



Jay Vogler, Pizza on Earth
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Joyce Cellars, Intervale Center
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Molly Stevens, author and chef
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Trevor Sullivan, Pingala Café
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Elena Gustavson, DownStreet Eats
COURTESY PHOTO

The Waters way

Five Vermonters in the food world reflect on the influence of Alice Waters, a pioneer in the promotion of sustainable, organic and local food



SALLY POLLAK
Free Press staff writer

Alice Waters founded Chez Panisse, a restaurant in Berkeley, Calif., in 1971. She is a chef, an author and a longtime champion of sustainable food systems centered on seasonal, local ingredients. Waters is a leader in the localvore movement, helping to establish and inspire its tenets. In 1996, she created the Edible Schoolyard at a middle school in Berkeley, with an associated kitchen and curriculum.

“Alice is famous for her palate,” said Joyce Cellars, community relations manager at the Intervale Center and former assistant to Waters. The food at Chez Panisse is “not flavor bombs or trendy,” Cellars said. “It’s deeply nourishing. Every sense is nourished.”

Waters, vice president of Slow Food International, will speak at Sterling College in Craftsbury at 6:30 p.m. Thursday, and tour the Intervale a week from today.

If too many cooks spoil the broth — look out! — because five will be cooking lunch for Waters and other guests at the Intervale. The menu is: mushroom potato soup, caramelized onion and cheddar panade, root vegetable slaw and apple-berry brown butter tart. The cooks are: Molly Stevens (cook-book author/teacher); Maura O’Sullivan (Penny Cluse); Alison Lane (Mirabelles); Mara Welton (Half Pint Farm); Amy Bacon (caterer and former Chez Panisse cook).

The Burlington Free Press asked five Vermont food people to answer the following question:

How has Alice Waters or her ideas about food and cooking influenced your work?

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Joyce Cellars, community relations director at the Intervale Center, worked with Alice Waters as her assistant in California while Waters wrote "In The Green Kitchen." EMILY MCMANAMY/FREE PRESS

Waters

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Molly Stevens: A moment of awakening

I had my first encounter with Alice Waters in New York City in the mid-to late-1980s. I had recently returned from a few years of cultural and professional hazing working in kitchens in France, and I was back home ready to start some type of career in food, although I wasn't entirely sure how. While I can't recall many specifics of the occasion, I clearly remember the adrenalized thrill of being one of several young cooks recruited to assist at an Alice Waters' event. I only knew her by reputation, and I felt nervous, privileged and excited at the opportunity.

The venue was an unremarkable ballroom in a Midtown hotel, but Alice and her crew had transformed the space by draping the tables with rustic black cloth and cleverly adorning the room with branches, fragrant herbs, and fresh produce. Then, a few minutes before the guests arrived, Alice gathered the cooks and helpers together, directed us to close all the doors, and she strolled through the room holding aloft large branches of smoldering rosemary, filling the air with the sweet scent of Provence. I was later introduced to Alice and even shook her hand, but it's that vision of her trailing rosemary perfume that inspired a shift in my approach to food and cooking.

Looking back on that time, I recognize that my nascent ideas about cooking had focused on complicated culinary technique, a hierarchy of rigid rules, and, yes, lots of men in tall white hats. Watching Alice magically create an atmosphere that felt more like an outdoor picnic than a formal banquet was a moment of awakening for me. She reminded me then — as she continues to — that food is celebration, a direct connection to our environment, our families and our communities, and that it is meant to be generously shared.

Molly Stevens is a cookbook author and cooking teacher. She lives in Williston.



Cookbook author and chef Molly Stevens in her kitchen at home in Williston, last week. GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS



Joyce Cellars worked with Alice Waters as her assistant in California. "What Alice gave me was the experience of a restaurant that transcended eating to embody love, community, hope," she wrote. EMILY MCMANAMY/FREE PRESS

Joyce Cellars: Creating magic

Seven years ago this month, I began my tenure in the office of Alice Waters, first as an intern and then as Alice's personal assistant — or, as she'd say, her "right arm." In preparation for writing this piece, I dug up a pile of Alice's notes I'd saved. Almost poems, these scraps conjure her up to me better than any of her cookbooks: "Dear Joyce / Couldn't find / my original / Obama letter / on my desk. Help!"

As Alice's "right arm," I did the usual assistant stuff: booking complicated flight itineraries, picking up dry cleaning, stocking the guest cottage fridge with Acme bread, organic milk and coffee. I learned to set up photo shoots for Japanese magazines, dined with famous artists, and helped organize a 100,000-person Slow Food festival in San Francisco. It was a dream job that I only willingly left because I'd fallen in love (I met my husband at Chez Panisse), and because we were moving to Vermont.

Happily settled in Burlington, I've thought a lot about who Alice Waters is and what she taught me. Alice the visionary, the chef, the school food advocate who got the White House to plant a vegetable garden, the restaurateur, the humanitarian with her famously uncompromis-

ing palate. Also, Alice the badass. I've yet to meet anyone who works as hard as Alice. She'd work until dinnertime, go upstairs to eat, come back to the office. I'd find garbled but coherent voice mails left on my machine at three in the morning. Before any Chez Panisse event Alice attended — whether a simple lunch at The Edible Schoolyard or the restaurant's elaborate Parsi New Year celebration — she'd have gone over the menu with her signature calligraphy pen several times, and the chefs, though sometimes surprised by her changes, almost always agreed. I soon realized that underlying this perfectionism and relentless pursuit of excellence was *real love*. Alice really, really cares. In fact, everyone at Chez Panisse cares.

What Alice gave me was the experience of a restaurant that transcended eating to embody love, community, hope. At Chez Panisse, even before food arrives at your table, you feel taken care of: soft lighting, copper fixtures, an open kitchen that reveals the cooks, those Zen masters of fire, metal, and wood. Alice understands that if you want people to change their behavior — to be curious about where their food comes from, to favor vegetables over meat, to share meals with family and friends instead of eating take-out at their desks — you have to make it feel

good.

I also admired Chez Panisse's organizational culture, based on respect, hard work and camaraderie: *la famille Panisse*. One evening, when I'd been working late nights for weeks, the chef, David Tannis, took me aside: "Why don't you come down to the kitchen and have a bite to eat?" I pulled myself away from my computer and ambled over to the kitchen, thinking I'd eat a few quick bites in a quiet corner. Instead, I found a small marble table beautifully laid for one. That night, David and a favorite waiter, Bob, doted on me, serving me course after course of food and wine. That's the "magic" of Chez Panisse.

That same "magic" exists at the Intervale Center, the remarkable fulcrum of sustainable agriculture, native habitat and community celebration where I work today. I've tried to bring the Chez Panisse ethos to my role (another dream job!) helping connect people to farmers and food. The Intervale Center's programs and events invite people to the table in a spirit of love, sympathy and encouragement. Alice taught me that we are motivated by our emotions and our senses. When someone tells us, "You've got to change the way you eat," chances are higher that we might actually listen if it makes us feel good. Whether hosting



Chef Trevor Sullivan at Pingala Café and Eatery in Burlington. "I think it's safe to say that Waters' influence is prevalent and alive in Vermont," he wrote. GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS

Summerville, delivering free food to low-income families, or introducing celeriac to college students, our goal at the Center is to leave people with smiles, full bellies, and a curiosity to learn more about their food choices — but we understand that change won't happen if we don't enjoy it. Hospitality is key, too. We want everyone to feel welcome to the Intervale table, and, more importantly, to be active participants in what Alice calls the "delicious revolution."

Good food is love. I'm abundantly grateful to Alice for teaching me how to share it.

Joyce Cellars is community relations manager at the Intervale Center.

Trevor Sullivan: Waters' way alive in Vermont

During my time on Vermont's Long Trail, I became enamored with the natural, raw beauty of the land and the organic flow of life. When I moved here in 2009, I dove into the restaurant scene and, to my delight, serendipitously became involved with a unique food system that embraces mindfulness, sustainability, and joyful practices.

Before opening Pingala Café & Eatery, I worked with restaurants like Church & Main, Amuse, The Willard Street Inn, and the Skinny Pancake. This fortunate mix of experience supported a very particular way of thinking about food sources, prac-

tices and systems. This exposure to sustainability led me to think and act in a way that's infused with innovation, commitment and confidence; all qualities that are at the forefront of Alice Waters' work.

During an era that promoted quick and easy process from prep to service, Waters was a trailblazer who had her sights set on getting back to the earth. Whether people know the person behind the practice or not, I think it's safe to say that Waters' influence is prevalent and alive in Vermont.

It's an honor to be a part of a food system that truly values working in such a way that benefits both people and the planet. At Pingala, we also strive to

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Owner Jay Vogler, stands in the doorway of Pizza on Earth, a staple for many pizza-loving patrons in Charlotte who drop by the small shop next to his home. EMILY MCMANAMY/FREE PRESS

serve only the best; organic foods that are comforting, nourishing and beautiful. After all, you are what you eat.

Trevor Sullivan hiked the Long Trail in 18 days in June, 2009, and lived on trail mix for 273 miles. He stayed in Vermont, and last month opened Pingala Cafe and Eatery in Chace Mill on the Winooski River in Burlington.

Elena Gustavson: Defining fine dining

For someone of my generation, growing up in California and for a time, living and working in the Bay Area, Chez Panisse and Alice Waters were synonymous with fine dining. The fact that it encompassed fresh vegetables and fruit while buying from local and organic purveyors was a given because, well, it was Chez Panisse! I didn't know it could be any other way.

All the obvious food influences aside, where Alice Waters really stands out in my mind is as an outspoken and driven woman in an occupation traditionally dominated by men. Ms. Waters is a fine example of bootstrap leadership with a strong social conscious and hands-on advocacy — standing up for what you believe in and then doing something about it. And it all started in a little cafe in Berkeley. How awesome is that!?

Elena Gustavson is chef/owner of DownStreet Eats, a restaurant in Cabot. She lives in Cabot and is former program director of the Center for an Agricultural Economy.



Fresh bread and pastries at Pizza on Earth in Charlotte, last Friday. EMILY MCMANAMY/FREE PRESS

Jay Vogler: Farm connection

Prior to our move to Vermont 23 years ago, I spent time in France training to be a chef. At that time I was very aware of Alice Waters and her reputation for using local organic products at her restaurant, Chez Panisse.

Her support of and enthusiasm for organic farming made perfect sense to us as we moved closer to having our own farm and planning our marketing. After our move to Vermont in 1991, I started Bingham Brook Farm growing organic vegetables with an emphasis on marketing to area restaurants. Although Alice was a

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JOYCE CELLARS,
community relations manager at the Intervale Center

forerunner in the support of this model on the West Coast, there seemed to be less of a connection here on the East Coast between the restaurant and the farmer. Over the years as interest in the farm to table movement grew, I could see the influence of her work as we, too, created our own network of local farmers connected to local chefs.

It was exciting to be here at the birth of the Vermont Fresh Network and Slow Food Chapter as well as meeting Alice at one of the Network's events. Having since developed an attached food business to our farm, Pizza On Earth Wood-oven Bakery, we even more appreciate the ties between the growing of quality produce and the transformation into a quality food product.

We can thank Alice for always supporting and promoting the values of fresh, local organic food that means so much to all of us who produce and use it.

Jay Vogler owns Pizza on Earth and Bingham Brook Farm in Charlotte.