The Sustainable Spread

National park eateries are serving more healthy, local, sustainable fare, and you can already taste the difference.
By Kallie Markle

Institutional food. It conjures visions of indeterminate mush ladled onto plastic trays, cellophane-wrapped fudge that could survive nuclear fallout, or lukewarm bottled water and a rubbery, slightly frozen corn dog. Such fare was once the norm when you visited the national parks to partake of the wonders of nature. Not so, these days: Several passionate foodies decided a day at the park needn’t mean a belly full of regret and a year off your lifespan, so they’ve begun to make healthy, sustainable options requisite for parks concessioners. Little by little, food options in the parks are looking less like B-roll footage from an “American obesity” newsreel and more like, well, nature.

As the story goes, the legendary late superintendent of Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Brian O’Neill, was approached in 2003 by a funder who criticized the disparity between the parks’ offering the best of nature but the worst of gastronomy. Most concessions at the time were “like a museum of everything bad about our food system,” as Larry Bain, a leading consultant on healthy and sustainable food, put it. Health wasn’t often an option, and taste hardly seemed a priority. Everything arrived frozen or packaged, shipped en masse from somewhere no farmer dare tread. O’Neill decided to make healthy, sustainable park food one cornerstone of his tenure; it was no leap of logic that an institution dedicated to preservation should endeavor toward sustainability, and really, the food should be as “green” as the scenery.

The Institute at the Golden Gate, a partner of the Park Service, embraced the momentum and published Food for the Parks, case studies of sustainable food concessions. When Park Service
Director Jon Jarvis announced in his 2010 Call to Action that a healthy food program would be manifest, the idea became less theoretical and more like something the agency could sink its teeth into. The move toward healthy, sustainable concessions wasn’t happening fast enough on its own, so the Park Service began to examine ways to include it in the all-powerful fine print.

Food-service concessions come in many shapes and sizes. Some are larger companies that service several parks, hospitals, and stadiums, whereas others service only a single site. The Park Service has long believed that private enterprise is the best supplier of food service, so whenever a concession opportunity opens up, companies bid for the prize: typically, a 10- to 15-year contract. Companies are required to meet certain needs of park visitors, but they can also sweeten the deal by sharing more of their revenue with the park, offering extra amenities, or proposing innovative ideas in décor, waste management, or menu. A panel of park staff—advised by a neutral, industry-savvy outsider—weighs the merits of each bid and crowns the winning company. Getting the contract requirements in place at Golden Gate took a team of legal, logistical, and culinary visionaries. “The big challenge was having words and intent that were easily discernible and measurable,” Bain, culinary visionary, explains. “What is ‘sustainable’? What’s ‘organic’? After a year [of work and legal scrutiny], we’d created a request for proposal that the Park Service felt comfortable with. The criteria were not only set forth, but there was follow-up. So: ‘If you do this, how will you do it? What will it cost? What will the bottom line look like?’” Bain even made menus that demonstrated where food could come from, how much it would cost the concessioners, what they could charge for it, and so on.

Golden Gate National Recreation Area Superintendent Frank Dean, who is spearheading the initiative as part of Director Jarvis’s Call to Action, admits there was uncertainty as to how the revised contract would work. “Would it be attractive to a businessperson?” he remembers wondering. “Would it be financially feasible? It turned out it was.” One palatable prototype? The café at Muir
The Muir Woods contract was one of the first to be open for bids after the healthy food program was initiated at Golden Gate. Several concessioners applied, some with considerable weight to throw behind their bid. When the bids came in, many of the larger concessioners proposed to achieve the minimum, but “this little company—which had only one other park contract—promised to not just meet the criteria but to exceed the standards of what would be organic and how it would be sourced,” says Bain. Muir Woods Trading Company (MWTC), a subsidiary of Ortega Family Enterprises, outbid the heavies, usurped the incumbent, and won the contract.

The Muir Woods Café, a grab-and-go eatery and retail shop, feeds the monument’s roughly 780,000 annual visitors and earns about $3.1 million in annual revenue. MWTC partnered with local farms and bakers for a variety of sustainable ingredients and products, sourcing from Veritable Vegetable, Rustic Bakery, and Marin Organic. The menu eschews forgettable standards like fried chicken strips and feckless bagged salads, offering flavorful alternatives such as turkey chili, organic pastries, and a grilled cheese sandwich featured on the Food Network series, “The Best Thing I Ever Ate.” Vegan, vegetarian, and gluten-free options abound, as does kid-friendly food that won’t turn your little cherub into a sugar-fueled fiend or a grease-soaked grump. Yelp reviewers, who overwhelmingly rate the café with four or five stars, declare the fare “delightful,” “surprising,” “one of the best post-hike meals you can have,” and of course, “delicious awesomeness.” One particularly enthusiastic patron even said the food was the “main attraction” of the park.

Muir Woods Café’s dining room is as appealing as the edibles. Tabletops are made from recycled beverage bottles, counter fronts are reclaimed sorghum straw, and the flooring keeps it in the family: repurposed picnic tables from Carlsbad Caverns National Park. Local farmers are profiled on café signage, and diners are directed to receptacles for “compost,” “recycle,” or “landfill,”
harmonizing the concessions experience with the park’s spirit of conservation. California, with its abundance of fresh flora and hearty fauna, isn’t the only state serving healthy, sustainable food. The Yellowstone Lodges at the Wyoming park have served locally sourced foods since the early 2000s; local vendors provide almost everything from bison to huckleberries. In less fertile months, the concessioner, Xanterra, expands the definition of “local” to a 500-mile radius, which allows it to serve organic wine. “We recognize that a lot of parks aren’t in urban areas, so we look at what’s feasible,” says Dean, Golden Gate’s superintendent. “If you’re in the desert or a remote area, the standards can be adjusted.”

The efforts extend beyond the table; according to Food for the Parks, “Xanterra has been able to divert 73 percent of its waste from landfills [and] operates a composting facility that turned 2.2 million pounds of waste into compost in 2009.” Health and environmental benefits are accompanied by ripple-effect economic advantages: the volume of food service for Yellowstone’s 3.3 million annual visitors means higher profits for local vendors. Nationwide, the numbers prove that healthy food endeavors are good for business. The re-envisioned eateries are popular, and customers happily pay for their soup or juice, even when it’s more expensive than fries or soda. The cost difference was a concern from the outset, but in the spirit of the parks, the goal was always accessibility. “There is a real interest in serving food that’s affordable,” says Cleveland Justis, former director of the Institute at the Golden Gate. “The concessioners don’t want to pass on expenses to customers and increase prices. Some things will cost more, but if you offset that cost by being more efficient in energy use or being more disposable, you can make up that expense.” At Mt. Rushmore National Memorial in South Dakota, park concessioner Xanterra constructed a small greenhouse atop its gift shop, and started a small vegetable garden a mile off-site to compensate for the region’s scarcity of fresh produce. The big park concessioners aren’t the only environmentally conscious menu makers, and the healthy foods initiative isn’t
limited to cafes and restaurants. The kitchen at NatureBridge, inside Golden Gate National Recreation Area, serves 91,000 meals a year, mostly to K−12 students attending two- to five-day field science programs. Chef Thomas Dreke and Director Aaron Rich don’t lower the culinary standards simply because of the youth and captivity of their diners. On the contrary, Dreke and Rich relish the opportunity to serve healthy food to their young charges and heighten the students’ instructive experience.

Food education is part of the educational experience here, including garbology: following every meal, the students weigh the waste after everything compostable is removed. They present their findings at their meetings, striving to be a zero-waste school, even competing with other schools attending this NatureBridge program. Instructors cover the whole spectrum of food, from production to disposal: “They talk about the energy it takes to get food here, about water use, where that food would go if it did go in the trash, landfills, and so on,” says Rich. There’s philosophy, science, and to drive the points home, there is salad. “We’re not going to serve a canned vegetable that kids won’t eat anyway,” Dreke says, so the centerpiece of every dinner is an extensive salad bar, which the students consistently devour, proving that lettuce artistry may be the key to winning dinner-table standoffs.

Breakfasts boast a fruit bar and fresh eggs. A container of liquid eggs may require less cost and effort than buying and cracking 45 dozen eggs from pasture-raised hens, but Dreke believes there’s no comparison. “We spend more money on that product because it’s so superior [to the ready-made alternative],” he says. “It makes a huge difference to kids.” To offset such costs, Dreke eliminated the evening dessert and lets Pillsbury handle the cookies at lunch. “We try to make as many things as we can,” he says, “but not everything is made here; you can buy frozen cookie dough that you couldn’t make much better.” The cookies are always freshly baked, so no one seems to mind.

The overall experience is transformative for many students.
“They’re seeing things done in a different way,” explains Rich. “Kids become amazing advocates for change, then they hassle their parents. Imagine that impact multiplied over 10,000 kids per year.” This sense of the aggregate pervades the Park Service’s food philosophy. Dean sees the number of meals served throughout the national parks as enough to move the needle in terms of what suppliers provide to their customers. “Costco and Walmart can drive the market because they have the clout,” he says. “[Sourcing directly from farmers] is different from having a typical food supplier bringing in a truck with processed, packaged food. The Park Service has enough clout to make a difference in those situations.” Once the new guidelines are met throughout the park system, visitors could be looking at a substantial buffet: billions of healthy, sustainable meals served every year throughout the United States’ national, state, city, and regional parks. When the bulk of ingredients are coming from local farms, it can improve the food chain in powerful ways. As Bain points out, “parks have the potential to be tremendous customers, both for volume and predictability, because they’ve been open for generations and they know the busiest and the slowest months. Farmers need that more than anything else.”

“What I love about this,” says Justis, “is that it aligns the interests of the local community with the park and the visitors. [A given concessioner is] probably spending hundreds of thousands of dollars that are supporting the local community.” Food that looks, tastes, and even does good? It’s just as nature intended.

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