

Connecting Food to a Sense of Place

Diablo Burger

Diablo Burger calls itself a “local foods based burger joint.” In northern **Arizona’s** hip community of **Flagstaff**, Diablo Burger offers only locally raised open-range beef and uses other local ingredients as much as possible. The story of why and how this burger joint got off the ground underscores its desire to “connect the well-being of our community to the sustainability of our landscape through gastronomy . . . which is just a fancy word for cheeseburger.”

A tiny burger joint in downtown Flagstaff, Arizona, is making a very big point. “At Diablo Burger, we say that it’s our intention to connect community and ecology through gastronomy — which we think is just a fancy word for cheeseburger,” says the restaurant’s owner, Derrick Widmark. “We want to connect our community to the landscape it’s built on through the food we eat.” Widmark is doing just that. Through the simple medium of a burger joint, the Flagstaff community is becoming connected to ranches that have been raising cattle in the Diablo Canyon area east of Flagstaff since the late 1800s.

Eating Beef to Support Ranchers

In 2006 Widmark had just begun working for the Diablo Trust, a grassroots collaborative nonprofit founded in 1993 by two longtime ranching families, the Prossers and Metzgers, to manage and conserve healthy ranch lands in a collaborative and environmentally sound manner. The name itself, Diablo Trust, set the direction for the group’s work. Not meant in the fiduciary sense, the word trust was chosen to reflect the unusual vision that a wide range of stakeholders would come together, in trust, to help preserve and manage the land area.

As the trust’s communications and program coordinator, Widmark was learning about the trust’s latest innovation, the Diablo Canyon Rural Planning Area, an unusual collaborative effort to preserve historic ranching operations in the face of changing economic conditions. Adopted in 2005 by Coconino County

after a two-year planning period, the Diablo Canyon Rural Planning Area is nothing less than a plan to protect traditional ranching and open space — both of which are at risk of being permanently lost — while also preserving healthy ecosystems.

Widmark’s restaurant is an example of one strategy suggested by the plan — creating value-added beef by direct-marketing to local restaurants. “Beef is the largest cash crop in northern Arizona,” Widmark tells me. “But until now, it’s all largely gone elsewhere.” This made no sense to him: there was plenty of beef being raised all around Flagstaff, but not an ounce of it to eat. He thought Flagstaff folks should be able to eat the beef being raised around them, and he decided to do something about it.

He credits Gary Nabhan, whom he names the “patron saint of the local food movement, not just in the Southwest but around the world,” with creating his “light bulb” moment. (On the day that I visit, I realize how much he esteems Nabhan’s influence when I see that the menu features a special “Nabhan Burger,” with grilled nopales (cactus), pepper jack cheese, and ancho chile mayo.) It was Nabhan who had brought in a speaker from an Idaho conservation group, Lava Lake Land and Livestock, to meet with Diablo Trust; he told them that as sales of their lamb to high-end restaurants in Sun Valley increased, so did awareness and appreciation of their conservation work. Widmark says, “I realized that if we could feed people local beef, there would be a lot fewer people asking, *What the [heck] is Diablo Trust?*”

A Plan to Preserve Working Lands

For regions facing the possibility of losing working farmlands, the model of the Diablo Canyon Rural Planning Area demonstrates how to explore and think through a range of options for preserving these lands and regional character. The challenges faced by the Diablo Trust ranching families are not unique: farmland and farming heritage is being lost to development throughout the country. The Diablo Canyon plan explains, “When economic conditions become unfavorable to ranching . . . working landscapes tend to be converted to other uses such as housing developments. . . . When that occurs,

landscapes are fragmented, there is a loss of open space and habitat values, and our cultural and historical values are diminished. In other words, Coconino County becomes less unique and special, and more like everywhere else.”²⁵² To develop an effective regional plan, the Diablo Canyon RPA model suggests it is essential to create a partnership dialogue that brings together agricultural property owners, county government, and the local economic development commission. Together, these groups can develop strategies for keeping traditional farm and ranch lands economically viable.

He opened Diablo Burger in 2009, and it quickly became a hip burger joint. Over the course of a week, depending on the season, the restaurant uses the equivalent of one to two whole cows from the nearby Diablo Trust ranches. While this represents a very small percentage of the ranches’ overall cattle sales, Widmark says that everyone involved believes that it is but a first step into the local market, with Diablo Burger serving as a “tasting room” for this quality product. Through serving local food Widmark is building awareness and appreciation for the region’s rich ranching heritage and helping a region become more connected to its food and landscape.

Serving Local to Support Local

Diablo Burger’s motto is “All About Local”: the burger toppings come from nearby farms, as do the greens, and the bread and cookies from a bakery in Phoenix. “The logistics of using local suppliers are much more challenging,” says Widmark. “But the rewards are much greater. When people hand over the product to us, they’re giving us something with a lot of pride, hours of work, sweat and toil. I tell my staff that we have a personal responsibility to these producers, that it is our obligation now to take their product and represent it as best we can.”

Diablo Burger is also all about promoting local environmental and economic sustainability. To help keep the money spent at Diablo Burger circulating

in the local economy, the restaurant accepts only cash. “Studies have shown that cash stays in the community,” he explains. Credit card fees are a form of economic “leakage,” and cash is more likely spent among local businesses and individuals, thereby creating a multiplier effect that feeds the local economy. Widmark works hard to spend his money locally, and he is proud to point out that as much of the restaurant as possible was built by local craftsmen.

Another unusual feature of the restaurant is that, for environmental sustainability, it doesn’t have a dishwasher. “Water is the most precious resource on the Colorado plateau,” says Widmark, “and dishwashers use tremendous amounts of water.” Instead, even though it comes at a higher cost, Diablo Burger uses compostable serving baskets and utensils made of bagasse, a sugarcane by-product, to generate as little trash and use as little water as possible.

It’s too soon to determine whether the restaurant will be successful, says Widmark, but he believes the restaurant has struck an important chord — helping people feel more connected to place. “People live in Flagstaff because they feel a connection to the landscape. When people feel like the landscape is feeding their families, and that eating this food helps to preserve open space, healthy watershed, and wildlife habitat, that’s hard to walk away from.” Though the restaurant had been in operation for only five months at the time of my visit, Widmark was able to say he hadn’t

run a single ad, yet somehow the word had spread. Tourists were even beginning to come in, pointed there by locals. For Widmark there is no higher compliment or testimony that Diablo Burger is filling an important need than for visitors to be sent to Diablo Burger for an experience that is specifically and locally authentic to Flagstaff.

Food: The Ace in the Hole

Diablo Burger is not the sole answer for keeping the large ranches of northern Arizona economically viable, says Widmark, but it is pointing the way to one part of the solution. “The economies of scale that industrial food has to offer just can’t be beat. So if we were able to do what Diablo Burger does at a much bigger regional scale, it would make a bigger difference for these ranches. That’s the issue.”

The biggest challenge for scaling up in the Flagstaff area is the same I’ve heard in other parts of the country: the lack of certified local meat-processing and storage facilities. These are not issues that can be solved quickly, as the coordination of state and federal inspection is complex, time-consuming, and costly. Increasing awareness and pressure for changes at the federal level to create a streamlined process for smaller facilities that serve local food markets may eventually help local food systems overcome this persisting challenge.

Challenges aside, Widmark believes that we have passed the tipping point and that local food is not a

passing fad. “Without cheap gas and oil, the industrial food system doesn’t work. And I don’t think the pendulum on energy costs is going to swing back in the other direction in my lifetime.” His goal with Diablo Burger is to help solve the puzzle of how to ensure that local food is affordable. “If the food is right here, it shouldn’t cost more. We can cement the long-term sustainability of the local food system if it is affordable.” Widmark has gone to great lengths to ensure that his burger is truly affordable. He tells me that people come in all the time thinking it is going to cost more and are pleasantly surprised. A couple from Phoenix wrote in his comment book, “We pay more for fast food, and this is so much better!”

“This movement isn’t about nostalgia,” he says, then points to the walls of his restaurant. “Do you see one single piece of artwork of cowboys, cows, or ranch lands on our walls?” Rejecting the idea that local food is about romancing the past, Widmark is clear that, if anything, it is about romancing the future — in a practical, pragmatic way. “Once urban communities begin to see rural areas as *part of our greater community*, not just for another subdivision or golf course, but as a place that feeds our families, then we will value those lands differently. So it is my belief that food is the ace in the hole that will help make the difference for working landscapes to survive as open space, providing us with food and water and contributing in such a wide range of ways to our greater quality of life.”

Bright Idea: Pooling Deliveries

One method for increasing the efficiency of obtaining local products is to pool resources with other businesses that use the same products. For example, Diablo Burger has teamed with several other restaurants in Flagstaff to share the weekly four-hour round trip to McClendon’s Select organic farm in Peoria, near Phoenix. Previously, the restaurants had either driven down to the farm independently or picked up produce from McClendon’s when it came to the local farmers’ market. Now when McClendon’s comes to the weekly farmers’ market, it adds a preordered pallet for the restaurants. Each week a different restaurant pays the \$50 delivery charge for the pallet, picks up the produce off the back of McClendon’s truck, and delivers to the partner restaurants.

It may take time and effort to set up an efficient partnership, but it can pay off quickly. “It took us nearly two years before we set up this current deal,” says Paul Moir, owner of Brix, a high-end Flagstaff restaurant. “One of our big struggles in Flag is getting the food up here. So it made sense to partner up. Now each [of] us picks up the pallet from McClendon’s every third week instead of every week.”