



Masako, Crown Princess of Japan, at the Food for Thought Summit

The Shapers of Taste

Setting trends and meeting
food challenges head on

By Tom Saboleski

*“One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well,”
said English writer Virginia Woolf.*

Dining well is a distinctive forte of the nonpareil Relais & Châteaux alliance. It is the group's trademark; its clientele expects the finest cuisine, with culinary creations and experiences that are extrasensory. Its lofty position also presents Relais & Châteaux with an opportunity: be at the forefront, and address the challenge of sustainable food production on a warming globe with an expanding population.

How many of us, when we're savoring an eye-catching and luscious dish, stop to consider the environmental impact of bringing that food to our table? Taking responsibility to contribute solutions, Relais & Châteaux held its Food for Thought conference in Tokyo in December 2016 to address these issues. World-class chefs and nutrition scholars presented innovative products and thought-provoking commentary on the future of food.

Pointing out that global warming is contributing to soil degradation and stress on water supplies, hydroponics authority Dr. Mori Yuichi predicted that “for mankind there will be shortages of food or lowering of the quality of food.” Reaching into his jacket pocket, Dr. Yuichi pulled out something resembling a plastic sandwich bag and declared, “This will replace soil and water.”

Unfolding it to a sheet about a meter square, Dr. Yuichi explained that the transparent membrane can be placed on a bed of liquid fertilizer and become a growing medium. He then displayed a similar sheet full of salad greens growing directly on the film. To dramatize his point, he turned the film upside down and the greens remained attached. Thin roots attached to the surface of the film spread out to an area that was larger than if the plant had been in soil. This, claimed Dr. Yuichi, allowed the plant to take in more nutrients; it will also allow food production to take place in deserts.

Approaching the topic from a slightly different perspective, Professor Tim Lang of the Center for Food Policy at City University of London stressed that “somehow we’ve got to change food culture and the food system.” Lang urged Relais & Châteaux chefs to be trendsetters in this noble mission. “You are the fork leaders, you are the opinion formers,” he declared. “You are the helpers and shapers of taste.”

Can you practice a healthy diet and not sacrifice the tastes, textures and complex flavors that make eating a joy? Yes, said Dr. Joanna McMillan, a leading nutrition scientist from Australia. She reminded the gathering, “Healthy food was perceived as dull, boring rabbit food.” Now, she maintained, “we can have fabulous food, we can have wonderful eating experiences,” and incorporate nutrition science, too.

Our worldwide problems demand the merging of chefs and nutritionists, McMillan said. “We now have more of a problem with overweight people in the world than we do with underweight people, and that has never happened in history.” Lamenting a rise in popularity of so-called “paleo” diets—which allow high consumption of lean meats, fish, fruits and vegetables, but are more land and water intensive—McMillan said chefs need to begin creating dishes where meat is not the star of the plate.

For the planet-conscious epicure, McMillan touted insects. “From a nutritional perspective, insects are incredibly interesting,” McMillan said. “They offer a marvelous alternative for minerals like iron.” She challenged chefs to “become more proficient at using insects. The problem in Western cuisine is we can’t seem to get past the yuk factor.” She cited a Mexican restaurant in Sydney that offers an appetizer of roasted spiced chili crickets. McMillan also said superfoods packed with health benefits that may help some medical conditions are of great interest. In 2017 she foresees more Inca nuts, teff (an ancient Ethiopian grain with a chocolaty color and flavor), red rice and seaweed appearing on menus.

Relais & Châteaux and Michelin three-star chef Yannick Alléno provided attendees with a chef’s perspective, and he shared his inventive method for creating sauces. “All recipes are based on sauces,” Alléno said. “If we want to modernize and look at the future of cuisine, we have to look at sauces.” Through his process of cooking foods under a vacuum, liquids are extracted and condensed with enhanced aromas. This preserves the terroir of each ingredient—the attributes imbued by its specific climate, geography and soil—infusing sauces with energy and less fat and salt.

Emphasizing the seriousness of the situation, Dr. McMillan drove home the consequences. “There is no point in creating the healthiest diet for our generation if it doesn’t leave the world a healthy place for our grandchildren and great-grandchildren.” ■

