More university students call for organic, 'sustainable' food
By Bruce Horovitz, USA TODAY

NEW HAVEN, Conn. — The agonizing decision to pick Yale over Harvard didn't come down only to academics for Philip Gant.

It also came down to his tummy. And his eco-savvy.

When he chose Yale last year, Gant wasn't swayed by its running tab of presidential alumni: President Bush, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Gerald Ford and William Howard Taft. He was more impressed by Yale's leading-edge dedication to serving "sustainable" food.

Sustainable might sound like New Age jargon, but college students such as Gant are embracing the idea: food grown locally with ecologically sound and seasonally sensitive methods. The concept also includes humane treatment for workers and animals and fair wages.

In addition to wanting sustainable food, students such as Gant want it to be organic: grown without pesticides, herbicides, antibiotics or hormones.

As a health-conscious member of Yale's wrestling team, Gant says, "Part of why I was so excited about coming to Yale is the way it eats."

Nutritionally wired students — many raised on Whole Foods diets at home — are pushing campus dining standards to be measured more by the food's origin, not its volume. This is part of a larger student movement on many campuses calling not just for sustainable food practices, but also for sustainable energy use. Some colleges are even naming directors of sustainability.

Colleges nationwide are buying more food from "local" farms (typically within the state, often within 50 miles). That lets students and school staff visit farms, get to know growers and have confidence that the food, whether certified organic or not, is grown in an ecologically sound manner.

But changes in food service, much of which is contracted out, aren't simple for big universities.

"Universities have never spent money on food before. They don't know how," says Alice Waters, founder of Chez Panisse, a Berkeley, Calif., restaurant famous for its locally grown food. Five years ago when her daughter was at Yale, Waters helped form the Yale Sustainable Food Project. Now, she says, colleges are changing "because students demand it."

Few understand the business needs to change better than Jodi Smith, marketing manager at the National Association of College & University Food Services trade group of vendors, including food service giants Sodexho and Aramark. If students can't find the food they want on campus, she says, "They'll find it elsewhere."

That business imperative has moved the $4.6 billion college food service industry to respond with new ways of operating that include relying more on nearby farmers for staples and produce, and serving more organic foods. Yale gets its salsa from an organic farm in South Glastonbury, Conn., instead of California. Its apples come from an organic farm in Meriden, Conn., instead of being trucked from Washington state.

Coming a long way

The 20% annual growth of the $15 billion organic food industry also is touching the nation's 4,216 college and university campuses. About half of the nation's 15 million college students have access to some organic food on campus, according to food service industry estimates.

More than half of the 375 schools served by Aramark (including Yale) serve some organic products, says Naala Royale, vice president of marketing at Aramark Higher Education. Sodexho sells organic at 50% of the 900 colleges it serves. "Two years ago, if you walked into any college and asked about organic, they'd look at you cross-eyed," says Vicki Dunn, senior director of campus dining.

With good reason. A year ago, 9% of students said they strongly preferred organic foods to other foods; it was 13% in the latest of the annual student surveys done by Aramark. About 80% of Yale students surveyed last year said they'd eat in the school dining halls more often if sustainable food was served.

A few colleges, including Yale, are even creating organic minifarms on or near campus. Produce from the Yale Farm shows up at special events on campus and is sold weekly at the New Haven Farmer's Market. "When I can connect my hand in labor to the food I'm eating, it's a powerful experience," says Joe Hunt, 21, a Yale senior who volunteers at the farm. On a rainy, September morning, he's spreading compost while munching organic cherry tomatoes. "I won't eat just anything anymore. Working here has changed my perspective on food."

Yale Farm is run by the Yale Sustainable Food Project, a university group made up of students, faculty and staff. "The way we eat every day is a moral act," says Josh Viertel, co-director of the project. "Serving organic food can be part of a greater educational experience here."

Even a cupcake.

Until last year, cupcakes served to Yale students were made from premixed ingredients in giant bags. About all cooks did was add water.

No more. Cupcakes, even icing, are made from scratch with organic ingredients. Few are prouder of that than Thomas Peterlik, director of Yale's Culinary Resource Center, the unit in charge of bringing more sustainable food to campus. Thanks to its efforts, Yale makes pizza from organic ingredients that can be traced to local farmers. The cost of the ingredients is less, Peterlik says, although added labor costs raise the total price.

Getting organic recipes down pat isn't easy at big institutions because they sometimes require changes in the food prep routine. It took a year for cooks in all the dining halls to get the organic pizza recipe right, says Catherine Jones, executive chef for the Yale Sustainable Food Project. "The pizzas would be too small. Or the crust too thin. Or the toppings too thick," she says.

Also, sustainable and organic foods have increased Yale's annual food costs from about $4.6 million for the 2004-05 school year to slightly less than $5.6 million last year, says Ernst Huff, who oversees student financial and administrative services. So far, the university is mostly swallowing the added costs and reducing other expenses. Yale recently increased the budget for student food to $2.94 per meal vs. $2.10 just two years ago, Peterlik says.

His goal is for Yale to serve 100% sustainable and organic food, and progress has been rapid. Five years ago, it served almost no organic food. Four years ago, it began to serve some organic food in one dining hall. By last year, organic entrees were offered at least once daily at all dining halls. This year, it's two meals daily.

Reaching out to farmers

Aramark has contributed by reinventing the way it does business at Yale and reaching out to area farmers. Until the project began, Aramark had about 15 to 20 food suppliers for all the food there. Now, it has up to four times as many, says Don McQuarrie, executive director of dining services. "Ten years ago, it was OK to get any tomato," he says. "Now, we want to be able to tell the students who grew it and where."

Nearly 40% of food served on campus is organic, Huff says.

How can students tell? When food being served in any of Yale's 12 dining halls is organic or locally grown, the Yale Sustainable Food Project's wheelbarrow logo appears on a placard. "That's the food that typically goes first," says Melina Shannon-DiPietro, project co-director.

One student was so enthused that she sent Shannon-DiPietro a poem celebrating organic granola:

Ode to Yale Granola

"Let me boast brazenly of the bountiful benefits to bodily health of this beautiful breakfast," wrote senior Lucas Dreier two years ago. "Give me a bowl, and my soul will be satisfied."