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# S.A. LIFE

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## ENVIRONMENT



Robin Jerstad/Contributor

Steve McHugh, chef and owner of Cured at the Pearl, has long been involved in food-related issues.

## Protecting the planet starts at home

### Chef shares 7 ways to make your kitchen sustainable

**By Richard A. Marini**  
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“Think globally,” goes the environmentalists’ slogan, but “act locally.” And there’s nothing more local than the cooking one does in the kitchen.

It might seem like what you do in the kitchen has little effect on the planet’s health, but Steve McHugh would beg to differ.

The chef behind Cured in the Pearl and Landrace at the Thompson San Antonio, McHugh has long been involved in food-related issues. He attended a sustainability-focused boot camp run by the James Beard Foundation and is one of only three Smart Catch chefs certified in the state of Texas. Smart Catch is a



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Supermarkets sell popular fruits and vegetables year-round, but it's more environmentally friendly to buy what's in season instead.

Beard Foundation program that teaches how to source sustainable seafood.

As a member of the city’s Food Policy Council, a group of like-minded individuals that focuses on sustainability, he’s also been involved in initiatives such as the food forest near Confluence Park, where fruit- and nut-bearing trees are being planted. Once they mature, they can be harvested by those living in the nearby community.

The six-time James Beard Award finalist for Best Chef tries to practice what he preaches at home and in his restaurants.

He tells of a recent conversation with one of his chefs who questioned why he purchased more expensive

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## KITCHEN

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eggs from a local farmer when he could get them cheaper from an industrial supplier.

"I told him we're helping support (the farmer) in her business, instead of buying something mass-produced from an egg farm in the middle of Kansas," he told the chef. "This is just an extension of the way my wife and I think about not just our business, but how we want to leave something positive behind."

Here are several ways he suggests that home chefs can use their own kitchen to leave things better than they found them:

**Know where your food comes from.** A basic recommendation for both sustainability and your family's health, this can mean anything from buying locally grown produce at a nearby farmers market and signing up for a community supported agriculture, or CSA, subscription from a local farm to reading labels and questioning staff at your favorite grocery store.

"Supermarkets have gotten much better at telling shoppers where foods they sell originate," McHugh said. "If there's no signage saying where the beef was raised, for example, you shouldn't hesitate to ask."

Locally grown produce is also more sustainable because it doesn't have to be gassed to make it ripen faster, shipped in packaging that won't break down for hundreds of years and hauled from hundreds of miles away in diesel-burning trucks or rail cars.

"Better to buy from the woman or the man down the road who's tending to their farm, growing beats, turnips, kale, whatever," he said. "It's better for you, and it's better for the environment."

**Know your seasons.** Today's supermarkets sell most every popular fruit and vegetable year-round. But that's not nature's way. So they have to ship produce long distances to keep those shelves full: strawberries from California and Mexico, blueberries from Chile and Argentina, grapes from Peru. That takes a lot of fossil fuel.

It's better to buy what's in season, even if that means having to be more flexible when menu planning.

"I tell people, don't go to the market looking for carrots; go to the market and see what they have," he said.

**Going for fish.** When it comes to buying fish, sustainability means thinking about more than the health of individual species. It means concern about the health of the entire marine system, including the fisheries, the workers and how fish are caught.

"Take snapper, for example," McHugh said. "Are they being



Daniel Balakov/Getty Images

When buying fish, consider the health of the the fisheries it came from, their workers, how the fish are caught and more. The Seafood Watch website can help.



Thomas Barwick/Getty Images

To "act locally," know where the produce you buy comes from. Purchase it at local farmers markets, and question grocery store staff about its origins.



Matthew Busch/Contributor

Chef Steve McHugh is one of only three Smart Catch chefs certified in Texas.

fished with nets or long lines? Long lines are better because they don't dredge the sea bottom like nets do. There's also less bycatch," which is un-

wanted fish and other sea creatures hauled up with the catch and then discarded overboard.

To reduce his environmental impact, McHugh has added a



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Don't throw out ham, chicken or beef bones — transform them into soup.

link to the Seafood Watch website to his mobile phone. It tells him whether a specific species is fished or farmed in environmentally sustainable ways.

"If I'm shopping or in a restaurant and I see, say, farm-raised Atlantic salmon, the site tells me if it's red, yellow or green," he said.

Green means the fish is good to buy; yellow means there are concerns about how the fish is caught, farmed or managed; and red means avoid it.

**Countertop composting.** Roughly one-third of all food produced in the United States gets thrown away, making it a significant contributor to climate change. Composting can help reduce greenhouse gases by lowering carbon and methane emissions. If you don't have room for a backyard compost pile, McHugh recommends the the Lomi Home Composter instead.

"It's about as big as a microwave and it'll turn orange peels, coffee grinds, broccoli stalks and other food scraps into compost in, like, 12 hours," he said. "I probably use ours every other day. It's so much better than putting the scraps into a landfill."

**Don't give up on fruit too soon.** McHugh doesn't understand people who toss bananas as soon as they start to turn brown.

"People make fun of me because I love brown bananas," he said. "But that's when the starches are converting to sugar, so they're going to taste way better than when they're bright yellow. The best banana bread or banana muffins are made with brown bananas."

The same goes for most other fruit, like peaches and tomatoes.

"That's the perfect time for making jams or for stewing tomatoes or making sauce or ketchup," he said.

**Save the bones.** Don't throw away those ham bones or chicken bones. Instead, throw them into a pot with some carrots, onions, celery, a couple of peppercorns and beans, and make soup. McHugh said he typically puts all that in about 3 quarts of water and simmer until it cooks down to about 2 quarts, which should take about three hours.

And there's no rush. You don't have to make turkey soup the day after Thanksgiving. Pop the carcass in the freezer along with any produce that's about to go bad and scraps from other meals, and it'll all keep for weeks until you feel the urge to make a pot of soup.

**Save the pickle juice.** Instead of simply pouring the pickle juice down the drain after the pickles are gone, McHugh uses it to make homemade mustard, mixing 2 parts juice with 1 part mustard seeds and letting it sit for 24 to 48 hours — the longer it soaks, the less heat in the final product.

"You can flavor them; you can puree them," he said. "You can throw it in a blender to make a smooth mustard."

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