



# Down to Earth

by Lyla Kaplan

Celebrating connections between  
local food, pottery and community

I have always wished that I had the discipline and patience for gardening and cooking. I find them essential to life and often think that if I were good at them, I would make better pots by being more connected to the earth and the bounties it offers. I first heard of community supported agriculture (CSA) farms years ago, but a member share seemed expensive, foreign and risky (you pay a fee up front and only get what the season and workers are able to provide). Having a child began to change that. I wanted my son to be able to eat raspberries right off the bush, laugh at clucking chickens and see the people who, day in and day out, work the land to feed others. Despite its bad reputation, guilt can be a good motivator: knowing the effort required for growing my produce, I knew I had an obligation to put some effort into cooking. Sometimes now I'm left with a feeling I haven't felt since gorging on my grandmother's glorious tomatoes as a child: a closeness. Being close to the farm has also helped inform my pottery making. I'm starting to get glimpses into the growing cycles and its fluctuations from year to year and within a season. I've begun experimenting with special low, wide vases for giant bouquets of basil, cilantro and parsley, so the smell and beauty can fill my kitchen.

Last summer, I encountered a farmer lamenting the fact that his farmer's market is surrounded by new developments with upwardly mobile young families who seem uninterested in food grown essentially in their own backyard. He mentioned he was always looking for new ideas on how to generate interest. A few days later, while driving along the Pennsylvania Turnpike to gallery-sit for a Cheltenham Clay Guild show in Philadelphia, a simple idea hit me that made me almost drive off the road: potters and farmers alike work the earth, and a functional pottery show featuring locally grown food would be a neat way to experience function, and raise awareness about what it means to enjoy excellent food in the context of art and community.

Function is defined as *what something does*. But it can also be defined as *a relation where one thing is dependent on another for its existence, value or significance*. For its function to achieve its full meaning, a pot must be used, and use cannot be separated from its context: the table on which it is sitting, the food it is holding, the person who picks it up, or the people who are sharing together. Potters already know about that quiet pleasure of meals enhanced by



Various bowls with fruit, salad and other treats, slab-built Helios porcelain with various glazes (Coleman celadon, Shino and Oribe with flashing slip), fired to Cone 10 in reduction (except for the bowl with strawberries, which was wood-fired), by Joanne Taylor Brown, Rydal, Pennsylvania. "My functional ceramic work serves as a frame to highlight beautiful produce, and was made to be overflowing with fruit and vegetables and passed around a dinner table," Brown explained.

the objects they are using. I'm sure most potters are familiar with the experience of going to a fellow potter's house and taking delight in picking out which coffee mug to use, or appreciating the salad bowl on the table. Good pottery and good food both come from the earth and from a labor of love. We all depend on food (and farmers) for existence, but food eaten together and channeled through art can enhance that existence. As Robert Yellin says, "If we use objects in our daily life that move the heart and help us transcend our daily routines and ways of thinking, we may be able to lift our spirits to a plane that will incorporate caring for the earth as part of existence" (*Japan Times*: Sept. 17, 2003. [www.e-yakimono.net](http://www.e-yakimono.net)).



Herb vase with basil, 7 in. (17 cm) in height, thrown and altered stoneware, modified Rob's Green glaze, soda fired to Cone 10, by Lyla Kaplan. The purple and thai basil in this vase were grown in greenhouses, which were winterized using waste vegetable oil from restaurants.



Bowl with apples, 16 in. (40 cm) in height, thrown stoneware with metal oxides, salt fired to Cone 10, by Terry Plaskett, Millville, New Jersey. "My pots are intended to be inextricably linked to function, presentation and the rituals of food and drink," says Plaskett.

People know their doctors, their teachers, their mechanics, but do they know their local potters or farmers? For Tim Schlitzer, director of Foodroutes, the nonprofit national organization promoting "Buy Fresh Buy Local" in 22 states (and growing), there is a connection between local pottery and food. "[Using] functional things everyday is kind of like coming home," he says. "You know where things come from, there is a story and a memory behind pieces, and [it] is also part of the reason for returning to local foods." Tim thinks there is great potential for collaboration between potters and farmers. "If you do care about where you get your food," he explains, "then you care more about presenting things in a few mismatched pieces that mean something to you." He says that when it comes to shopping, people in the sustainable food world think, "how local can we get?" Shopping locally (and not from large chains) keeps more money circulating within the community. For example, a study conducted in Maine found that locally owned businesses spent 44.6% of their revenue locally (wages and benefits paid to local employees, goods and services purchased from other local businesses, profits going to local owners and local and state taxes), whereas chains spent 14.1% of their revenue locally, mostly as payroll (complete reference and other studies found at [www.livingeconomies.org/localfirst/studies](http://www.livingeconomies.org/localfirst/studies)).

If people work together with a common goal in mind, who knows what is possible. In Madison, Wisconsin, the Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition (MACSAC) has been established long enough to create the "Partner Shares Program," working with the local Empty Bowls project to raise money that goes directly to low income families, allowing them to have a CSA share. Along with the silent auction this past year, approximately thirty families were able to choose their CSA.

With vision and help from Claire Murray, farmer and volunteer coordinator of the Chester County division of the Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign, and Ben Gall, owner of the new Arts Scene Gallery ([www.theartsscene.org](http://www.theartsscene.org)) in West Chester, Pennsylvania, the first annual "Down to Earth" event was held October 6–8, 2006, to celebrate the intrinsic value of eating locally grown food using handmade art, and to

introduce local farmers and artists to a wider audience. Invited artists had to live within a 100-mile radius (an arbitrary criteria for the Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture's Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign) and make art intended for food. Sixteen regionally and nationally recognized ceramics artists exhibited about ten pieces each and, instead of having work displayed on pedestals, it was set on tables and in cabinets made by five local artists and placed throughout the 6000-square-foot converted warehouse space. For the reception, local producers donated massive quantities of local cheese, produce, bread, flowers, wine and beer, and a local/seasonal chef provided dips and hors d'oeuvres. Rich Hoffman's film "Fridays at the Farm" and Willi Singleton's film "Wild Clay, Ancient Fire" were repeatedly shown throughout the weekend. There was also a special viewing of "Kamataki," an award-winning movie authentically filmed at Shiho Kanzaki's anagama about a young man who finds his way back to life through the *kamataki*, which means kiln firing. Fifteen percent of proceeds went directly to the Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign.

The art gallery setting, in which the idea of "function" is often removed from the art world, seemed to allow people to slow down a little, enjoy each other, savor the food and pottery and take in the amazing gallery space. I observed one couple as they reached into a bowl for some local sheep cheese, stop and look at the bowl, pick it up for a closer inspection, and then promptly ask if it was for sale. Another fellow came back at the end of the three-day event to pick up the pots he purchased, and asked if the "beer" pitcher was still avail-

able. (Except for a couple of pitchers that were surreptitiously used to help keep the local microbrew flowing, pots being used were seconds and not marked for sale.) When I asked him if he used it during the reception, he said he wanted to buy it because he really enjoyed using it that way. "Sometimes people don't think about how pottery would feel if it were [being] used," mused Claudia Desimone, of The Arts Scene's Café Menta. "In a gallery, it sits away on a shelf somewhere, and you don't think about it in your kitchen. Pottery is so much more than just looking at it. It is tactile. When you use something over time, I think you can get a really different experience of it."

Next time, we will ask farmers to include their philosophies in the artist statement book, and will hold the show after the harvest, in November, when farmers have more time to enjoy the event. Perhaps in lieu of an entry fee, potters could contribute one pot to be used and sold. It would also be interesting to open dialog with a few prominent chefs who already support our local farmers, and to provide tastings and recipes designed for specific kinds of pots. My journey "Down to Earth" has allowed me to meet excellent people, sell a few pots, help others sell a few pots and hopefully plant a seed or two about the joys produced from our earth.

*To find a local farmer's market, CSA, or farming organization near you and to read more about the benefits of buying locally, visit [www.foodroutes.org](http://www.foodroutes.org).*

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## recipe

### CARROT GINGER SOUP WITH BUTTER-TOASTED CASHEWS

Onion	1 large (chopped)
Carrots	6 large (scrubbed, cut into ½-inch slices)
Raw cashews	generous handful
Butter	a few tsp.
Ginger	2-in. piece (peeled, chopped)
Sour cream or yogurt	to taste
Salt	to taste

Sauté onion in butter or olive oil. Add carrots. Add water to cover, simmer until tender. Toast cashews with 1 teaspoon of butter. Add to carrot mix, along with chopped ginger. Purée the soup, adding water to adjust thickness. Salt to taste. Serve in the handmade pot of your choice with a dollop of sour cream or yogurt.



Cup and saucer, 4½ in. (11 cm) in height, stoneware with iron oxide and glaze, fired to Cone 6, by Cara Graver, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania. Reflecting on her experience with "Down to Earth," Graver said, "We are building local resources to unite individuals." And whether it's food or pots, she feels they were "reducing the expenditure of energy used to ship goods to and from far-off places."