



from the
GARDEN
to the **TABLE**

CHARLIE AYERS and **JESSE COOL**
are raising the bar on local organic cooking.
At Palo Alto's Calafia Café, the quintessential
California eatery, Ayers lets organic ingredients
take center stage in his eco-friendly dining room.
Jesse Cool of Menlo Park's Cool Café
and Flea Street Café grows her own
produce, buys from local farmers, and
makes compost in a business park. »

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KYLE CHESSER



Jesse Cool checks for ripe beans in her garden on Stanford University's open space land.

JESSE

BY ANN MARIE BROWN

JESSE COOL » If there is a poster child for organic food and healthy eating, Jesse Cool must be it. Even without a drop of makeup and wearing a T-shirt that bears the word "DIRT"—a tribute to her passion for farming—Cool looks like a very attractive 40-something. Except she's 60.

Sure, she runs the trails at the Stanford Dish (the open space land near the linear accelerator center) and lifts weights at the gym. But what keeps Cool on top of her game, she says, is good, fresh food.

"I primarily eat a diet of whole, organic, real food and I think the body knows how to process that better than artificial or processed foods," she says. "But I am so imperfect. I follow the 80/20 principle. I try to do the best I can 80 percent of the time. The rest of the time, I'm not perfect."

Cool has just opened a new restaurant, Cool Café, in Menlo Business Park. Its understated interior pays tribute to her conservation-minded business ethos—the same practices that garnered her signature restaurant, Flea Street Café, a coveted green business certification from San Mateo County. Tabletops and countertops are made of bamboo. Floors are painted concrete. The lighting is low-voltage. Flatware is either reusable bamboo or "spudware," made from potatoes and compostable. The

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CHARLIE

the West beckoned, he pulled up stakes and moved to Northern California. In 1992, Ayers interviewed for a position with Alice Waters, renowned chef and co-owner of Chez Panisse and advocate of locally grown and organic food. It was a pivotal moment in shaping Ayers' career.

"[Waters] said to me, 'You won't work out here; this is not a place for you.' And I asked 'Why?' And she proceeded to tell me about the importance of supporting local farms and organic food. I was really offended because up until that point I had never been turned away by a chef... and so I wanted to learn as much as I could about this whole organic movement that I wasn't qualified for or had no experience with."

Shortly thereafter, while catering a music festival, Ayers met the founder of Muir Glen Tomatoes. "He said to me, 'What do organic foods mean to you, Charlie?' and I said, 'It's about foods that are free of chemicals and as pure as can be.' He said, 'Let me make it a little simpler for you. It's about not having petroleum distillates in your food.' That really piqued my interest. That's where I really got the spark. And that's when I started implementing the use of organic products in everything that I was doing."

Ayers' passion for organics led him to a job running the prepared food department at Whole Foods Markets, and then to his much-storied tenure as Google's head chef—a position he held from the startup days in 1999 until 2005.

While growing an organic garden at home is one of the best ways to ensure a steady flow of produce at a minimal cost, Ayers admits he doesn't have one. "I have a big dog at home, and there's no stop-
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only beverages sold are in glass bottles, not plastic, because glass is more easily recycled.

Patrons at Cool Café find a very simple menu with only one hot entree each day, perhaps a meatloaf or a vegetarian strata, priced at about \$8. The minimalist menu is a carefully planned strategy in Cool's eco-minded efforts.

"Simplifying the menu saves manpower, storage, and waste," says Cool. "It's about values. It sounds trite but this is what we are all about. Even the cleaning agents we use are far beyond plant-friendly," she says. "You can eat this stuff."

Monday through Friday, Cool Café makes lunch for many of the 3,000 people who work in the Menlo Business Park, but this is no ordinary cluster of cubicles. In the parking lot outside the café, Cool's landlord has created an "edible landscape" according to Cool's specifications. The pavement is broken up with citrus trees, lavender, rosemary, and other plants that can be used in the kitchen. A compost pile is in the works.

"I've entered another community here," Cool says. "We are creating a community in this place."

This is the same go-the-extra-mile energy that Cool puts into her other projects, like her work at Stanford University Hospital, where she has revamped their dietary program to include as much organic and local food as possible, including strawberries from Watsonville, whole-grain bread from a San Francisco bakery, and grass-fed beef from Marin and Sonoma. Cool's soup recipes, including carrot ginger with curry and roasted sweet pepper with goat cheese, are a staple on the patients' new menu.

"This is deeply challenging work, and it's never been done

before," she says. "Stanford is taking responsibility around the issues of food and healing. They make 4,000 meals a day, and now they are cooking chicken soup from whole, organic chickens."

Cool's influence at Stanford Hospital extends beyond the health benefits of organics to the sustainable practices of the kitchen. "Everything on the tray is recyclable, re-usable, or compostable now," she says. "It was a struggle, but we did away with all the plastic wrapping."

Stanford and Cool share more organic connections. Cool is the chef-proprietor of the Cool Café at the Cantor Center for the Visual Arts on Stanford's campus. And she tends her half-acre garden on Stanford Open Space land, right next to the running path. The garden, where her two grandchildren like to play, has apple, fig, and plum trees, plus an overflowing abundance of vegetables. Cool was new to gardening when she began tilling the soil five years ago, but she is a savvy farmer now: "I knew I had made the grade when I found myself saying, 'That is the most beautiful compost pile!'"

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Jesse Cool shows off one of her egg-laying organic chickens.

JEWELS FROM JESSE

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE GUILTY PLEASURE?

Gin martinis.

WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE CHEF?

I have always learned the most about food from my farmer friends. They keep me connected to how to keep it simple, respect pure flavors, keep it as fresh as possible.

SEEN ANY MOVIES LATELY?

I saw the screening of *Botany of Desire*, a documentary based on the book by Michael Pollan. I was there primarily because the filmmakers are dear friends. It was fantastic and I encourage people to make sure and see it when it shows on PBS.

WHAT IS YOUR CAN'T-DO-WITHOUT INGREDIENT?

Eggs. That's why I have chickens. My sons know that I always have fresh eggs, good cheese, fresh vegetables, butter, and olive oil in the kitchen. With those ingredients, I can always make something wonderful.

