

USDA and White House Move on Progressive Food Agenda

By Jim Slama

Local and sustainable food advocates are smiling these days as signals out of Washington indicate major new support for their efforts. The biggest news was the announcement that long-time organic advocate Kathleen Merrigan had been tapped to become the Deputy Secretary of Agriculture, the number two position at the USDA. As an aid to Senator Patrick Leahy, Merrigan was the major force behind the Organic Food Production Act which recognized and regulated organic farming.



This follows the decision by Obama to hire their Chicago personal cook, Sam Kass as assistant chef in the White House kitchen. He will work closely with Executive Chef, Cristeta Comerford. Kass is known for his strong support for local and organic foods and did a cooking demo at the FamilyFarmed EXPO in November.

While in Chicago, Kass was the Executive Chef at the Jane Addams Hull House Museum. One of his projects was called Re-thinking Soup in which he cooked up organic soup and bread and served it to University of Illinois students. The gatherings also included talks from farmers, educators, and foodies. These soup kitchen sessions were held in a historic building at the original Hull House where Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle*. I had the honor of speaking about food in the Obama era at the first Re-thinking Soup gathering after his historic election win. At the time, I had no idea I was on stage with the president-elect's personal chef.

Kass' impact on the First Family may already be taking root. At a visit to the United States Department of Agriculture headquarters in Washington, First Lady Michelle Obama brought a Magnolia tree to be planted in their new garden. The garden replaces a blacktop parking lot and will include fruits and vegetables, some of which will be provided to local soup kitchens. Mrs. Obama praised a just

announced program at the USDA that will be planting such gardens in all their facilities worldwide. "I'm a big believer in Community Gardens," she said, "both because of their beauty and for providing access to fresh fruits and vegetables to so many communities across the nation and the world."

Michelle Obama also offered up a unique local food perspective prior to hosting her first state dinner. Marian Burros reported in the New York Times that the first lady invited a group of reporters and culinary students to tour the White House Kitchen, prior to a dinner in honor of the nation's governors. According to Burros:

The first lady took the opportunity to put in a pitch for local and sustainable food and for healthy eating, a recurring theme of hers during the campaign and since she arrived in Washington.

When food is grown locally, she said, "oftentimes it tastes really good, and when you're dealing with kids, you want to get them to try that carrot."



"If it tastes like a real carrot, and it's really sweet, they're going to think that it's a piece of candy," she continued. "So my kids are more inclined to try different vegetables if they are fresh and local and delicious."