

SEEDS OF DISSENSION Georgia Straight, October 16th, 2002

JOHN BISHOP EXAMINES GENETICALLY MODIFIED FOODS IN DECONSTRUCTING SUPPER

By Angela Murrills

For a new documentary, chef John Bishop went from Salt Spring Island to Andhra Pradesh in his GM food quest.

John Bishop—yes, that John Bishop, the John Bishop who cooked for Bill Clinton, who regularly feeds the rich and famous, who has been termed "the prince of fresh" and even appears (as himself) in a murder mystery, *that* John Bishop—is currently starring in one of the scariest movies you'll see in a long time. It's got the lot: exotic tropical locations; tension; conflict; and the current hot celluloid ingredient, cuisine. But what *Deconstructing Supper*, a one-hour documentary by Vancouver-based filmmaker Marianne Kaplan, also has is a levelheaded and balanced look at the issue of genetically modified foods. Airing next Thursday (October 24) at 8 p.m. on Vision TV, *Deconstructing Supper* casts Bishop in the role of an inquisitive chef who, when a customer asks him about GM foods, sets out in search of the truth. The film is designed to reach a wide audience. Kaplan says that Vision TV supported the project from the start. Global originally bought the documentary to show in B.C., then saw the rough cut and decided to screen it nationally in late February 2003.

Why make a documentary on GM foods? And more to the point, why ask someone in the first rank of restaurateurs to front it? Kaplan says the seed was planted in June 1998, when she took an SFU summer course called Women, Life, and the Planet. She says that as well as broadening her growing interest in food issues, "the workshop opened my mind to the potential for total control of the food chain." Eager to make her documentary as accessible as possible, Kaplan, already a filmmaker, cast about for a suitable "hero" and approached Bishop, who immediately agreed. "I didn't have much knowledge [of GM foods]," he says, "and I thought, 'It's a journey I want to take.'" In the end it would be a demanding and time-consuming one. Nor did Bishop get film-star treatment. He was paid a nominal per diem and reckons that over the eight months it took to shoot 50 hours of film on three continents, he had worked about 60 days on the project. According to him, he relished every moment.

Kaplan provided some basic information, but Bishop's on-camera questions are real (which explains why he never sounds scripted). "It's a revelation to me," he says of the discoveries he made. Engaging, quiet, polite, with the reassuring air of a country doctor, Bishop is not your stereotypical strident activist (one reason why Kaplan approached him), which renders his interviews and comments all the more compelling.

Close-ups of elegant food and people, sophisticated art, and cool jazz make the film's opening sequence more Cary Grant than counterculture. It places us inside Bishop's, where a customer's question about genetically modified foods sets Bishop off on the quest that takes him, literally, halfway around the world—and ultimately makes him examine his responsibilities as a restaurateur.

His journey begins on Salt Spring Island, where organic farmer Michael Ableman discusses with Bishop the difference between California's vast fields (where, he says, a single valley grows 60 percent of the nation's fruits and vegetables) and Bishop's memories of his father's productive backyard garden in Wales. As Ableman points out: we pay a high price for cheap food in the impact it has on our health and the land.

In San Diego, Bishop watches a protest march against genetically modified crops. Representatives from the biotechnology industry argue that science can mean the need for fewer chemicals for pest control and the opportunity to feed Third World countries. Bishop next visits a large biotech company

and watches how new DNA is moved into canola plants. He also learns that mainstream foods containing soya, corn, or canola oil might have been genetically tinkered with. With great tact and amiability, he makes his way through a "GM feast" of canned soup and other processed foods. "Does that mean the toxin is actually in the soup?" Bishop asks the scientist, without a smidgen of irony.

"The companies that produce them say that GMs are safe," Bishop says in the documentary. "But how do they know? We haven't been eating them long enough." And, as Stephen Yarrow, a federal government official with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, points out, it's the developer who provides the testing information that leads to government approval.

Travelling to Bruno, Saskatchewan, Bishop meets Percy Schmeiser, who has grown and developed his own high-yielding, disease-resistant canola seeds for 53 years. In 1997, when canola from GM seeds arrived, uninvited, on his land, the Canadian division of transnational biotechnology firm Monsanto Company accused Schmeiser of growing genetically modified canola without a licence, and sued him. Monsanto won the case when the federal court Judge W. Andrew MacKay ruled that it did not matter how the seed came to be on Schmeiser's land; the farmer has also lost a subsequent appeal. "I was a seed developer and a seed grower," he says in *Deconstructing Supper*, "and that right has been taken away from me." He also asserts that control of the seed supply eventually means control of the food supply. Representatives from Monsanto refused to be filmed.

Bishop next journeys to England, where massive public pressure, grassroots activism, and boycotts have convinced all major supermarkets to pledge not to use GM ingredients in their house-brand products. All the documentary provides is information; viewers are left to make their own decisions as to what Canada should be doing. "I don't know what to believe," Bishop admits, as he prepares to leave for India.

Here, in the countryside, he hears about farmers, like Schmeiser, who seed-select according to their needs. There are tall-growing varieties that provide both fodder and grain, and others that have evolved over the centuries to be salt-, drought-, or frost-resistant. Crops aren't zero-tolerant to pests, Bishop discovers, but the natural balance works. Native plants that were lost due to the introduction of pesticides in the 1960s are being reintroduced; birds and benign insects wiped out by biochemistry are coming back. The biotech companies know how to manipulate chemicals and plants, he feels, but "that is not about farming; that is not about food."

The story concludes in the small village of Pastapur in Andhra Pradesh, where there is a return to traditional agriculture. P. V. Satheesh is director of the Deccan Development Society, a grassroots organization working with women in about 75 villages who, since the mid-'80s, have brought over 10,000 acres of formerly degraded land back under active cultivation, raise six times the quantity of grain they formerly did, and have created a viable distribution system. Satheesh talks of "the special knowledge of farmers" gleaned over dozens of centuries, and of usable greens that, because they are uncultivated, are considered weeds. He says of the DDS farmers: "Their agriculture is so sophisticated that I think the biotech industry can never start understanding and appreciating this depth and level of knowledge." Bishop, as chef and gourmet, has the final word over a meal whose ingredients look remarkably similar in colour and variety to Michael Ableman's harvest on Salt Spring Island. Says Bishop of the food: "I can't remember ever feeling better."

Months after the filming, he is still keenly interested in the people he met, and in late August he hosts Satheesh (en route to an organic-food conference in Victoria) to an Indian lunch at Bishop's. "We're in a sad transition period from a rich food culture [that is now] starting to embrace processed foods," Satheesh says. "We'll have to go through that phase to come back to what we're losing. We have a

heritage of 5,000 years or more in agriculture," he continues. "For Monsanto to come and teach us about growing food is a joke. We are saying it with such certainty because we have done that experiment."

In Marianne Kaplan's view: "The message that we need to get out is that supporting organic farmers and farming is crucial." John Bishop, meanwhile, is determined to use produce that is 100-percent organic. View the documentary and make up your own mind.

John Bishop will cook an organic five-course Indian dinner this Sunday (October 20) at a benefit screening of *Deconstructing Supper* at the Norman Rothstein Theatre. Tickets, \$55 for FarmFolk/CityFolk members, \$65 otherwise, are available from FarmFolk/CityFolk (604-730-0450), Capers Community Markets (604-739-6640), and Barbara-Jo's Books to Cooks (604-688-6755).

FOOD of The Week

John Bishop's cookbooks are among my absolute favourites. His latest, *Simply Bishop's: Easy Seasonal Recipes* (Douglas & McIntyre, \$45), coauthored with Bishop's chef Dennis Green, immediately went on the shelf next to my stove. Autumn appetizers of roasted-pear-and-goat-cheese phyllo pastries are incredibly easy to do (like most of the recipes), as is the golden-beet soup with orange-and-dill sour cream. Cold-weather entrées are just as nourishing to body and soul: braised lamb shanks with root vegetables; slow-cooked pork shoulder; a chicken cassoulet. And then there's dessert, as well as all the other seasons. This is seriously recommended for everyone passionate about eating superb local food. • Angela Murrills