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The Citizen Chef



Tom Colicchio, restaurateur and TV figure, is as passionate about the politics of food as about the plating.

By ALAN FEUER

On a recent afternoon, the chef Tom Colicchio was sitting with his staff in his office, on East 19th Street in Manhattan, hashing out the details of the high-end hotel restaurant he plans to open this winter in Miami. What would he name the lobby bar? Would he serve small plates to bathers at the pool?

Then it was time to take a conference call. The subject: a state law in Vermont that requires food producers to clearly label products made with the genetically modified ingredients known as G.M.O.s.

If the switch from appetizers to activism seemed jarring, Mr. Colicchio, who owns and runs the Craft chain of restaurants, argued that the two were of a piece. After all, he said, since the 1970s, when Alice Waters touched off the farm-to-table revolution, chefs have served as educators and cultural enlighteners, informing their customers about the social benefits of organic farming and sustainably produced food.

More recently, many restaurants in cities like New York have been transformed from places to get a meal into something like religious shrines for an eating elite. And many chefs who have benefited greatly from the trend have come to the conclusion that it is not enough to simply cook with — or preach about — heirloom tomatoes and artisanal goat-milk cheese. They have become increasingly and explicitly political, writing op-ed pieces, backing candidates for office, testifying before congressional committees and supporting laws to curb the use of antibiotics in the nation's food supply.

Mr. Colicchio, 54, is among the most vocal and widely recognized of the new political chefs, not least because of the celebrity he has earned from his side job as a judge on the hit television show "Top Chef." Though the field is crowded with colleagues and competitors — Mario Batali, for one, has taken on fracking as an issue — Mr. Colicchio's advocacy work is argu-

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Tom Colicchio at the Community Food Bank of New Jersey in Hillside, top, where he urged Gov. Chris Christie not to reduce funds for an anti-hunger program; and at a sustainable-seafood event at his Riverpark restaurant, far left, where Atlantic salmon sashimi, center, was served; and a food bank worker.



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ably unmatched in both stridency and scope. "There are a lot of chefs who understand that food has been good to them and, because of that, believe that everyone should have access to good food," said Margarette Purvis, president of the Food Bank for New York City, the largest local anti-hunger group. "But Tom has stepped it up to the next level. He's not only knowledgeable, he's incredibly committed. And he's really down there fighting in the trenches."

In April, for example, Mr. Colicchio appeared, in his Buddy Holly glasses, at a steak-and-speeches fund-raising dinner that the Food Bank held at Cipriani Wall Street in Lower Manhattan. It was an opulent affair, where a wealthy crowd raised \$2 million at a wireless silent auction — the bids came in by iPad — buying items like tickets to "The Daily Show" and an "agritourist" weekend in Belize.

The speech Mr. Colicchio gave when he was at the podium, to present an award to MSNBC for its coverage of hunger issues, was not your typical charity oration. Congress, he declared, immediately delving into details, had just passed a farm bill that had cut \$9 billion from the food-stamp program, and the House of Representatives, he said, was poised to slash the bill by several billion more.

"Do the math," he pleaded. "We can't make up for this. Now more than ever, it's important that we call our leaders out when they support cruel and punitive policies that are bad for this country."

To do that, he frequently promotes, particularly on his widely followed Twitter feed, a legislative scorecard that rates members of Congress on how they vote on food-related issues. The scorecard, which tracks things like crop-insurance bills and nutrition-reform amendments, was created two years ago by a group called Food Policy Action. Its founder, Ken Cook, met Mr. Colicchio in 2010, when they both showed up to testify before a congressional committee about providing money for school lunches.

"I'd never seen him in action, except on 'Top Chef,' frightening contestants who had flat soufflés," Mr. Cook recalled. "And it turned out Tom had the same effect on the members of the committee. I've lobbied with lots of famous people on the Hill, but this time everyone was really paying attention."

Boldface names who push pet causes do not always make erudite advocates, but Mr. Colicchio, who is versed in food policy, can effortlessly riff on subjects like commercial crop yields, glyphosate herbicides and the carbon content of soil. His feelings are so well known in the world of food that in 2009, when he did a series of TV commercials on behalf of Diet Coke — "Eating well and living well doesn't mean you have to sacrifice great taste" — many culinary writers condemned him as a hypocrite and a sellout. In an interview at the time, Mr. Colicchio said he sold Diet Coke in all of his restaurants. "I have a rule," he said. "If I use it, I'll endorse it."

And though he occasionally gets messages on Twitter from critics who think that he has stepped outside his occupational wheelhouse (one of his favorites was "Stop talking about hunger and get back in the kitchen and feed people"), he tries to immunize himself from accusations of overreach by being well-informed.

"I find that people are happy enough when celebrities take up issues," he said, "but only if they really know their stuff."

It would seem that he both knows his stuff and is taken fairly seriously. Last year, Representative Chellie Pingree, a Democrat from Maine, invited Mr. Colicchio to a dinner party at her home in Washington to announce the introduction of the Local Farms, Food and Jobs Act, which gives assistance to farmers.

"I've had events with big people in the food world before," said Ms. Pingree, who is herself a restaurateur and a farmer, "but



I've never had a turnout like the one I had for Tom. There were 50 members from the House and Senate, standing in my dining room, hoping just to meet him and to get him in a picture. People were literally standing in line."

IF THERE IS such a thing as noblesse oblige de la cuisine, then Mr. Colicchio feels it. He has acknowledged that his political engagement stems partly from feeling a responsibility to make constructive use of his success as a chef (the James Beard Foundation named him the nation's best in 2010), not to mention the celebrity that he has gotten from television. "I wouldn't exactly call it guilt," he said, "but I obviously have a soapbox and I want to use it for a good cause. Just because I have a television show and restaurants that happen to be on the more expensive side, I still believe that food is a basic right."

Mr. Colicchio's mother, Beverly, taught him to cook and also worked in the lunchroom of a public high school in his hometown, Elizabeth, N.J. His father, Thomas, the president of a municipal correction officers' union, was constantly campaigning for local elected officials and bequeathed to his son an obsession with politics. It manifests today not only in Mr. Colicchio's advocacy work but also in his habit of yelling at the television news.

Mr. Colicchio's first job in a kitchen was at age 14 in the snack bar of the Gran Centurions Swim Club in Clark, N.J., making hamburgers and grilled cheese sandwiches. When he moved to New York City in the early 1980s, he rode the rise of the Manhattan restaurant scene — which he attributes to upscale New Yorkers looking for an entertainment more sedate than cocaine — at hot spots like Gotham Bar & Grill, the Quilted Giraffe and Mondrian.

While working at Mondrian he was invited by Share Our Strength, a group fighting hunger, to cook a dish at a charity event. It was, he still recalls, a crab ragout with shallot-lemon butter and potato purée. He also recalls being awakened that evening to the fact that thousands of people in the city went hungry every night.

At that point, Mr. Colicchio was in his 20s and, in his own words, was "a raving lunatic" who had already run some of New York's most important kitchens. Although he stayed involved in fighting hunger by raising money for charities and food banks, he was much more focused on his career. Things took off in 1994, when he and Danny Meyer opened Gramercy Tavern on East 20th Street. Seven years later, he went off on his own and opened his flag-



Tom Colicchio, from top, at Riverpark, one of his restaurants; at a Community Food Bank; and in a "Top Chef" episode with, from left, Emeril Lagasse, Padma Lakshmi and Gail Simmons.

Riffs on glyphosate herbicides and the carbon content of soil.

ship restaurant, Craft, one block away.

The year he opened Craft, he also married Lori Silverbush, a filmmaker who had worked at Gramercy Tavern as a waitress. (They now have two sons, 3 and 4. Mr. Colicchio also has a 21-year-old son from a previous relationship.) Mr. Colicchio credits his wife for his political awakening. In 2007, Ms. Silverbush started mentoring a teenage girl she had met through a Harlem charity called Groove With Me. She helped to get the girl into a school for students with learning disabilities. Then one day she got a phone call from the principal, who told her that the girl had been spotted outside foraging for food in the trash.

The call resulted in "A Place at the Table," a film on hunger and its political roots that Ms. Silverbush released in 2012 (with a co-director, Kristi Jacobson). "What we learned was that the great work of charities was in some way enabling us to never look at the policies that underpin hunger," she said. "We can't food-bank our way out of this. It just doesn't matter how much money we raise. We are never going to raise as much as they're slashing."

Mr. Colicchio appeared in the film and served as its executive producer, and the experience opened his eyes to the insufficiency of the charitable work he had been doing for decades. He began reading up on food-stamp legislation and on school lunch programs, like the one his mother ran at Elizabeth High School. His transformation came in the form of a simple but radicalizing insight: "If we want better food policies, we need to elect better officials."

These days, as part of his anti-hunger work, Mr. Colicchio has joined his fellow chefs Rachel Ray and Jonathan Adler in endorsing Lunch 4 Learning, a grass-roots campaign pressing Mayor Bill de Blasio to

offer free lunches for all students in public schools. Mr. Colicchio tweets or retweets daily about food-policy subjects, like the new food documentary "Fed Up" or a petition seeking congressional action to stop the importing of chicken from China.

But politics, like cooking, is more art than science, and despite his various efforts, he said, he was often frustrated by the political process. "There are two things you don't want to see made — sausages and laws," he said. "And having seen both, I can tell you, I'll take the sausage."

A FEW DAYS before his conference call on G.M.O.s, Mr. Colicchio, in his monogrammed chef's whites, presided at a sustainable-seafood tasting at Riverpark, one of his ritzy holdings, which sits in a garden on the East River at 29th Street. There was a jazz singer, and oysters on the half-shell. Wealthy foodies sampled the sea bass and the spectacular views of Queens.

One of the most pointed criticisms of the new food movement is that it is elitist, ignoring — or choosing not to focus on — the dining divide that separates those who care about where their fish are caught and those who cannot afford to buy fresh fish. While Mr. Colicchio does not deny that this divide exists, he argues that it is rooted in specific policies that, with enough political will, can be changed.

"The government subsidizes corn, wheat and soy," he said, adding that these subsidies made certain foods enticingly cheap for the poor, who are often afflicted by conditions like obesity and diabetes by consuming too much of them. "But there's no reason that unhealthy processed foods should cost less than a peach. It's a choice we make — a bad choice."

Attempting to bridge the divide and to address the question of food more holistically, Mr. Colicchio and Ms. Silverbush have spoken out about creating a federal Department of Food — perhaps to replace the Agriculture Department — which could simultaneously fight hunger, reorganize subsidies, limit the use of antibiotics and mandate the labeling of G.M.O.s.

"When we were an agrarian nation, a nation of growers," Ms. Silverbush said, "it made sense to focus on the people who produced food. But now we're a nation of eaters and we need to think about consumers."

Of course, we also need to think about elections, Mr. Colicchio said. And to that end, he has been active as a board member of Food Policy Action, which brings together activists from factions of the movement who had not previously seen their efforts as related. By working with other board members like Wayne Pacelle, president of the Humane Society, and Gary Hirshberg, chairman of the organic yogurt company Stonyfield Farms, Mr. Colicchio said, it might be possible to create a national constituency around the issue of food, one that could leverage its size and unity to make a difference at the ballot box.

"Gun advocates have the N.R.A.," he said, "and the pro-life movement works together on a single issue. Food advocates need to get together on a single issue. This isn't about great tomatoes or going to the greenmarket and having a nice little soulful experience. It's about votes."

Mr. Colicchio gave a TEDx talk in Manhattan titled "Vote Food" a couple of months ago. Not long after, he said, he was approached — not for the first time — by certain people who asked him whether he wanted to run for office. While he said later that he never would ("That's for damn sure," Ms. Silverbush chimed in), he remains convinced that the only path toward more effective and equitable food policy is through politics.

"As soon as one legislator loses their job over how they vote on food issues, we're going to send a clear message to Congress that we're organized and we're viable and strong," he said. "We're going to make clear that, yes, we do have a food movement — and that it's coming for you."