

## FoodWISE: Gigi Berardi's new book examines food choices

by *Grow Northwest*

**F**ood. We all eat, need, and want it, but how much do we really think about our food choices, or even try? Gigi Berardi, long-time resident and professor at Western Washington University, hopes you do, and has released a new book guiding this very subject.

FoodWISE (standing for whole, informed, sustainable and experienced-based thinking), asks people to stop, think, and then act when making food choices, in the belief that eating is more rewarding the more we are connected to the sources of our food. And at the very least, in this busy world, to try and do so. Along the way, she shares stories of farmers and people right here in our northwest corner, and her experiences with food through the years. Teaching food and geography classes domestically and internationally, and growing a lot of her own food or acquiring locally, she also maintains the food blog FoodWISE.

In the making over seven years, and started as a classroom resource, the book is published by North Atlantic Books and was released Jan. 14. She is hosting several community events, including a 'FoodWISE' lecture series at WWU

and an upcoming celebration at Twin Sisters Brewing (see the side bar below for details).

Thank you to Gigi for taking the time to interview with *Grow Northwest*, and share her thoughts.

*With dizzying choices and busy schedules, what are some simpler ways individuals and families can become more FoodWISE?*

Right, well, the entire book addresses the "dizziness piece"—it's a book not about food, but about food choices—how do we choose when dozens of times a day we are faced with the decision of not only what to eat—which food to buy—but also how much. Moreover,

As I write in the book, "Around the start of the twentieth century, saturated fat was heralded as one of the most important components of good health.

Even early United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) dietary guidelines touted its vast benefits. Now, saturated fat is widely condemned. But—spoiler alert—it's about to get a serious makeover, as I'll discuss in Part 2.

With all this conflicting information, maybe it's no surprise that many of us are guided as much by our own feelings and ideas about food as by what anybody else tells us. Emotions and information sometimes clash over food—our

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what's "healthy?"

To be honest, "healthy" is such a loaded term (and one that's co-opted by the food industry), I try not to use it in the book. So, obviously, information about food is everywhere. But a lot of what we read and hear is poorly researched, or not practical.

mood and what we feel like eating versus what we know about what's in particular foods and what's "good for us." How many of us buy that muffin in the coffee shop because it seems just the ticket for what ails us, or have had a bowl of ice cream at bedtime because we feel blue? Mood ups and downs can lead to



Gigi Berardi with her sheep during lambing season. COURTESY PHOTO

an awful lot of senseless eating, and it turns out that some foods can reinforce those mood swings."

Boom. So, what to choose? Choose WISE. Whole Foods and Whole Farms, Be Informed, Choose Sustainable Systems, and that means foods you can afford, and always opt for experience—experimenting with favorite foods and being adventurous with the less familiar. The entire book develops this approach, and advises us to use the mantra, "Stop, Think—then Act." But sometimes it's just impractical to have Whole Food, Information-rich, from Sustainable Systems, and based on Experience. Just choose one of them! There's the FoodWISE override! Sometimes we have to choose Sane! Our options are limited.

As I write in the book, "So, with FoodWISE: you've learned some guidelines. I hope you can follow them. I believe it is possible to live a FoodWISE life. At least try, because that is where we need to be. If everyone is trying, much of the time, then we are going to get there."

*Some of the best words you share in the book are: "A better world can start in the kitchen." The kitchen is obviously an important place in the home for eating and cooking, and also for connecting with one another. How do you see this changing and evolving?*

With my students!!! They must be some of the world's best cooks, and they often have the simplest recipes. In the winter Ecogastronomy: The Art and Science of Food class I teach, there are 150 students, and

50 students at a time cook for the class. These potlucks are epic! Some of the students' recipes appear in the book.

We're going to get back in the kitchen as people realize how simple it can be, and wholesome, and inexpensive!

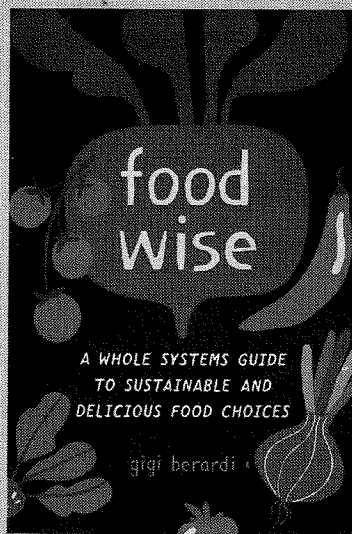
As I write, "Cooking FoodWISE isn't whipping up a perfect soufflé or staging Instagram-worthy plates. It's learning to put together some tasty whole food dishes, even if with just a few, simple ingredients. It's finding sources of local and fresh foods, and becoming familiar with what's available in what seasons. It's experimenting with a few new foods or ways of cooking, even if just a little bit. It's connecting with your friends to learn about other places to find ingredients, or other ways of preparing foods you're familiar with, or new dishes altogether."

*It's lovely to read about your family's heritage, including your parents being from different backgrounds and some of the dishes in your childhood. What foods bring back fond memories of family and cooking together, and did you share them with your children?*

Yes! Lasagna with a fresh tomato sauce cooked for days and flavored with (now, our own venison) sausage (although my daughter's a lifelong vegetarian!), homemade breads, stir-fries, egg frittatas, fried cauliflower. The biggest and fondest memory, though, is sitting around a table eating together.

*Farmers and producers in our See FoodWISE, continued on page 6*

### DISCUSSIONS AND EVENTS COMING UP



#### FoodWISE Lecture Series with Joel Salatin, Jan. 30

Gigi Berardi presents "Our Shared World of Food and Farming" with author and farm activist Joel Salatin. Free and open to the public, 10-11:30 a.m. in Communications Facility 115 at Western Washington University.

#### FoodWISE Lecture Series with Sister Noella Marcellino, Feb. 20

Gigi Berardi presents "Our Personal World of Food: Traditional Foods and Fats," with guest speaker Sister Noella Marcellino, known widely as "The Cheese Nun" and featured in Michael Pollan's *Cooked* book and docu-series on Netflix. Free and open to the public, 10-11:30 a.m. in Communications Facility 115 at WWU.

#### Celebrating FoodWISE with Gigi Berardi, Feb. 27

Gigi Berardi will discuss her experiences and celebrate the farms and people in her book at 6 p.m. at The Restaurant at Twin Sisters Brewing, Bellingham. All welcome, donations accepted. Sweater Weather String Band performs, and Twin Sisters appetizers available.

#### Writing FoodWISE, March 11

Writing your stories, with Whatcom Writers and Publishers at 7 p.m., Nicki's Bella Marina (Skyline Room), 2615 S Harbor Loop Dr, Bellingham.



**FoodWISE, continued from page 4**  
northwest corner provide a lot of choices. What do you say to people who believe supporting local is too expensive and cannot be done in some way on a monthly food budget?

Buy in season (should be less expensive), buy from your friends, barter with your friends! Find the eco-farming niche. We make cheese, sausage, and dilly beans. She makes the kimchee, my other friend makes the sauerkraut. Trade. Grow garlic! That's so easy, and a perfect food to trade.

And choose the highest quality and eat less of it, and mix it up! I'd say that even of my beloved sheep cheese. I don't really need to eat nearly as much as I do! Leverage! Balance! One FoodWISE day a week, then two. Just a FoodWISE meal. People will discover for themselves what works and what doesn't.

*"We need small-scale integrated farms" is a focus of your writing, and you cite examples of several local farmers and the work they've done in the community. Can you briefly note here some of the local farmers mentioned in your book? How do you see the overall picture in our northwest corner?*

Vibrant! Challenging! Exciting! Eager to learn! I see farmers as environmental stewards. Shout out to

all the farmers I mention and who have endorsed some of these practices! Larry Stap of Twin Brook, Randy Honcoop of Honcoop Berry Farms, Troy Lensen of Lensen dairy and associates, Scott and Brigit Meyers of Sweet Grass Farms on Lopez, Alexandra King and Brian Kerkvliet of Inspiration Farm, Cheesemakers Lindsay and Jeff Slevin of Twin Sisters Creamery. Many farmers in western Washington are interested in teaching and learning—it's a very exciting time to be working here.

This is the garden of eatin'! If we can't figure out farming here, and food, with our salmon populations, then where can we? And weather figures prominently.

And still another take on farming here:

"A FoodWISE attitude values foods that are fresh, local, organic, seasonal, and sustainable—but not necessarily all at the same time. But caution: being food savvy, I sometimes might choose "true blue" (loyal-to-local, but not necessarily organic) over "global green" (mega-farm organic) produce. Doing so helps me be aware of and empathetic to local producers and the challenges they face in providing consistently high-quality produce.

*Your studies and work are broad and exciting. You have lived with a group of old-order Men-*

*nonite organic farmers in central Pennsylvania, taken students to Europe, traveled to Mexico, and other places. How did these experiences influence your work and are there other regions you wish to visit and study?*

I am so fortunate to be able to study and travel like this. Yes, most certainly yes. Each of these experiences has enriched my life so. Experience leads to empathy—the ability to understand and have compassion for other living beings—and empathy results in better decisions about food. It's critical: increased awareness of the overall food system helps us to be more understanding of roles within it beyond ours as consumers, and more empathetic to those involved in the day-to-day production of food. I feel that when we have more information (essentially second-hand experience) about some part of the food system, we can make better choices.

Up next? I would love to develop a program with Vandana Shiva at her Navdanya Biodiversity Conservation Farm. We've talked about it a little bit. North Atlantic Books (my publisher) publishes much of her work as well.

*In your experiences, can you talk about some of the shared feelings and themes about food and cooking around the world?*

Oh, gratitude is a hugely important theme! The gratitude for the food itself, but also being able to share it. An example is my students in Italy: Whatever the food is like, shared over a three-hour meal, it becomes divine. We are all grateful to be sharing companionship.

Technically speaking, though, there is a commonality around the enjoyment of tastes. The sensory taste profiles of foods is such an important topic, it's a main focus of the "science" section of the book! The lesson there is that taste sensations are important, and we can't lose our high-quality foods, because, with them, then, we lose taste profiles.

*What sparked the writing of FoodWISE, and how does it fit in today's world?*

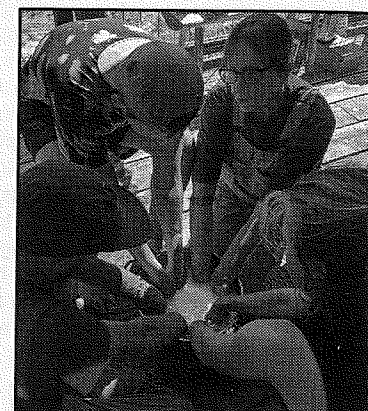
The spark was partly from a life-long interest in food and farming—and partly happenstance! I've written about food and food systems throughout my professional life—often through an energy efficiency/analysis lens. I've written about organic and conventional wheat production (and was one of the first to publish in academic journals about the topic). I've

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(that was from an "environmental" Fulbright in Italy—there were only two that year for Europe), resilience in farm systems in western Washington, catastrophic US farm and food policy (making US ag less resilient), disaster scenarios—and recovery—for food systems. I've also edited and contributed to books on international political food economy (World Food, Population, and Development – Frances Moore Lappe of Diet for a Small Planet fame wrote the foreword to it), soils (Agricultural Soil Loss: Processes, Policies, and Processes), and technological change in agriculture (Social Consequences and Challenges of New Agricultural Technologies—which really was a survey of technological change dating from the beginning of the last century! Imagine! Rural sociologists were concerned about the impacts of donkey-powered threshing machines!).

Plus, I've gardened all my life, and now have sheep that I milk and then make cheese. But...I'm also very curious—about everything. So one day I was in the Barnes and Noble bookstore on the Guide, and turned around and found I was in the diet section. My eyes focused on an intriguing title—Mindless Eating. It was by a scholar whose work is little followed these days, but it did get me to thinking about the fierce food beliefs I hold, and my students hold. Where do they come from? How do they get in the way of us making good food choices? So, I had the idea, then, to write a personal food memoir, that also addresses the fierce food beliefs we hold that lead us down problematic paths (like, no fat in our diet! or, lots of sugar in processed foods). I began the book in 2012, which is why we say FoodWISE was seven years in the making. The working title was "A Cultivated Life," but it was difficult to sell. Nevertheless, I kept reworking it, until one day I came across another book, by chance.

I was reading an issue of *Real Simple* and there was a column on happiness. The magazine featured the work of Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe in their book, *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to do the Right Thing*. The authors were at Swarthmore College and



Making cheese with her students. COURTESY PHOTO

Schwartz. Here's how I tell the story in FoodWISE,

"For FoodWISE, I have drawn heavily on Practical Wisdom and other writings of Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe on the general topic of experience and practical wisdom, and the strong relationship between the two. In a discussion with Barry Schwartz at Swarthmore College during the 2013–2014 academic year, I asked him if he had thought about applying the idea of experience, and "practical food wisdom," to his work on institutions failing to do the right thing (usually by focusing on rules and regulations rather than experience and wise judgment). "Only at the dinner table," he replied—which got me thinking that I could and should apply such thinking to what could best be called a FoodWISE approach.

And that's how it started, my FoodWISE thinking. But it was editor Barbara Sjöholm who helped me refine the acronym title for the book (WISE). And, very importantly, it was a former student, good friend, close colleague, and co-teacher who encouraged me to query Alison Knowles of North Atlantic Books, who "just happened to be looking for a good food book."

So... A combination of perseverance and circumstance.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

This interview was shortened for publication. For the full Q&A, with recipes from Gigi's book, see [www.grownorthwest.com](http://www.grownorthwest.com). FoodWISE is available locally and online. See her blog at <https://wp.www.edu/gigiblog>.

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