

Serving Up a Menu of Change

Cat Cora is no stranger to stirring the pot. The Food Network's first female Iron Chef is also the founder and president of Chefs for Humanity, an alliance of culinary professionals and educators seeking to reduce hunger worldwide. Cora's compassion isn't limited to her own species; the longtime animal lover and companion to an adopted Chihuahua recently signed The HSUS's pledge to boycott Canadian seafood until Canada ends its brutal commercial seal hunt. As the executive chef for *Bon Appétit* magazine and an HSUS spokeswoman, Cora whipped up a gourmet vegan meal in January at the Sundance Film Festival, which featured a screening of *A Sealed Fate?*, a documentary about the seal hunt created by photographer and *America's Next Top Model* judge Nigel Barker. In this excerpted interview, Cora took a break from the kitchen to talk to HSUS web editor Gail Berrigan.

Q: What prompted you to join the boycott of Canadian seafood?

CORA: I've always been a huge supporter of the Humane Society, ever since I was a little girl. So when they came to me, I immediately said, "Of course."

As a kid, I was the one who brought all the strays home—every stray you can think of. My mom would tell me stories about a bug or a cat I brought in; I must have brought all the neighborhood cats and kittens home. I've always been an animal lover and a huge advocate for animals. I think giving them a voice is important.

Q: Do you think chefs have a particular responsibility to promote a food "ethic"?

CORA: With the restaurants I've run and the restaurants I've opened, I've been a huge supporter of animal rights and sustainability and sustainable ecosystems. When I was running restaurants in the Bay Area, we had an issue with tuna fishing and the way they were catching dolphins in nets, and the unfortunate fate of those dolphins in order to catch the tuna. I've supported those campaigns as they've come out and always reflected that in my restaurants and on my menus. I think it's important that we—fishermen, chefs, farmers—all support sustainability and sustainable ecosystems.

Q: Does it make a difference to customers?

CORA: Absolutely, especially now that consumers have gotten so much more savvy—about sustainability, organics, healthy ecosystems. My hat's off to all my colleagues and all the people who have been pioneers because it has woken our society up to what's going on.

This is why we have a responsibility to put notices on the bottom of our menus and let people know that our food has been sustainably produced from healthy ecosystems, and that our food has been humanely gathered and procured. Every time we do this, it educates people even more.

Q: Is this the first time you've officially supported an animal cause?

CORA: Officially [with] a campaign, yes. But over the years, we've



only gotten our pets from the local [shelters]. At one point when I was in New York, I was very much into rescuing greyhounds—I rescued two from a racetrack.

Q: Any canine perks to living with you?

CORA: There are! Well, we try. We don't do any people food; I have to say that. But we did do some treats for our old dog, Sierra, when she was getting up in age and we knew she wasn't going to have a whole lot of time left. Of course, we're always looking for the best dog cookies—I've got to smell them and look at them and know what's in them—and the best dog food.

Q: You did a vegan dinner for the Protect Seals event at Sundance. Was that unusual to plan and execute?

CORA: I have a degree in exercise physiology and nutrition. I've always catered to vegetarian and some vegan customers in my restaurants. I've been doing it for a long time, and I've spent time working on making really good vegan and vegetarian meals and not just steamed vegetables on a plate with rice.

The crazy thing was that I was doing a non-vegan dinner for Chris Rock and his film entourage right before this vegan dinner started. When you're doing something like that, what you don't want to do is two completely different dinners; you want to do as much overlapping as you can. So I tried to do as close to the same menu as possible. And actually Chris Rock's whole crew got some vegan options. They didn't know, and they loved the whole meal.

It just goes to show you can do great things with vegan ingredients these days. It's four-star restaurant cooking but vegan.