

Food & News: Bringing the Two Together

By Al Tompkins

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The Charlotte Observer's Kathleen Purvis is my guest columnist for today's Al's Morning Meeting. I can't remember exactly when I met Kathleen, but it seems I have been a fan of hers for a decade. She is one of those people who seems to know something about everything. I especially appreciate her ability to tell me that what I think I know is not always so. She has the skeptical, but not cynical, mind of a journalist.

I turned to Kathleen because food is such a big story these days. Here are her ideas for you:

You want stories that will hit people where they live? There are plenty of ways to do this on the food beat, where we often take national issues, such as rising food prices, and localize them.

Slate took food writers to task last month for not writing about economics: "When food writers and producers advocate economy, they're usually talking about time — churning out recipes for fast, easy, everyday weeknight meals that can be prepared in minutes. The dollar-savvy recipe is far less common."

That drew a puzzled reaction from some members of the Association of Food Journalists. From The Milwaukee Sentinel to The Orlando (Fla.) Sentinel, we've all been writing about how to stretch food dollars — and we didn't just start when organic milk passed \$5 a gallon.

The following food-related stories are worth a look:

- Jill Silva, food editor at The Kansas City (Mo.) Star, documented her family's experience living on the equivalent of a food stamp allotment for a week. She wrote and blogged about what it took to feed her family of four — including her then 13-year-old son — breakfast, lunch and dinner for seven days on \$5.54 a day.
- Heather McPherson, food editor at The Orlando (Fla.) Sentinel, sent three chefs to the supermarket to come up with dinner for four for less than \$15.
- In March 2007, I asked food editors in six cities similar to Charlotte — Raleigh, N.C.; Orlando, Fla.; Austin, Texas; Albany, N.Y.; Kansas City, Mo.; and Huntington Beach, Calif. — to price a list of 20 common items at a mainstream supermarket. By writing this article, we at the paper were responding to complaints from people who have moved to this area and said food costs here are higher. The article also provided us with benchmarks for comparing this year's food prices to prices from previous years.
- Earlier this year, the Observer's food section included a guide to cutting up your own chickens. The guide was part of our series, "The Cruellest Cuts," which documented worker abuses in the poultry industry.
- I wrote earlier this year about how big families cope with higher food costs. I approached Mothers of Multiples, an organization whose members have, at minimum, twins. Many have quads and quintos and know every aisle at Costco and Aldi.

Finally, this week I wrote about food shortages at food pantries and food banks. The story turned up some additional angles that are worth pursuing:

- The difference between food pantries and food banks. (Pantries provide emergency bags of food, food banks gather larger quantities and distribute them to pantries and other food charities, such as soup kitchens).
- Gleaners. Most communities have gleaning groups, the members of which go into fields in rural areas to gather what hasn't been picked. They also get unused food from food brokers and processors. One trouble for our local gleaning group, run by the Society of St. Andrew, is that now that gas prices are up, volunteers are having a harder time driving to rural areas to pick.
- What's the most common food that charities need? Peanut butter. It's high in protein, shelf-stable and used in many cultures. When food drives come to your door, you might have extra cans, but you probably aren't as likely to have a spare jar of peanut butter. (When we wrote about this in a recent story, people donated cases of it. One couple called a local charity, Loaves & Fishes, and offered to either bring the company 1,000 jars of peanut butter or a check to buy 1,000 jars. Loaves & Fishes took the check — money is tax-deductible, so it goes farther.)
- What has networking done for feeding the hungry? America's Second Harvest doesn't just gather food for one charity or emergency; it links the inventories of food banks all over the country, making it easier to get specific food to specific people.

If you have more questions or want more ideas, feel free to e-mail me at kpurvis@charlotteobserver.com.