

Debbie Koenig

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## The Lifetime Achievement Award is given to an ...

*The Lifetime Achievement Award is given to an individual whose lifetime body of work has had a positive and long-lasting impact on the way we eat, cook, or think about food in America.*

When Nora Pouillon decided to pursue organic certification for Restaurant Nora, her charming Washington, D.C., eatery, restaurant certification didn't exist. So she invented it. "Back then she was the only person emphasizing that as the first and foremost quality of her cuisine," says Patrick O'Connell, chef-proprietor of the Inn at Little Washington and a fellow leading advocate of local sourcing. Working with certifier Oregon Tilth, Pouillon spent two years establishing standards, and in 1999, with 95 percent of her ingredients certified organic, Restaurant Nora became the first officially certified restaurant in the United States. "She continued until it became not only fashionable but essential. And others followed," adds O'Connell.

Pouillon's dedication to what she initially called "additive-free food"—when she opened the restaurant in 1979, the term "organic" hadn't yet been coined—began in World War II-era Austria. Born in Vienna in 1943, Pouillon escaped the bombings when her father leased a farm in the Alps. "We had no electricity, no running water," she recalls. "We lived with a farm family and these farmers worked day and night. I learned the whole process, that food is not just put on the table or bought in the store."

Those experiences led to an awakening after Pouillon moved to Washington, D.C., in the mid-1960s with her then-husband, a French journalist. Armed with cookbooks by James Beard and Elizabeth David, she set to work in the kitchen, entertaining regularly. By the early '70s, this had blossomed into a catering company and cooking school, as well as her first dealings with wholesale suppliers—from whom she learned that in America, cows were being treated with antibiotics to help them digest food they wouldn't naturally eat. "That was my aha moment," Pouillon says. "I started searching for farmers who do things in a more sustainable way."

In 1976 an acquaintance approached her to open a restaurant in the historic Tabard Inn, where she insisted upon using as many natural and organically grown ingredients as possible. This led her to develop a network of farmers and suppliers, which she relied upon when she left to open Restaurant Nora a few years later. To help that network survive, Pouillon organized bus tours of the farms for area chefs, encouraging them to source ingredients locally. "So many of them didn't even know there was local food, they were so used to calling a distributor on the phone," she says. With her leadership, the farm-to-table movement began to take root in our nation's capital.

Pouillon led by example in other ways, too, helping to establish the FreshFarm farmers' markets, 14 of which now thrive in the D.C. area. She even dabbled in small-scale farming herself. "One of the first things Nora did was to put out a little garden in front of the restaurant. People would walk by and smile," says O'Connell. "It was subtle, but it demonstrated that every square inch of soil could produce something."

That subtlety ensures that Restaurant Nora never feels like a throwback to the hippie era. Since its opening, diners have discovered the benefits of sustainability and health-conscious cooking while enjoying memorably delicious meals. "Nora created an environment that drew people to the restaurant. It's one of the most special places I've ever visited," says Valerie Jarrett, former senior advisor to president Barack Obama and a longtime customer. "It's the quality of the food. It's the healthy eating. It's the ambience. That all comes from Nora."

Pouillon realized her message had reached all the way to the White House when President Obama hosted a

surprise birthday party for the First Lady at the restaurant. “When I told him this is the first certified organic restaurant in the country, he called, ‘Michelle! Michelle! Come over, you have to meet this woman. She’s right up your alley!’” recalls Pouillon. “I’m selling the restaurant, and they just moved in up the street. I hope they come in again before I sell.”

As Pouillon looks toward retirement, she’s anxious to spend more time with her four children and five grandchildren, to take on short-term consulting jobs, and to continue her work as a partner in a sustainable fish business and on the boards of multiple environment- and sustainability-focused organizations. “But first of all, I will rest!” she says.

After four decades of trailblazing, Pouillon has certainly earned some time off. “She helped shift the perception of organic from something that was good for you but not necessarily pleasurable,” says Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. “She showed that a fine-dining restaurant, making no concessions to quality or pleasure, could be organic. I think for a lot of people, she changed the understanding of what organic could be.”

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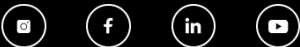
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