I remember how when I was a kid, if my mom needed bread, she sent me to the neighborhood bakery for a loaf still warm from the oven. Vegetables came from our backyard garden, cherries from the trees my dad planted when my big sister was little, and chicken from a poultry shop not too far away.

Food didn’t get any fresher than that.

And, I admit, sometimes I hated it. Sometimes, I just wanted the foods my friends ate: bologna on Wonder bread with plastic-wrapped cheese, TV dinners, and chocolate pudding made from a box mix, or better yet, packaged in a plastic cup. Once in a while my mom gave in, but usually dinners were made-from-scratch affairs: cabbage stuffed with rice and ground beef and baked in tomato sauce; soup made from garden-grown beets, flavored with beet leaves and sour cream; crepes filled with farmer’s cheese; and pierogies with dough so tender, they melted in your mouth.

Food made almost completely with ingredients that were whole, natural and in season.

Now that I’m a mom, and a working one at that, I get what my mom, who also worked, was trying to do. And I can hear her telling me, “Some day, when you’re a mother, you will understand.”

And, as mothers usually are, she was right. Now, I understand.

Finding what’s right for you

I had a sneaking suspicion, from things my friends said in passing, that many of them faced the same battles. So, I asked, and what I discovered is this: Despite the many short cuts and conveniences available to today’s home cook (like processed foods and take-out), these women usually eschew them in favor of preparing wholesome meals that are as simple and nutrient-dense as possible.

Gina Scialla, a music teacher, feeds her family as many whole foods as possible. When company’s coming or it’s the weekend, she cooks multiple batches of food – meals that are easy to freeze like soups and stews, sauces and casseroles. It takes planning and extra work, but it means that “on really busy evenings I can take something from the freezer rather than resorting to processed foods.”

Michele Downie, a special needs teacher, belongs to an organic farm in Pennington. Once a week, she spends the better part of an afternoon there, picking produce and berries in the fields; at home, she blanches and freezes the excess. It’s a lot of work, yes, and rounding out the winter menus with store-bought organics can get expensive, but she’s “driven by the fact that it is best for my family, me and the environment.” And it’s become second nature to shop for foods that are as close to their origin as possible – “Ap-
“I do believe that as women become more educated on the benefits of eating organic, local or raw, there does seem to be a progression.”

They’re using common sense, like the women I mentioned earlier, by taking the time to closely examine labels and packaging, considering both ingredients and nutrition composition, and planning meals in advance to avoid consuming highly processed convenience items. They’re also trying new items, “particularly those that can contribute to quick and nutritious meals and snacks, and loading up on fresh produce, often organic,” Jill says.

One of the best-selling items is kale, and Tony Mirack, McCaffrey’s produce director, couldn’t be more surprised. “Five years ago, I couldn’t give kale away,” he said. “Now, I have five types in stock and sales are up 300 percent.” He credits the media’s portrayal of kale as a superfood, and the resulting proliferation of online recipes, for the boost in the leafy green’s popularity. Same thing for avocado. Outrageous health benefits aside, shoppers used to steer clear of avocados because of their fat content. Today, avocado sales are climbing higher than anything else in McCaffrey’s produce section.

When Jill takes customers on market tours at one of McCaffrey’s four locations, she has the chance to chat about what’s motivating their dietary changes. Usually the catalyst is a health matter, she says, like weight management, heart disease or cancer prevention; sometimes it goes beyond that, like when shoppers want foods from companies that support important causes, or are environmentally conscious.

**Baby steps are OK**

Lindsay Vastola, founder of Body Project Boutique Fitness & Lifestyle in Robbinsville, loves empowering women with the tools they need to succeed. Many of her clients are success-driven professionals trying to balance busy work and personal schedules, so Lindsay focuses on everyday eating; how to save time with the shopping, cooking and prepping, and how to stop over-thinking what’s healthy and what’s not.

“I do believe that as women become more educated on the benefits of eating organic, local or raw, there does seem to be a progression,” Lindsay explains. “Maybe they start buying organic milk and eggs, then more organic, local produce, then grass-fed beef and organic meats, then raw cheese.

While I believe that more people are looking to buy local and organic, I still think the health-conscious and health-educated individual weighs...
the cost and benefit, eating as healthy as possible with cost and time being the biggest factors influencing how ‘far’ they go into the lifestyle,” Lindsay said.

**Farm to table to you**

Steve Tomlinson was an artist and designer working in wood shops in Brooklyn. Then the economy crashed, he lost his job and he found himself reinventing his life.

He knew he wanted to keep designing, but in a way that would have minimal negative impact on the environment, and as he ran through the options, he kept circling back to farming.

Today, he runs the Great Road Farms in Skillman, a 112-acre spread that supplies Agricola restaurant in Princeton with produce and free-range eggs, and sells the extra through its own CSA (community-supported agriculture) and at the West Windsor Farmers Market. Steve farmed 3.5 acres last year; this year, crops cover about six acres and focus on items Agricola uses most, like kale, Swiss chard, tomatoes, zucchini and radishes. There are also 200 laying hens, and plans in the works for a 25-tree orchard featuring apples, Asian pears and plums.

One perk of Steve’s job, aside from living on the farm with his wife and their infant son, is that he gets to collaborate with the executive and sous chefs. They work together to plan the next season’s crops – a tall order for a restaurant that serves 500 diners on a Friday night – working from a binder Steve has filled with vegetable varieties. And, he’s invited to bring new ideas to the table, and gets to sample them before they’re added to the menu.

“One time I went out to eat and I had a beet dish made with red and white beets. They all turned pink. I thought it was delicious,” said Steve, who shared his find with the chefs. The next time beets showed up on the menu at Agricola, it was in a dish featuring apples stained with beet juice, which made them spicy.

I asked Steve what he thought was driving this back-to-the-land approach. “I don’t know what it is, but there’s definitely something in the air. Farms are popping up all over,” he said. “People are changing their lives, reassessing their values. My grandparents grew their own vegetables. They had their own chickens. My parents’ generation – things came in cans, frozen dinners. Now we’re going back to basics.”

Even if they’re not eating at farm-to-table restaurants like Agricola, they are practicing farm to table at home.

There’s a farmers’ market at the historic Dvoor Farm in Flemington that attracts a steadily increasing clientele every Sunday that it’s open. Last year, readers of the Hunterdon County Democrat voted it their favorite farmers’ market.

Patricia Ruby is executive director of the Hunterdon Land Trust, which manages the Farmers’ Market. Part of the market’s appeal, she believes, is that people “can shake the hand of the farmer who picked the produce and learn the best way to prepare it – ways to create delicious meals that best retain the food’s nutritional value.”

It’s a feel-good situation too: shoppers bring home nutritious, locally grown foods, which allows “farmers who sell directly to the community to focus on growing and harvesting food when its flavor and nutritional value peaks, instead of worrying about packing or shipping crops across the country,” she says.

**If you build it, they will come**

Look around, the next time you’re out driving. Chances are, you’ll happen on at least one farm-to-table restaurant, or a new farmers’ market, or perhaps a specialized bakery like the Wild Flour Café, a gluten-free bakery that opened in Lawrenceville last May.

Canadian-born Marilyn Besner, its founder, long dreamed of opening her own place. She spent years honing her skills as an amateur cook, and when she attained a work permit, took a job at Whole Earth Center. She’s also trained at The Natural Gourmet and the French Culinary Institute.

Her bakers use the kitchen as a laboratory, experimenting with an array of flours – everything from amaranth to quinoa – until they find just the right blends for baguettes, pumpernickel, cheese sticks, challah, sandwich loafs, flat bread, biscotti, cream puffs, cupcakes, whoopie pies and tartlets. Birthday and wedding cakes, and full-size pies, are available by special order.

“All things we sell has the right crust and crumb combination. Our cookies have a balanced ratio of crunch to moistness. Our muffins are loaded with flavor,” Marilyn said.

I asked why Marilyn decided on a gluten-free bakery. “There wasn’t one around, and there’s demand,” she said. “What’s available is not always what’s desirable. You can find frozen at grocery store, but not fresh. We bake fresh every day.”

True to its café billing, Wild Flour serves breakfast and lunch (for example, cauliflower red lentil soup and a baguette with eggplant tapenade and mozzarella cheese), and in February, hosted a special Valentine’s Day dinner.

Clearly, we’ve evolved from the notion that the food we eat must taste bad if it’s good for us. (Remember all those commercials of kids turning their noses up at vegetables on their plates?) The combination of old-fashioned, hands-on farming with newer technologies that make it easier and more efficient brings us a cornucopia of tasty options for a healthful diet. **MW**