When I first began visiting France, I was amazed at the quality of the produce, especially at Rungis, the large food market outside of Paris. The chef I worked for at La Foux d’Alloose, in the sixth arrondissement, was a man of Rabelaisian dimensions and appetites, and working for him changed me forever. Each day Alex Guini would meet me in front of the restaurant at 3:00 A.M., and we would drive his little Renault deux-chevaux to the market to buy provisions. The pavilions at Rungis are the size of airplane hangars and are filled with the best products Europe has to offer, from Spain, Germany, Italy, and beyond. Several acres of primeurs—fruits and vegetables—are displayed like jewels; the purveyors eye each new customer suspiciously.

In Rungis there is almost no hawking or yelling as in the street markets of Paris, where brash female stall keepers cry out “Buy my raspberries” loudly enough to break your eardrums. For them, purchasing the berries is not a suggestion; it’s an order. But in Rungis everything is mute, and the signs are illegible to outsiders. Most buyers have frequented the same stands for years, and the merchants participate in a charade that goes something like this: “I have saved the best for you, dear buyer. Of course I am cutting my own throat with this price, but since we are friends…” Each day,
after a little half-hearted haggling, Alex and I would transfer cases of fruits and vegetables to his deux-chevaux.

I have since witnessed the same scene in many markets around the world: the Fulton Fish Market in New York, Tsukiji in Tokyo, Munich’s Grossmarkthalle, even the glorious retail market, Peck’s, in Milan, where the staff seem more like accomplices than salespeople. The sort of secret family of people involved in food, from farmer to chef, is deeply satisfying to me. We all recognize how hard everyone works in this competitive business and give each other credit for our labors—even if we don’t always give a discount.

I am lucky to have started cooking in Paris, and especially to have found the purveyors at Rungis. Now, thirty years after my first visit to France, I am gratified that farmer’s markets in the United States are beginning to offer a similar level of quality. Recently I witnessed the establishment of a farmer’s market in Westport, Connecticut, by Michel Nischan, an eloquent spokesman for sustainability. His market, which follows the French model, was an instant success. It struck me that it’s only fitting to fashion our markets after those that have existed in France for centuries—after all, much of America’s founding philosophy comes from the exchange of ideas between the lumières of France and our own first statesmen, especially Thomas Jefferson.

On a recent visit to Jefferson’s estate, Monticello, I was amazed to discover that most of the vegetables in the thousand-foot garden there derive from our third president’s own heirloom seed stock. Peter Hatch is the affable gardener who has cultivated this garden for the past thirty-two years. He likes to quote Jefferson’s prescription for healthy eating, which hardly differs from what we counsel today: “I have lived temperately eating little animal food and that, not as an aliment so much as a condiment for the vegetables which constitute my principal diet.”

Jefferson’s concern for gastronomy is well documented. In seeking a maître d’ he considered the “indispensable qualifications” to be “honesty and skill in making the dessert.” For his chef he chose his slave James Hemings (the brother of his mistress, Sally Hemings) and sent him to Paris to study cooking. Hemings eventually became Jefferson’s chef at his residence on the Champs Elysées, and later at Monticello. I like to think about Jefferson’s attention to his kitchen and garden and remember that American cuisine, with its bounty of tomatoes, potatoes, chestnuts, and corn, was not always reliant on convenience and processed foods. I am thrilled to be in the food business at this point in history when American palates are returning to elemental tastes and good food.

It is a special privilege to make desserts at the White House. I am proud that the first family has chosen healthy and locally sourced ingredients for their meals. Desserts can be healthy, I am convinced, if they are made with quality ingredients and served in judicious portions. I use less sugar and butter than I used to, and I often replace some sugar with honey, or add herbs as an interesting counterpart. Peaches and lemon verbena are one of my favorite combinations these days. When flavors are robust and layered, people don’t miss the sugar, because there are other elements to satisfy their taste buds. I often replace some butter with a good oil like grapeseed, olive, or argan, which carry less saturated fat and have their own important nutrients.

The kinds of desserts I make at the White House are the traditional American favorites like pies, cobblers, and crumbles, prepared with whatever fruits are in season. These are the desserts I grew up with, and they satisfy my American palate. But after baking for so many years, I am able to understand traditional recipes and adjust them toward a healthier finished product. This past summer’s bumper crops of peaches, cherries, nectarines, and plums were a joy to bake with.

My years of cooking in France got me started as a chef; and it was in France that I first enjoyed the conversations around food that make dining so much more than just a meal. I love to recall past meals and think about their contexts. Exploring the past also helps me prepare menus with specific themes, as we must do for all large group events at the White House. I work hard to coordinate the many different parts of the meal—the flowers, invitations, decorations, and table settings—to create a beautifully orchestrated moment that reflects my interest in balance as well as the experience of eating. Taste and texture are important, but temperature and environment are factors, too. Some contemporary chefs use lighting to change the color of the walls with each course in order to influence the guests’ pleasure. We haven’t tried that at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, but why not?

Our national conversation about food has been going on for hundreds of years. Now, more than ever, it is important that we make good choices for ourselves and our children. The First Lady’s example of a vegetable garden on the South Lawn has reverberated around the world and inspired many home gardens. What a terrific time to be a chef at the White House! I am proud to be part of a country that is now showing deep respect for nature and its infinite diversity, and I am hopeful that our attitudes and actions will continue to celebrate the spirit of Thomas Jefferson.