

A man with dark hair and a slight smile is sitting on a wooden stool in a restaurant. He is wearing a dark, textured jacket over a light pink t-shirt, a purple and blue striped scarf, and blue jeans. He has a watch on his left wrist. The background features a wall with several dried gourds hanging from the ceiling. To the left, a round clock is mounted on the wall. In front of him is a wooden table with a woven seat and a decorative vertical element. On the table, there are some white napkins and a small lit candle. A row of potted plants sits on a ledge behind the table.

the PRICE of PURITY

CONVINCED THAT AN EVER GREENING PUBLIC IS WILLING TO PAY A LITTLE MORE, A YOUNG ARGENTINE RESTAURATEUR IS DETERMINED TO TAKE HIS ORGANIC CONCEPT NATIONAL. IRENE SAX REPORTS. PHOTO BY PETER SUMNER WALTON BELLAMY.

Ten years ago, an Argentine businessman named **Alberto Gonzales** went out onto the streets of New York City with a pocket full of \$5 bills. He stopped people and offered them five bucks to tell him what they would want in an organic restaurant.

Everyone said top quality food; and because it was New York, they also said it had to be fast.

From this early market research, Gonzales put together the plans for **Gusto Grilled Organics**, a 100 percent organic restaurant that opened this winter. During the day, it's a speedy self-service cafe, where customers order grilled whole wheat pizzas, empanadas, soups, and sandwiches at a counter. In the evening it turns into a casual bistro with table service and light supplied by candles and low-energy bulbs.

It hasn't been an easy journey or shallow commitment for Gonzales. Going organic and being certified by the Green Restaurant Association meant much more, he discovered, than buying only ingredients produced without chemicals, hormones, pesticides, or other artificial ingredients. This, of course, he does, and his is the first restaurant in New York City to use only meat and produce certified by the Northeast Organic Farming Association in accordance with rules of the USDA. (In 1999, **Nora** in Washington, D.C., became the country's very first certified organic restaurant.)

Gusto Grilled Organics' tables and chairs are made with wood recycled from old barns. Cleaning supplies are environmentally friendly and biodegradable. Electricity is supplied by wind power bought through a Con Ed conservation project. It costs 30 percent more: just one of the extra costs he took on by going organic.

There are the water-saving Ecolab dishwashers. There are the energy-efficient Rankin-Delux char-broilers that supply the same BTUs as normal grills but use less energy (and cost four times as much as ordinary grills, he says.) This was an important consideration, since much of the food at Gusto Grilled Organics is cooked on the grill—not only meat and vegetables but also the pizzas and empanadas.

Packaging is important in Manhattan, where takeout and deliv-

ery are big business. Almost all of Gusto Grilled Organics' packaging is biodegradable: the clear cups and straws are actually made of corn and dissolve within 90 days, and the take-out menus are printed on old paper bags with soy ink.

And at the end of the day, there's always garbage. Waste is separated into organics, paper, and plastic, and organic material is composted with the help of a company that provides this service—for a price.

How much of this cost is passed on to the customers? Some, certainly, although Gonzales points out that the average dinner check is \$23—reasonable for Manhattan—and that a lunch of pizza and lemonade costs \$12. "It can't be compared to a \$3.99 value meal, but the quality is different, too."

Gonzales says he has been lucky in finding investors more interested in making a change than a quick profit. When he was running short during the construction period, a man from Wall Street wrote him a check for \$120,000, admitting that it wasn't the kind of investment he'd recommend to his company. "If it weren't for him," says Gonzales, "we never would have opened. He was like an angel in my path."

So far, customers have been so receptive that Gonzales plans to open four or five branches in New York and then more across the country. He's already been contacted by people in California and Boulder, Colorado, about opening there.

As an incentive, there's the **Chipotle** across the street and the knowledge that this healthy fast-food chain now has over 700 outlets. But his concept is somewhat different, Gonzales says. The food isn't just healthy and fast, but it's made in a way that is good for the environment. "I'm convinced that the same motion that brought them to the top will bring us there, too."

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