

'Food Is Medicine' event cultivates new solutions for sustainable health

By Diane Boudreau, ASU News
October 21, 2025

The stats Tom Pesek listed off to a packed auditorium at Arizona State University on Thursday were sobering.

“Tonight, some 673 million persons will go to bed hungry. Two-point-six billion people, at least, can’t afford to eat a healthy, nutritious diet. That’s fully one-third of humanity,” said Pesek, senior liaison officer of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, during the “Food Is Medicine and Eating for Health” event held on World Food Day, which is also the anniversary of the Food and Agriculture Organization.

The public event was cohosted by ASU’s [Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems](#), Food Tank, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the Sprouts Healthy Communities Foundation.

Trailblazers from science, farming, health, culture and community advocacy gathered at the Walton Center for Planetary Health on ASU's Tempe campus. They shared innovative, community-driven solutions to challenges in food production, quality, access and sustainability. Breakout groups led by ASU faculty and graduate students brainstormed new ideas to advance science, policy and local initiatives.

Attendees also sampled dishes created by acclaimed chefs, with ingredients provided by Sprouts Farmers Market and Duncan Family Farms.

“I want people to get excited about the idea of healthy food and to hear new and interesting ideas they haven’t heard before,” said Kathleen Merrigan, executive director of ASU’s Swette Center. “I want our community here in Maricopa County and Arizona to be in the same room together on different issues more often.”

AI: Ancestral intelligence

Although food as medicine may be a trendy topic right now, the concept is not new. For example, many Indigenous peoples have practiced regenerative agriculture and eating for health for millennia.

“In California, we’ve had at least three 100-year-long droughts in the last 5,000 years,” said Debra Utacia Krol, an Indigenous affairs reporter at the Arizona Republic and member of the Xolon Salinan Tribe from central California. “If anyone knows how to adapt to drought, it’s us. So I think it’s very important that people listen to Native people, listen to elders, listen to traditional practitioners.”

Krol and Denisa Livingston, who leads the Diné Community Advocacy Alliance, discussed the value of preserving traditional food systems, from protecting communities’ rights to save and sell their own seeds, to educating younger generations on traditional foods and harvesting practices.

Livingston suggested AI could also stand for “ancestral intelligence” and reminded the audience that we are the ancestors to future generations.

“It’s important that we visualize who we want to be and who we should be in the future, seeing ourselves as ancestors, with the responsibility and the stewardship of being an ancestor,” Livingston said.

Pierre Thiam, a James Beard Hall of Fame-inducted chef and founder of Yolélé Foods, is bringing his ancestors’ foods and traditions to current and future generations.

Thiam enjoyed eating fonio, a grain native to West Africa, while growing up in Senegal. When he became a chef in New York, however, he was unable to find the ingredient in the U.S.

“When I was writing my first cookbook, I had to think of substitutions for ingredients,” he said. But then he came up with a better idea. “Instead of substitutions, I started thinking about ways to bring those ingredients to market and support the families that have been growing these crops for thousands of years.”

Fonio is a highly nutritious “superfood.” It is also drought resistant and grows in poor soil. Its deep roots can help prevent erosion and protect the land where it is grown.

Yolélé Foods is helping the resilient crop make a comeback. However, Thiam worried that creating global demand for fonio might not benefit the farmers who grow it.

“We didn’t want to be the next quinoa. We didn’t want the success of fonio to be outside of the community. So we have these aggregation centers that provide the seeds, the warehousing and the market, run and operated by the farmers,” he said. “Now we go from a subsistence grain to an opportunity. The farmers are winning, the environment is winning and consumers around the world are winning.”

He said the concept of food as medicine should not remain a trend — it should be a way of life.

“We need to return to the way we’ve been feeding ourselves for 5,000 years plus. We need to diversify our diet. Fonio is one superfood, but there are thousands of others. Seventy percent of our biodiversity has disappeared. If we don’t consume it, it continues to disappear.”

Cultivating sustainable production

A growing number of people do want to consume diverse foods that are packed with nutrients and help regenerate our soils.

Brandon Lombardi, chief sustainability officer for Sprouts, said 60% of the company's produce — and 30% of all its products — is organic. "Both the demand and the supply have grown, but now the demand is outstripping supply."

Farming is precarious work, requiring up-front investment that doesn't see a return for months — if the crop survives. Transitioning to organic farming adds another layer of risk. Sprouts helps reduce that risk by entering multiyear contracts with farms, providing a level of reliability needed to invest in going organic.

"They know that all of the food they grow is going to be purchased, whether it's fit for consumption or not. And then we get a better cost as a retailer, which can be passed on to the consumer. So it's a triple win," Lombardi said.

Any food that can't be sold goes to food pantries or, if unfit for human consumption, to animal feed or compost.

Arnott Duncan, a fourth-generation farmer and owner of Duncan Family Farms, quickly captured the audience's attention with his humorous take on organic farming.

"I always thought the organic movement was horse s**t," he said. "Now I know it is."

He went on to describe how he and his wife added a petting zoo for children to their farm years ago. When rain turned a pile of the animals' manure into compost, the couple put it on their vegetable garden.

Duncan said the plants that grew were "absolutely beautiful" and delicious, sparking his interest in composting. He partnered with a horse racing facility in Phoenix, which provided multiple truckloads of manure every day, quickly filling his 30-acre composting yard.

"Composting became the way for us to farm. We started farming organically — now we're 100% organic in Arizona, Oregon and New York," Duncan said. Today, Duncan Family Farms is one of the largest organic vegetable operations in the country.

The end result? "We all eat really good s**t at the end of the day."

From farms to families

Michel Nischan, a James Beard Award-winning chef and cofounder and chairman of Wholesome Wave, knows firsthand how farm-fresh produce contributes to good health.

"From as far back as I can remember, I used to get shipped down to my grandfather's farm every summer. I learned how to grow things, how to raise things and how to turn them into something delicious before I even got to high school. It's why I'm a chef today," he said. "Everyone in my family who was active in farming lived very long lives and were very healthy because they ate what they grew."

He created Wholesome Wave with former Under Secretary of Agriculture Gus Schumaker to connect fresh produce to people in need. Together they created initiatives like the Double Value Coupon Program, which doubles SNAP benefits used to buy fruits and vegetables. And they launched the National Produce Prescription Collaborative, which encourages government-sponsored health plans to cover healthy food prescriptions for people at high risk of diet-related illness.

The presenters discussed the challenges of eating for health in the face of budget cuts to programs like SNAP.

“Millions of people are either going to lose benefits completely or see their benefit level cut, including kids, seniors, families, people with disabilities, veterans,” said Crystal FitzSimons, president of the Food Research & Action Center.

Yet research shows good nutrition saves money for everyone.

“The cost of food insecurity and hunger in this country is about \$160 billion annually in direct and indirect health care costs,” FitzSimons noted.

She is encouraged by the growing national movement for healthy school meals for all, with nine states now offering free breakfast and lunch in schools.

FitzSimons shared a story she heard from a grandmother who was raising her granddaughter. The child ate school lunches for the first week of school, but at the end of the week, the lunchroom staff threw away her lunch right in front of her because she didn’t have money in her account.

“The message you would send, that you would rather put the food in the trash than let the kid eat it, is outrageous. This really drove the conversation about healthy schools for all,” she said.

Via video, Arizona Sen. Ruben Gallego shared how critical food assistance was when he was growing up. Throughout the afternoon, other political leaders emphasized the importance of food as medicine in short videos, including U.S. Sen. Mark Kelly, Congressman Greg Stanton, Tempe Mayor Corey Woods and Phoenix Mayor Kate Gallego.

But what does 'healthy' even mean?

While we all know that a good diet leads to better health, we still don’t have great tools for measuring the benefits or drawbacks of specific foods.

The Periodic Table of Food Initiative is working to measure food the way we measure medicine.

“We still measure nutrition on a handful of nutrients, the same as in the 1950s. But food is far more complex,” said Selena Ahmed, senior director of the American Heart Association and global director of the Periodic Table of Food Initiative. “It’s 2025 and we’re still trying to figure out what’s in our food.”

The Periodic Table of Food Initiative uses the latest tools that are used in medicine to find answers.

“One of the questions we are commonly asked is, does organic food or regenerative agriculture result in more nutrient-dense foods? Also, does it matter for human health? We’re answering these questions with standardized tools,” Ahmed said. “In addition to measuring the good things in food, we’re also measuring the bad things, like toxins and heavy metals.”

As the initiative gathers more data, they are exploring how best to apply it. Ahmed said doing so will require collaboration and partnerships.

It’s all about relationships

Forging collaborations is what Food Tank is all about. The organization exists to convene, educate and collaborate with local partners to amplify food and agriculture solutions.

The Swette Center has a longstanding relationship with Food Tank. Food Tank has also been collaborating on a series of events across the country with Sprouts, which is headquartered in Arizona.

“We all came together and said, ‘What would it look like for Sprouts and ASU to collaborate alongside the U.N. and Food Tank to host an event here in Arizona?’” said Lyndsey Waugh, executive director of the Sprouts Healthy Communities Foundation.

Waugh, a graduate of ASU’s [Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication](#), said she couldn’t think of a better partner to work with than ASU.

“The spirit of ASU is innovation, collaboration and tackling issues that need attention from all different sides,” she said. “You see that show up in the way that ASU does its work and the thought leaders that are a part of the institution.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Get involved!

Find out about upcoming events and opportunities through the Swette Center on their [LinkedIn](#) and [Instagram](#) accounts.

Main image



Seasonal salads featuring Duncan Family Farms acorn squash, local greens, apples, pecans and microgreens were sampled during the “Food Is Medicine and Eating for Health” event held at ASU's Tempe campus on Oct. 16. Photo by Quinton Kendall/ASU

Text image(s)



Denisa Livingston (right), a community health advocate and leader of the Diné Community Advocacy Alliance, discusses Indigenous approaches to food production with Debra Utacia Krol, an Indigenous affairs reporter for the Arizona Republic. Photo by Quinton Kendall/ASU



Clara Migoya, agriculture and water reporter for the Arizona Republic (left), interviews chef Pierre Thiam about fonio, a West African grain he has brought to the global market. Photo by Quinton Kendall/ASU



Fonio, an ancient West African grain, is the star ingredient in a pilaf with dates, carrots and peanuts, created by chef Pierre Thiam for the “Food Is Medicine and Eating for Health” event. Photo by Quinton Kendall/ASU



Arnett Duncan, owner of Duncan Family Farms, shares the story of his transition to organic farming. Photo by Quinton Kendall/ASU



Tepary bean hummus from chef Michel Nischan topped with seasonal vegetables from Sprouts.
Photo by Quinton Kendall/ASU



Danielle Nierenberg, president of Food Tank (left) interviews Selena Ahmed, global director of the Periodic Table of Food Initiative, about standardized tools for measuring the healthfulness of foods. Photo by Quinton Kendall/ASU