PART I: THE COMING FAMINE—IS IT INEVITABLE?

A CONVERSATION WITH AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR, JULIAN CRIBB, BY CHRISTOPHER KOETKE, CEC, CCE; EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, KENDALL COLLEGE SCHOOL OF CULINARY ARTS; VICE PRESIDENT, LAUREATE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITIES CENTER OF EXCELLENCE IN CULINARY ARTS

At the upcoming International Foodservice Sustainability Symposium (IFSS), supported by co-founding sponsors Kendall College and the National Restaurant Association Conserve: Solutions for Sustainability, attendees will hear from some of the world’s leading sustainability experts. The event, which takes place in Chicago on May 24-25 immediately following the close of NRA Show 2011, is the first-ever conference to focus strictly on sustainability as it affects our industry. The IFSS international keynoter will be Julian Cribb, author of the new book, The Coming Famine. As a prelude to his address, I recently sat down with him to talk about his book, what it portends, and whether or not we, as chefs, can do anything to “head it off at the pass.” For those who are interested in attending IFSS and hearing more from Julian Cribb and other sustainability experts, information can be found at www.ifssymposium.org.
Chris: Julian, most chefs grew up in a time when the concept of sustainability didn’t exist. When it came to the concepts of saving water or energy or looking at how we grow and harvest our food, it just wasn’t part of our training, so there’s a huge amount of education to be done. We’ve made some tremendous progress in the last few years, but now I think it’s time to take a deeper dive into the more complex issues, so you are the perfect speaker for this audience.

Julian: I’m very excited to address the International Foodservice Sustainability Symposium. For the last 20 years, I feel that the world has been rather complacent about its food supply and scarcity will sneak up on us if we’re not careful. It’s good to know that the chefs and restaurateurs of the world, who have a tremendous effect on how we eat, have a strong interest in this topic.

Chris: In reading your book, I would characterize it as both powerful and horrifying. As a brief introduction for those who haven’t read it yet, could you please share its premise and how you came to write it?

Julian: As an agricultural journalist for about 40 years and now a general science journalist, I’ve always had a strong interest in the food supply, and how it can be produced efficiently and sustainably. In the first decade of this century, I could see the food supply was not keeping up with demand. Grain stocks were going down and down at a time when the population was growing and nearly developed nations like China and India with a rising middle class, began demanding more food, especially protein. At the same time, almost everything we need to produce food sustainability is running out: fresh water, good farm land, oil and fertilizer, which are all finite resources. Further, agricultural science has been neglected in all of the major developed countries of the world for the last couple decades and the climate is changing profoundly. Our civilization, which was founded on agriculture, is changing profoundly and we don’t know what the ultimate consequence of that change will be on our food supply.

Chris: I really commend your book as it paints the picture of a perfect storm. Some of the issues you talk about, like climate change and fossil fuel depletion, we’ve known were developing, but you’ve brought those issues and many other disparate pieces together into one comprehensive model. Along those lines, you talk about 2050, as critical for humanity. Why is 2050 such a milestone?
Julian: The human population is still growing by about 100 million per year and people are living longer in developing countries. That means that sometime between 2030 and the end of the century, assuming there’s no awful war or devastating pandemic, we’ll have to be feeding 9-11 billion people until the population slowly begins to decline after the 2060s or 2070s; that’s roughly double the current population. Feeding this number of people is a very large challenge and we need to think about how we’re going to do it now, before the issue becomes critical. We’re already seeing some of the consequences in rising food prices because supply is not keeping up with demand worldwide. The United States, Australia and Europe are awash in food, but the rest of the world is not and, with globalization, we’re now all completely connected economically. Right now, the price increase is being caused by severe droughts around the Black Sea and in Australia. In the past, the world wouldn’t have even known about that, but now consumers know almost instantly when there’s a drought or crop failure. That breeds food insecurity which can cause governmental failure, conflicts, and mass migrations and it’s in the news right now. In the past month we’ve seen the fall of regimes in Tunisia and Egypt; it started with people in the street protesting the price of bread and that’s a pattern that has prevailed throughout history. The Russian and French revolutions started with bread prices. There’s nothing that will bring down a government faster than unsatisfied hunger for food among its populace. Most of the wars over the last 30 years, if you scrape away all of the politics, religion and ethnicity on the surface, you’ll find it’s all about food, land, and water. That’s my concern – the multiplier effect that food insecurity can have on the world.

Chris: You talk about “peak” as it relates to things like population, water, oil, and agricultural outputs. Can you tell me a little more about how you use that term?

Julian: It was a Texas oil man, M. King Hubbert, who first used the term in regards to oil; it’s when demand outpaces the discovery of new reserves and so supply gets scarce and expensive. You can apply that “peak” concept to any finite resource. If your resource is badly managed, like the world’s fresh water has been, then you can run out pretty quickly. Water can be cleaned, recycled and reused, but most people and governments don’t do it; instead, they use it, pollute it and throw it away. Each person, over a lifetime, consumes about 100,000 tons of water, about 75 percent of which goes into food production. For example one slice of bread represents 40 liters of water that was used to grow the grain, to make the flour that goes into the bread you eat. With grain bowls running dry and mined resources of water running out and not available for food production, the potential for a coming crisis is clear. It’s a problem that is solvable, but we must be acknowledge that it is a problem and be willing to take the necessary action to resolve it. We’re seeing it with oil already. One American think tank sees oil hitting $200-300 a barrel. If that happens, the impact on agriculture, practiced as it is today, would be catastrophic since most farmers wouldn’t be able to afford $20 a gallon to run their trucks and equipment and in developing countries where we’ve helped mechanize farming, virtually no one could afford fuel and agriculture would grind to a halt.
Chris: As chefs, we don’t typically think about water; we use it with abandon and the reality is there’s a price for that water and we don’t pay that fair price. Books like yours bring home the reality that you may not see them, but they’re still very real and they will be impacting our future so we need to do something about it.

Julian: Many countries, like Australia, are beginning to acknowledge that they’re not paying the right price for food. Farmers need to get paid better or the economic signal for them to produce won’t be there. People don’t invest in ventures that aren’t profitable – and by and large today’s agricultural system is not – that’s another major issue. It may seem expensive to the consumer, but today we’re paying for the food but not the landscape destruction that results from the growing process. It’s a short-sighted policy and our grandchildren will pay for it. I find it hard to understand because for the last 400 generations – 10,000 years – humans always treated food with great respect; remember your grandmother told you to eat all of the food on your plate because people are going hungry? You did not see people throwing half of their food away or trucks leaving supermarkets laden with yesterday’s bread. It’s a colossal and stupid waste – it’s obscene!

Chris: You talk about the disparities between the developed and developing world. Our readership may not be fully aware of how great those disparities are. Can you comment on that?

Julian: In the developing world, there are a billion people who go to bed hungry each night and that’s a tragedy that has been going on the last half a century or so. The solution is easy, it’s available, and it’s called knowledge. We can deliver that knowledge and technology to enable them to feed themselves, but it hasn’t happened yet. America’s not going to feed the world because its food is too expensive and the poor people in developing countries can’t afford it. There are two types of agriculture; you’ve got the smallholders, which feed half the world, and you’ve got the broad-acre, intensive, high-tech agriculture that feeds the billion rich people in the world. Most of the world is fed by smallholders so we have to look after both kinds of farmers if we’re going to maintain the food supply. The issue is that we can’t just push the technology button and just double food production because we’re losing land, water and energy. We need to do two things: 1) reinvent the way we farm and produce food; and 2) reinvent our diets. In both, lie a huge challenge and a prodigious opportunity. The Western world’s current diet kills half of its consumers. Half of the people now in the United States, Australia and Europe die of cancer, heart disease, diabetes and obesity, which are all diet related. We can come up with a healthier diet, one that not only saves lives and protects health, but also treads less heavily on the planet.
Chris: As chefs, we’re becoming more and more aware of these nutritional issues and how they impact people in the United States and around the world. It seems that when we start to follow the issues around sustainability and the food supply, we start to solve nutritional issues at the same time. Chefs have been saying for awhile now that in order for our diet to be nutritionally sound we need to reduce animal protein portions and increase our intake of fruits, vegetables and whole grains. And lo and behold, that’s also key to the solution for feeding our planet.

Julian: Chefs have a tremendously important role to play here because they are the people who lead “the fashion of food.” They decree what sort of food we will be eating. Great chefs create menus; other restaurants copy them and these trends flow through to consumer cookbooks and magazines. The intellectual leadership of the world’s diet rests with the chefs.

ABOUT KENDALL COLLEGE’S SCHOOL OF CULINARY ARTS
Founded in 1985, the School of Culinary Arts at Kendall College is among the premier culinary-training programs in the United States, offering associate and bachelor’s degrees and certificates in culinary arts as well as associate degrees and certificates in baking and pastry. The school occupies a stunning “Riverworks” campus near downtown Chicago. The American Culinary Federation Education Foundation Accrediting Commission has accredited the Culinary Arts Associate and Baking & Pastry Associate programs since 1988. Kendall, which celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2009, also operates Schools of Hospitality Management, Business and Education. Kendall College is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and a member of the North Central Association, www.ncahlc.org, 1-312-263-0456. Kendall College is a member of the Laureate International Universities network. For more information, visit www.kendall.edu.