

Food and Community A Future Intertwined

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From a foodie perspective, the last twenty-five years have been exhilarating, some might even say revolutionary. There are gardens growing in many schools and a flagship garden at the White House; celebrity chefs abound, and even some farmers have attained rock star status; people are doing farm-stays for vacations, milking cows and helping with the harvest; and the ratings of the Food Network channel are exploding.

Food has moved to center stage in our culture and collective consciousness. One major positive note is that more and more people are equating good food with good health, and not just to individual health but the health of the larger community as well. Food is coming back home, seeking relationships of trust, well-being, and community.

Yet observers such as Herman Daly and John B. Cobb reckon our food system remains seriously out of balance. “If economics is reconceived in the service of community, it will begin with a concern for agriculture and specifically for the production of food,” they write in their book, in *For the Common Good* (1994). “This is because a healthy community will be a relatively self-sufficient one. A community’s complete dependency on outsiders for its mere survival weakens it. The most fundamental requirement for survival is food. Hence, how and where food is grown is foundational to an economics for community” (p. 268).

Food production and distribution are highly concentrated in the hands of a small number of too-big-to-fail agribusinesses and retail mega-corporations, writes Wenonah Hauter in her book *Foodopoly* (2012). The small farms, ranches, and dairies of a century ago have been replaced by enormous agribusiness concerns, some twenty of which supply most of the food that makes its way into our food chain, and massively concentrated confined animal feedlot operations (CAFOs), which raise animals in appalling conditions to produce chemical-laden meat with questionable health

value and serious environmental consequences. Local butchers and bakers have been replaced by big-box retail superstores, four of which control over 50 percent of all retail food sales. Meanwhile, families and communities have in one or two generations lost a whole history of knowledge and expertise around growing and preparing food.

Although local food sales have grown to an estimated \$7 billion in 2012, they still are an infinitesimal fraction of our \$1.3 trillion food economy. And the vast majority of our food dollars, some 89 percent in 2011 according to the US Department of Agriculture, continues to be spent on manufacturing, packaging, transporting, and marketing processed food products, with only a thin sliver of our food dollar paying for the production of actual whole, real foods—let alone for such foods grown with minimal chemical inputs by well-paid workers within the communities that consume them.

Food insecurity and diet-related chronic illness continue to plague the nation, with disproportionate and reverberating impacts on minority and low-income communities. In a 2012 report for the US Department of Agriculture, Alisha Coleman-Jensen and coauthors found that nearly 15 percent of households in the world’s richest nation experienced food insecurity in 2011, but the rate of hunger in black and Hispanic households was over 25 percent, and approached 35 percent in low-income households. Obesity and type 2 diabetes have reached epidemic proportions across all age, income, and ethnicity groups, but rates are significantly higher in African American and Hispanic communities, which, not coincidentally, are more likely to be located in food deserts with limited access to grocery stores selling fresh, healthy foods.

And our political leaders have thus far utterly failed to adapt our antiquated and dysfunctional national food policy (aka the Farm Bill) to these and other exigencies of the twenty-first century, including climate change, soil loss, and groundwater depletion.

Without a doubt, the centralized industrial food system has achieved amazing productivity and technological advances over the last half century. But along the way, the creation of short-term shareholder wealth has been decoupled from community health, environmental sustainability, and justice, and community self-reliance has been sacrificed to the pursuit of specialization, efficiency, and scale economies.

We believe that the current food revolution is a hopeful harbinger of some remarkable community-level changes in our food and food system to come over the next twenty-five years—changes that are essential to diversify and restore balance and resilience to our dangerously lopsided current system.

Signs of communities retaking control of their food systems are multiplying exponentially around the country. Witness:

- The explosion of farmers markets and community-supported agriculture (CSA).
- The growth of programs, policies, conferences, educational programs, and media on home, neighborhood, and community-based food production, from backyard chickens and neighborhood backyard produce exchanges, to community gardens and gleaning programs, to local seed banks and seed swaps, to mobile slaughterhouses and sustainable meat “hackathons.”
- Individuals rediscovering cooking skills as one of the most valuable assets in managing personal health and wellness, not to mention food costs; and communities investing in community kitchens and kitchen incubators to support the growth of local food artisans and entrepreneurs.
- The emergence of hundreds of local food hub projects around the country, seeking to rebuild the infrastructure that has been lost over the last sixty years to bring local products from small and mid-size farms and food processors to local markets.
- Farm to school and school food programs engaging parents, teachers, administrators, farmers, and communities in bringing healthy, local food into school cafeterias and utilizing school gardens and nutrition education to raise a new generation that understands where food comes from and why good food matters—and that has access to that good food every day.
- Hospitals not only reassessing their internal food service and procurement operations but lever-

aging those efforts to increase communitywide healthy food access via hospital-based farmers markets and CSA.

- Food policy councils giving rise to proactive policies and programs, such as the Good Food for All Pledge, a comprehensive procurement program created by the Los Angeles Food Policy Council and signed onto by the Los Angeles Unified School District, highlighting a holistic approach to sourcing good, fair, nutritious, and sustainable food.
- Initiatives like the Food Commons seeking to weave together threads of sustainable agriculture, new economy, local food, and innovative community-based ownership and finance into a holistic system of infrastructure to support thriving, networked regional food economies.

All of this activity has not gone unnoticed by major players in the dominant large-scale food system. Some are moving proactively toward more sustainable ways of operating. Bon Appétit Management Company, for example, is leading the charge in demanding better practices from the largest producers in the country. One of its current initiatives is phasing out gestation crates from their pork supply by 2015. As Helene York, the company’s director of strategic initiatives, stated in *Civil Eats* (2012), “We are announcing a commitment—even though the products we need aren’t produced in the quantities we need. Why? We’re convinced of one thing: The best chance for change is to stop waiting for everyone else to make the first move. We’re committed to shifting production practices in the marketplace one way or another.”

Retailers—from Costco to Walmart—are responding to consumer demand by expanding their offerings of local and organic foods, and many others are rushing to enter the fast-growing fresh and natural foods segment.

Even policy makers are beginning to take note. In spite of a lack of visible progress on revamping the Farm Bill, national dialogue about commodity crop subsidization is getting louder, the US Department of Agriculture is putting more resources and effort than ever before into supporting regional food systems, and First Lady Michelle Obama is shining a spotlight on the vital connections among health, food access, physical activity, and individual and national prosperity.

That the largest food retailer in the world, Walmart, is utilizing its enormous market power and highly efficient global logistical systems to buy and sell more local and organic foods is, on the whole, a good thing.

But does the presence of “local” produce on the shelves at Walmart equate to a community being able to feed itself?

Is there not some real value to communities investing in and retaining for themselves such a core competency as food production, particularly in the face of increasingly volatile economic, political, and physical climates? What have communities lost by ceding their self-sufficiency to remote corporations whose primary obligations are to still more remote investors and shareholders? More important, what do communities stand to gain, or regain, through the flourishing of home-grown local food movements?

A community-level food system will undoubtedly not be able deliver the same price points as Walmart. But mounting evidence suggests that, across the economic scale, people are ready to pay more for local food that nourishes not only their bodies but their communities.

We believe we are in the midst of a community-rooted food renaissance—the rebirth of food that travels a short and known route from field to plate and accomplishes these things:

- It supports local farmers and farm workers with dignity.
- It keeps dollars circulating within the local economy and creates a ripple of jobs throughout the community.
- It is a genuine expression of local identity and heritage, not a cosmetically engineered imitation.
- It celebrates and enriches cultural and genetic diversity that fits the season and the local environment rather than fighting against them.
- It increases the self-sufficiency of families and the resilience of the community for generations to come.
- It expresses love and care for ourselves, our neighbors, and our planet.

The last twenty-five years have witnessed a reawakening of what Wendell Berry eloquently described in “The Pleasure of Eating.” But as Berry noted in

that same essay, “We cannot be free if our food and its sources are controlled by someone else” (p. 229). Food and food production are now major conversations in both public and private sectors. As we harness this incredible moment of convergence across sectors, let us celebrate our accomplishments (preferably around a good meal) and then get back to the good work that needs doing to bring food back home.

As Dee Hock (1999) has said, “In times such as these, it is no failure to fall short of realizing all that we might dream. The failure is to fall short of dreaming all that we might realize” (p. 3).

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