

FOOD DEMOCRACY

Nourishing a Fundamental Freedom

By Brian Halweil

Photos by Darcy Kiefel, Heifer Photographer

Last year, the National Touring Association of Norway, which represents walkers, hikers and campers and is one of the largest lobbying groups in the nation, joined forces with the nation's one and only celebrity chef to develop a line of foods made from indigenous ingredients to stock Norway's extensive network of camping huts. So instead of the usual dehydrated campground fare, someone staying in a mountain cottage in Jotunheimen National Park would dine on cured reindeer heart, sour cream porridge and small potatoes grown only in those mountain valleys.

In Egypt, the company Sekem, the nation's largest organic foods producer, has developed a line of breads, dried fruits and other items made entirely from ingredients grown in Egypt. The brand is recognized by 70 percent of Egyptians, and sales have doubled each of the last five years.

In New York, the largest supermarket chain on Long Island, King Kullen, committed to buying only fruits and vegetables grown on Long Island during the local growing season for its 50 stores. When Long Island farmers are cutting cauliflower, King Kullen only stocks that cauliflower. Five years ago, the store spent \$100,000 on Long Island produce. In 2005, the store spent more than \$5 million on local produce.

What ties together these disparate enterprises from around the world? At a time when our food travels farther than ever before, they are all evidence of "food democracy" erupting from an imperialistic food landscape.

At first blush, food democracy may seem a little grandiose—a strange combination of words. But if you doubt the existence of power relations in the realm of food, consider a point made by Frances Moore Lappé and her daughter, Anna Lappé, in their book *Hope's Edge*. The typical supermarket contains no fewer than 30,000 items. About half those items are produced by 10 multinational food and beverage companies. And 138 people—117 men and 21 women—form the boards of directors of those 10 companies.

In other words, though the plethora of products you see at a typical supermarket gives the appearance of abundant choice, much of the variety is more a matter of branding than of true agricultural variety. And rather than coming to us from thousands of different farmers producing different local varieties, these products have been globally standardized and selected for maximum profit by just a few powerful executives.

Just as democracy returns power to the voting public, food democracy returns power to the eating public. The parent who lobbies her child's school to serve more fresh foods raised nearby is declaring food democracy. So is the chef who peppers his menu with the

names of farmers and fishers who supplied the food. The politicians in developing countries who decide to protect their farms from the ravages of international trade—they declare food democracy, as do the grandmothers in Italy, Zimbabwe and Japan who scorn homogenized fast food and champion culinary heirlooms and home recipes tied to their landscape and passed down for generations.

These declarations might seem simple, but they buck the dominant trend in the global food system. Far-flung food has now become the norm. Apples in Des Moines supermarkets come from China, even though there are apple orchards in Iowa; potatoes in Lima's supermarkets come from the United States, even though Peru boasts the most varieties of potatoes.

The farther our food travels, the less control we have over that food—how it was raised, how the landscape was treated, what sort of living the farmer made. And it's this loss of control over something that touches us so deeply that has sometimes provoked strong, even violent, responses.

When the French shepherd José Bové drove his tractor smack into a McDonald's to fight what he called “culinary imperialism,” he became one of the better-known symbols in a nascent global movement to protect and invigorate local food sheds (those spheres in which land, farmers and food businesses come together to provide food for the community).

Jet-lagged Food

The long-distance food system offers unprecedented and unparalleled choice to paying consumers—any food, anytime, anywhere. At the same time, this astounding choice is laden with contradictions. Ecologist and writer Gary Nabhan wonders “what culinary melodies are being drowned out by the noise of that transnational vending machine,” which often runs roughshod over local cuisines, varieties and agriculture.

Farmers producing for export often find themselves hungry as they sacrifice the output of their land to feed foreign mouths, while poor urbanites in both the developed and developing worlds find themselves living in neighborhoods unable to attract most supermarkets and other food shops and thus without healthy food choices. Products enduring long-distance transport and long-term storage depend on preservatives and additives, and encounter all sorts of opportunities for contamination on their journey from farm to plate. The supposed efficiencies of the long-distance chain leave many people malnourished and under-served at both ends of the chain.

But, as more communities decide to take back sovereignty over what they put in their mouths, local food is pushing through the cracks in the long-distance food system: rising fuel and transportation costs, the near extinction of family farms, loss of farmland to spreading suburbs, concerns about the quality and safety of food and the craving for some closer connection to it. In an era of climate change and water shortages, having farmers nearby might be the best hedge against other unexpected shocks. On a more sensual level, locally grown food served fresh and in season has a definite taste advantage — one of the

reasons this movement has attracted the attention of chefs, food critics and discriminating consumers around the globe.

The Dangers of Dependence

Although the notion of food democracy might be abstract, regaining it demands some very concrete ingredients. For instance, farmers who raise just one or two crops will have a hard time feeding their neighbors. And communities that lose their butchers and bakers and ranchers and farmers will have a hard time regaining any level of self-sufficiency.

Consider the example of apples in Britain. As recently as 1965, Britain was largely self-sufficient in dessert apples (apples for direct consumption, not canning or baking). This self-reliance depended in part on the production of a wide diversity of apples—there are over 2,000 varieties in the National Collection of the United Kingdom—that ripened and were harvested throughout the year.

In the last 30 years, as less expensive apples began streaming in from abroad and as supermarkets and apple processors required higher degrees of standardization, British farmers replaced 60 percent of their apple orchards with other crops. British orchards are now dominated by two or three “commercially desirable” varieties with a relatively narrow harvest season, crippling the potential to regain self-sufficiency. Today, only 25 percent of the apples eaten in Britain are home-grown.

One of the strongest implications of the global food chain is that the ability of regions to produce their own food year-round is obsolete. But in those poor communities that are not attractive to distant food companies, or cannot readily afford to import food, the best hope for good nutrition will continue to be local food.

“One of the simplest solutions [to persistent hunger] is to promote diversity in the diet,” said Emile Frison, director general of the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute, or IPGRI. In Tamil Nadu, India, for example, the institute has been promoting the use of millet plants that are more nutritious and easier to grow in marginal environments than crops such as wheat. The institute is also promoting indigenous Bayarni rice in Nepal, forgotten legumes in Kenya and sorghum varieties in Ethiopia.

In India, the Navdanya (“Nine Seeds”) movement helps promote food self-sufficiency by cataloguing local varieties of wheat, rice and other crops and declaring them common property. It’s an effort to prevent private entities, such as corporations, from gaining control over local foods by patenting their seeds. Founded in 1987, Navdanya sets up locally owned seed banks, farm supply stores and storage facilities and helps to establish “Zones for Freedom,” villages that pledge to reject chemical fertilizers and pesticides, genetically engineered seeds and patents on life.

“Freedom” in this context has both an economic and an ecological meaning. The crop diversity reduces dependence on expensive agrochemicals and other inputs and provides resilience against major pest outbreaks or climatic shifts. And when farmers produce for local (as opposed to export) markets, their customer base diversifies considerably,

encouraging them to plant a wider range of crops. In this way, crop diversity reinforces self-sufficiency.

“It’s Hard to Go Back”

The nutritional fallout from the loss of local food diversity has landed heavily on indigenous populations. Treated by governments as second-class citizens, relocated to the poorest lands and inundated with poor-quality surplus food, native people around the world typically suffer from high levels of diet-related illness.

The Oodham Indians of the American Southwest suffer from one of the highest recorded rates of adult-onset diabetes in the world. But they have found that many of the native, locally available foods that their ancestors enjoyed—like mesquite flour, prickly pear fruit and pads, tepary beans and cholla buds—are high in fiber and low in cholesterol and saturated fat, and generally help reduce the incidence of diabetes.

In addition to the nutritional benefits, recent efforts to revive cultivation of these plants have helped to reinvigorate the cultural traditions—harvest ceremonies, use as religious offerings, medicinal applications—tied to the foods. Since 1997, demand for the traditional foods in the Oodham communities has grown five-fold—a resounding referendum on food sovereignty.

Farther up the food chain, food companies are beginning to catch on, perhaps prompted by the demands of customers or just good business decisions.

“We’ve been pleasantly surprised by how easy it has been for our chefs to create these menus,” said Maisie Ganzler, director of communications and strategic initiatives for Bon Appetit Management Company, about the company’s “Eat Local Challenge” in September.

The challenge featured 190 cafes, restaurants and university eateries serving at least one meal made only from ingredients grown within a 150-mile radius. “We were motivated by flavor,” said Ganzler, who noted that the company would expand its local offerings based on the challenge’s success, and the initiative would likely inspire similar programs by other national food service companies. “Once you taste the difference in the food, it’s very hard to go back.”

Eat Here, Spend Here

Perhaps the most compelling reason to declare food democracy is the fact that it offers huge economic opportunities. In fact, local food might be the first economic opportunity in farm country in years. A study by the New Economics Foundation in London found that every £10 (about \$18) spent at a local food business is worth £25 (\$44) for the local area, compared with just £14 (\$25) when the same amount is spent in a supermarket.

That is, a pound (or dollar, peso or rupee) spent locally generates nearly twice as much income for the local economy. The farmer buys a drink at the local pub; the pub owner gets a car tune-up at the local mechanic; the mechanic brings a shirt to the local tailor; the

tailor buys some bread at the local bakery; the baker buys wheat for bread and fruit for muffins from the local farmer. When these businesses are not owned locally, money leaves the community at every transaction.

While the idea of complete food self-sufficiency may be impractical for rich and poor nations alike, greater self-sufficiency can buffer nations against the whims of international markets. To the extent that food production and distribution are relocated in the community under local ownership, more money will circulate in the local community to generate more jobs and income.

Not surprisingly, this notion of food sovereignty is even invading diplomatic circles. “Today, agricultural trade is far from being free, and even further from being fair,” Jean Ziegler, the United Nation’s special rapporteur on the right to food, recently told the United Nation’s Commission on Human Rights. “Global commodity markets are increasingly dominated by fewer global transnational corporations that have the power to demand low producer prices, while keeping consumer prices high,” with a negative impact, however unintentional, on the millions of people who continue to go hungry around the world.

Farmers, consumers, even the rare trade official who are wary of the promises of free trade have begun to define an alternative model for agricultural trade that returns full control to nations to govern their farming for the public good. In some cases, this might mean supporting producers of basic staples; in other cases, propping up farmers in a protected watershed. Subsidies would be permissible to support small-scale agriculture for local production, but not to support large-scale farming or the export sector.

So while global trade agreements try to eliminate geographic distinctions, elsewhere people are restoring them. Farmers in Hawaii are uprooting their pineapple plantations to sow vegetables in hopes of replacing the imported salads at resorts and hotels. School districts throughout Italy have launched an impressive effort to make sure cafeterias are serving a Mediterranean diet by contracting with nearby farmers. Even some of the world’s biggest food companies are starting to embrace these values, a reality that raises some unsettling questions and awesome opportunities for local food advocates. Recently, officials at SYSCO, the world’s largest foodservice provider, declared its dependence on small, local farmers for certain products they can’t get anywhere else.

The Food Renaissance

In my own neck of the woods, on the eastern end of Long Island—the finger of land directly east of New York City where America’s first farming and fishing families settled but which has morphed into the McMansion-laden resort spot known as “The Hamptons”—a few innovative farmers and food makers are doing what they can to detach from the global vending machine and feed the people around them.

Stop at any of the remaining farm stands or the fields where farmers continue to grow some of the world’s tastiest potatoes, and you can find inspiration. A friend is trying to hold onto her family’s potato farm by making potato chips in a converted storage shed,

outfitted with a peeler, slicer and fryer: a “micro-chippery.” Their chips are already flying off the shelves of dozens of local stores.

Many farms have been turned over to grape vines, and the relatively young “Long Island wine country” now boasts more than two dozen wineries. Local winemakers are churning out merlots, chardonnays, gewürztraminers and other standards that feature the unique characteristics of the maritime climate and have won international acclaim.

In one of the most inspiring stories, a local school chef has built her cafeteria around local food, resulting in 1,500 meals each day that taste better, are more nutritious and begin the essential process of teaching students where their food comes from.

Listed together, these efforts do seem formidable, and it’s easy to feel as if I’m living in the middle of a culinary renaissance. For me, rebuilding a food democracy includes the one-acre kitchen garden and orchard that my wife and I tend. It includes the farmers market my wife and I launched in our hometown of Sag Harbor, and have watched flourish as droves of locals come to enjoy fruit, vegetables, clams and oysters, mushrooms, raw-milk cheeses, jams and honey raised by local artisans.

Similar changes are unfolding in millions of different communities in a million different ways. But the general path will look familiar. Farmers will plant a greater diversity of crops. Less will be shipped as bulk commodity and more will be packaged and canned and prepared to be sold nearby. Small food businesses will emerge to do this work. Governments will encourage these new businesses. And shoppers, seeking pleasure and reassurance, will eat deliberately and inquire about the origins of their food. It is the fact that communities around the world all possess the capacity to regain this control—to declare food democracy—that makes the simple idea of eating local so powerful. These communities have a choice. And they are choosing instead to eat here.

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