

Local Food; Revolution and Reality¹

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On March 26, 2010 Jamie Oliver, an outspoken British chef turned activist, called for a “food revolution” in America.ⁱ The occasion was the premier of a six-episode reality show on ABC Television. The show was filmed in Huntington, West Virginia – supposedly the unhealthiest city in the unhealthiest country in the world. The premise of the show is that people's physical health is linked directly to the foods they eat. Obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and many forms of cancer – epidemic in America – have all been linked directly to diet.

In the first episode, Oliver pointed out that today's children are the first generation whose members are expected to live shorter lives than their parents. It's not the kids' fault; they eat what parents and other adults choose to feed them, or at least allow them to eat. Too often, this means whatever is cheapest, quickest, and most convenient. Over the past few decades, health care spending in the U.S. has raised to almost double the amount spent for food, which is not likely a coincidence. In the pursuit of quick, convenient, cheap food, Americans have become the most overfed and undernourished people in the world. It's time for a “food revolution.”

Actually, the food revolution was well underway long before Jamie Oliver arrived in West Virginia. Health and nutrition are but the latest motivations for rejecting the “food-like substances” that dominate today's industrial, global, corporately controlled food system. The local food movement is most visible in the U.S. In a 2008 food industry study, sales of local foods were estimated to have grown from \$4 billion in 2002 to \$5 billion in 2007 and were projected to reach \$11 billion by 2011.ⁱⁱ Organic food sales are still far larger, more than \$20 billion, but local foods have replaced organic foods as the most dynamic sector of the retail food market.

The local food movement has its roots in the natural food movement of the 1960s, which began with the “back to the earth” people dropping out of the American mainstream and forming their own communities or “communes.” Rachel Carson's 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, had awakened public awareness to the environmental risks of agricultural pesticides. The “hippies” responded by producing their own *natural* foods, buying natural foods at local farmers markets, and establishing the first cooperatively owned and operated natural food stores. Most knew where their natural food came from because they knew the farmers who grew it. To these early

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natural food advocates, *organic* was more a way of life as a way to grow good, healthy food. It was a rejection of the mechanistic way of thinking that supported industrial development, including industrial agriculture.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the natural food movement spread far beyond the hippie communities, as more people became aware of the food safety and environmental risks associated with industrial agriculture. The growing market for natural foods laid the foundation for a booming market in organic foods during the 1990s. As natural food retailers took a larger share of the natural foods market, fewer consumers then knew the farmers who grew their food so they needed some other means of knowing that their food was grown naturally. *Organic* certification was a means of assuring consumers that legitimate standards for *natural* food production had been followed. Organic farmers across the U.S. formed organizations to define organic standards and to inspect organic farms to verify compliance. Organic certification allowed producers to gain access to even more distant markets, as farmers and consumers began to rely on certification rather than personal relationships.

The late '80s and early '90s brought dramatic changes in organic foods retailing. By the late '80s, several natural foods retailers had expanded into small chain store operations, operating from three to 20 stores. In 1991, Whole Foods, then a six-store operation, began buying out other natural food stores, beginning a consolidation process that ultimately would reshape the natural foods market.ⁱⁱⁱ In 1993, Wild Oats followed the lead of Whole Foods and began acquiring other natural foods cooperatives and small retail chains.^{iv} The share of the organic market held by *independent* natural foods and health foods stores fell from 62% in 1998 to 31% in 2003. Total sales of organic foods grew an average rate of 20% per year during the 1990s and well into the 2000s, doubling every three to four years.

Prospects for large profits from the rapidly growing organic food market eventually attracted the attention of the large mainstream food corporations. The mainstream supermarkets, such as Kroger and Safeway, added lines of organic foods and began promoting organic foods in their ads. In 2005, Wal-Mart announced plans to move into organic foods in a big way, initially committed to retailing organic foods for a price premium of only 10% over their "always low" conventional food prices. In 2007, mainstream corporate supermarkets had 47% of the organic foods market. The large natural food chains and independent food coops accounted for 46%, leaving direct sales at farmers markets and cooperative food-buying clubs with just 7% percent of the organic market.^v Whole Foods eventually bought out Wilds Oats, and by 2009 operated 270 stores in North America and the United Kingdom.

The large corporate food retailers and processors found it difficult to deal with large numbers of small farms, particularly with the diversity of organic standards and certification programs that existed among different groups of farmers in different regions of the country. They encouraged organic farmers to adopt uniform *national* standards for organic certification so they could assemble the large quantities of organic products necessary to supply their stores. Organic farmers were led to believe that uniform national standards would give them greater access to these mainstream food markets. On the surface, standardization of organics seemed to be a good idea and most organic farmers supported it.

In 2002, the USDA launched its national program for certification of organic foods. However, uniform national standards actually facilitated the ongoing industrialization of organic food production and distribution – the specialization, standardization, and consolidation of control needed to accommodate the mainstream food system. With greater standardization, organic producers continued to specialize and consolidate into even larger scale operations. Large producers typically could meet these *minimum* requirements at lower costs than could the philosophically committed organic farmers. This industrialization of organics left smaller independent organic farmers and natural foods coops struggling for their economic survival.

However, many discriminating natural foods consumers were already moving beyond organic to *local*. They didn't trust either the corporate food system or the government to maintain the integrity of either conventional or organic foods. Many people in the new food movement didn't trust certified organic; they wanted to buy their foods locally from people they knew and trusted. If you asked these people why they prefer local foods they would probably mention freshness and flavor. However, the local food movement today is about far more than a search for fresh and flavorful foods; it's about a search food with integrity.

The Chefs Collaborative, a network of more than 1,000 American chefs, promotes the “joys of local, seasonal, and artisanal cooking,” proclaiming that “cultural and biological diversity are essential for the health of the earth and its inhabitants.”^{vi} These same cultural and ethical values are reflected in the Slow Food movement, a worldwide organization with about 85,000 members in over 100 countries. Their website states, “We believe that the food we eat should taste good; that it should be produced in a clean way that does not harm the environment, animal welfare or our health; that food producers should receive fair compensation for their work, and that all people should have access to good clean food.”^{vii} *Good, clean, and fair* are becoming the watchwords of the local foods movement.

The natural food movement is being fueled today by scientific studies indicating that nutritive values of foods have declined with the industrialization of the food system, verifying Jamie Oliver's insinuations.^{viii} One prominent academic study compared nutrient levels in 43 garden crops in 1999 with levels documented in benchmark nutrient studies conducted by USDA in 1950. The scientists found declines in median concentrations of six important nutrients: protein –6%, calcium –16%, phosphorus –9%, iron –15%, riboflavin –38%, and vitamin C – 2%.^{ix} Another study published in the Journal of Applied Nutrition in 1993 showed nutritional deficiencies for conventional foods relative to organic foods.^x Organically grown apples, potatoes, pears, wheat, and sweet corn, purchased over a two-year period, averaged 63% higher in calcium, 73% higher in iron, 118% higher in magnesium, 91% higher in phosphorus, 125% higher in potassium, and 60% higher in zinc than conventional foods purchased at the same time.

Other studies have shown that yield-enhancing technologies – fertilizers, pesticides, plant density, and irrigation – reduce the nutrient content of field crops by amounts generally consistent with the results for the 50-year nutrient declines and differences between conventional and organic crops.^{xi} These results should come as no surprise to anyone who understands that industrial agriculture derives profits primarily from *quantity* factors: acres farmed, head produced, yields per acre, rates of gain, and the cost efficiency of large-scale production. *Quality*

factors affecting prices typically are incidental to profits and are often associated with cosmetic appearance rather than nutrition.

The food processing and distribution industry also must share the blame. The corporations that market our foods are concerned about profits – not diet or health. In fact, the managers of the multinational corporations that currently control the American food system have a legal fiduciary responsibility to maximize returns to their stockholders. They have no social or ethical commitment to protecting public health and do only those things required by law. Current laws are clearly inadequate to protect the public from diet related illnesses, as is evident in current trends in the diets and health of Americans.

Food industry marketers know that humans have a natural taste preference, probably a genetic predisposition, for foods that are high in fat and sugar. Preferences essential for the survival and health of our primitive ancestors may threaten our health today. Regardless, it's easier to market foods that are higher in calories, particularly when those foods are cheaper to produce. The primary sources of those cheap calories are plants and animals from farms using modern yield-enhancing technologies and thus lacking in nutrient density.

There is no scarcity of information today on the subject of food. Best-selling books, such as *Fast Food Nation*^{xii} and *Omnivore's Dilemma*,^{xiii} awakened mainstream society to the dramatic changes in the ways foods were being produced, processed, distributed, and marketed. *The End of Food*^{xiv} and *America's Food*^{xv} covered virtually all aspects of the industrial, corporately-controlled, global food system. Video documentaries such as *Future of Food*,^{xvi} *Broken Limbs*,^{xvii} and *Fresh; The Movie*^{xviii} provided gripping images of the negative ecological and social impacts of an industrial food system on nature, society, and on future of humanity. They all tell the same story of a food system that is lacking in ecological, social, and economic integrity.

These books and documentaries also tell a story of hope for the future through the voices and images of the farmers and consumers who are creating a new, sustainable food system. The farmers may label themselves organic, biodynamic, ecological, natural, holistic, or choose no label at all; but they were all pursuing the same basic purpose. They are creating systems of farming that can maintain their productivity and usefulness to society indefinitely – a permanent, sustainable agriculture. They are producing food with ecological, social, and economic integrity.

The stories tend to focus on a few *Celebrity farmers*, such as *Joel Salatin*^{xix} (*Polyface Farms, Inc.*) of Swope, VA and *Will Allen*^{xx} (*Growing Power Inc.*) of Milwaukee, WI. However, there are tens of thousands of these new farmers scattered across the country. At least six “sustainable agriculture” conferences in the U.S. and Canada draw 1,500 to 2,500 people each year. Those attending include farm families and their customers and friends. Conferences drawing 500 to 700 people are becoming almost commonplace and virtually every state in the U.S. has an organic or sustainable agriculture organization, most hosting conferences that draw 100 to 250 people annually. The modern sustainable agriculture movement, which began with the “back to the earth” movement of the 1960s, is spreading like a virus through American agriculture.

The ten-of-thousands of new sustainable farmers are supported by tens of millions of consumers who are searching for alternatives to the industrial foods they find in today's

supermarkets and fast food franchises today. Food industry studies indicate approximately one-third of American consumers are willing pay premium prices for healthful and nutritious foods that have ecological, social, and economic integrity.^{xxi} Many are turning to local farmers and local markets to ensure the integrity of their food. The local foods movement has been doubling the number of farmers markets each decade, even as organic foods moved into mainstream supermarkets.

People tend to underestimate the importance of the local food movement because they associate local with home farmers markets and community supported agricultural organizations or CSAs, and more recently, home and community gardens. While farmers markets and CSAs have been growing rapidly, they still account for a very small portion of total food sales. The number of home vegetable gardens also exploded after the sharp run up in food prices during 2008 – including one at the White House. While farmers markets, CSAs, and gardens are and will continue to be important, the local food movement is probably most accurately defined by the growing number of retail food stores and institutional food buyers who are committed to sourcing as much food as possible from local growers.

For example, Good Natured Family Farms is an “alliance of more than 100 family farms, some are 3rd or 4th generation, who raise our animals humanely and care for the earth in a sustainable fashion. We have banded together to be able to bring our foods to Hen House Markets and Ball's Price Chopper Supermarkets, and the Community Mercantile in Lawrence, Kansas.”^{xxii} The alliance began by supplying high quality beef to Hen House Markets, a 13-store supermarket chain operated by Ball Foods Inc., a family corporation with a long history in Kansas City. Good Natured Family Farms (GNFF) fits in well with Ball Foods' commitment to maintaining its local connections. GNFF has developed an expanding line of branded food products, which now includes beef, chicken, eggs, honey, cheese, and milk, with other products in various stages of development. As GNFF states on their website, “We have three goals: Support local farmers by providing them with a market for the food they raise, provide our customers with fresh, natural foods raised humanely, without hormones or sub-therapeutic antibiotics, and raise our beef, chicken, eggs, and milk in a manner which protects and conserves the precious resources upon which they rely.” In 2008, GNFF products marketed through Hen House Markets totaled more than \$10 million.

New Seasons Market operates nine food supermarkets in the Portland, Oregon area. As Brian Rohter, co-founder and president, explains on their website, “Three families and about fifty of our friends decided in late 1999 that we wanted to create a business that we could be proud of – a company that had a true commitment to its community, to promoting sustainable agriculture, and to maintaining a progressive workplace.” New Seasons supermarkets look pretty much like any other modern supermarket, with delis, bakeries, and other amenities American food shoppers have come to expect. Once inside the store, the most noticeable difference is that virtually every item in the store is labeled with respect to origin and there is an “organic” option for nearly every food item. Also, many of the food products originate pretty close to Portland with labels often including the names of the farmers. New Seasons also has a full-time person whose sole responsibility to serve as a liaison with their local farmer-suppliers. As they say on their website, “Locally owned and operated means being an active and committed participant in the community; because our kids go to school with your kids. Locally owned and operated

means buying from small vendors and supporting the development of our regional food economy. Locally owned and operated means being in touch with our customers.”^{xxiii}

The local food revolution is also moving into institutional markets – schools, hospitals, extended care facilities, etc. – in addition to supermarkets and restaurants. The most impressive progress thus far seems to have been made in getting sustainably produced local foods into public schools. For example, more than 500 public school districts and 95 colleges and universities currently have active programs to provide U.S. students with locally grown foods.^{xxiv} By the way, Jamie Oliver started his food revolution in Huntington by getting nutritious food into the local schools of Huntington.

Supermarkets and institutional markets will continue to be important. However, the food systems of the future may more closely resemble today's multi-farm CSAs. *Grown Locally*,^{xxv} *Idaho's Bounty*,^{xxvi} and *the Oklahoma Food Cooperative*,^{xxvii} for example, are cooperative organizations of farmers that offer a variety of vegetables, fruits, meats, eggs, cheese, baked goods, flowers, and herbs produced by local farmers. Many items are available as CSA shares, standing orders, or for week-by-week purchase. Customers may have the option of on-farm pick-up, local delivery points, or delivery to the door for an added charge. Websites allow producers to post what they have available each week, ensuring that products sold are available for delivery and allowing customers to place or revise their orders on the website.

At a different scale of operation, Riverford Organics in the United Kingdom is a multi-farm CSA cooperative that provides nearly 50,000 customers each week with fresh local foods – including meat, milk, and eggs.^{xxviii} Their website states, “The original Riverford box scheme began supplying 30 friends from the farm in Devon; now... the Riverford alliance is delivering thousands of boxes a week to homes across the country – while maintaining the local connection and keeping the food miles down.”^{xxix} Riverford Organics and other similar organizations are proving that small and mid-sized farms are capable of providing food for thousands of people locally, and with millions of such food organizations, billions of people globally.

This is the current reality of the local food movement. The total sales of all alternative foods – natural, organic, local... – probably still amount to something less than 10% of total retail food sales. However, the natural food movement is still less than fifty years old and was virtually unknown until about 20 years ago. The movement has grown tremendously over the past two decades and continues to grow, in spite of the economic recession. It will only take the right spark at the right time to ignite an explosion in public *demand* for “good food.” Jamie Oliver came to America at time when the country was ripe for revolution. It remains to be seen whether his television show will be the spark many Americans have been waiting and hoping for. Regardless, today's reality is that local food is moving us ever closer to a food revolution.

End Notes

ⁱ *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution*, <<http://abc.go.com/shows/jamie-olivers-food-revolution>>

ⁱⁱ *Packaged Facts*, “Local and Fresh Foods in the U.S.,” May 1, 2007.
><http://www.packagedfacts.com/Local-Fresh-Foods-1421831/><

ⁱⁱⁱ *Whole Foods Market*, “Our History”
<<http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/company/history.html>>

^{iv} *Wild Oats*, “History” <<http://www.wildoats.com/app/cda/cda.php?pt=History>>

^v Carmelo Ruiz-Marrero, 2004, “Clouds on the Organic Horizon,” *CorpWatch*
<<http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=11712>>

^{vi} *Chefs Collaborative* <<http://www.chefscollaborative.org/>>

^{vii} *Slow Foods International* < http://www.slowfood.com/about_us/eng/philosophy.lasso>

^{viii} For a list of peer review scientific studies documenting the health benefits of natural foods, see *The Organic Center*, <http://www.organic-center.org/>

^{ix} Donald Davis, Melvin Epp, and Hugh Riordan, 2004, “Changes in USDA Food Composition Data for 43 Garden Crops, 1950 to 1999” *Journal of American College of Nutrition*, 23:669-682.

^x Bob Smith, 1993, Organic Foods vs Supermarket Foods: Element Levels, *Journal of Applied Nutrition*, 45:35-39.

^{xi} WM Jarrell and RB Beverly, 1981, “The Dilution Effect in Plant Nutrient Studies,” *Advances in Agronomy*, 34:197–224.

^{xii} Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001).

^{xiii} Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006).

^{xiv} Paul Roberts, *The End of Food* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2008).

^{xv} Harvey Blatt, *America's Food: What You Don't Know About What You Eat* (Boston: The MIT Press, 2008).

^{xvi} *The Future of Food* <<http://www.thefutureoffood.com/>>

^{xvii} *Broken Limbs*, <<http://www.brokenlimbs.org/endorsements.html>>

^{xviii} *Fresh; the Movie* <<http://www.freshthemovie.com/>>

^{xix} *Polyface Farms Inc.* <<http://www.polyfacefarms.com/>>

^{xx} *Growing Power*, <<http://www.growingpower.org/>>

^{xxi} Allison Wortington, *Sustainability, the Rise of Consumer Responsibility*, The Hartman Group, Bellevue, WA, Spring, 2009.

^{xxii} *Good Natured Family Farms* <<http://www.goodnatured.net>>

^{xxiii} *New Seasons Market*, <<http://www.newseasonsmarket.com>>

^{xxiv} For more information see, <<http://www.farmentoschool.org>> and <<http://farmtocollege.org>> and for case studies, see *Agriculture of the Middle*, <http://www.agofthemiddle.org/archives/2004/09/case_studies.html>

^{xxv} Visit the *Grown Locally* website at <<http://www.grownlocally.com>>

^{xxvi} Visit the *Idaho's Bounty* website at <<http://www.idahosbounty.org/>>

^{xxvii} Visit the *Oklahoma Food Cooperative* website at <<http://www.oklahomafood.coop/>>

^{xxviii} *Riverside Organics*,
<<http://www.riverford.co.uk/about/riverford/index.php?PHPSESSID=ab9d136c17f85194b64ca4a5f3b1c55a>>

^{xxix} *Riverside Franchise*,
<<http://www.whichfranchise.com/franchisorPage.cfm?CompanyID=2240>>