

## **The New Food Culture: Good News for Small Farms<sup>i</sup>**

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At an organic farming conference in Winnipeg, Canada, a couple of years ago, a woman in the audience stood up and said, “Organic foods are not going to become popular with mainstream consumers until they became *quick, convenient, and cheap*.” My immediate response was that *true* organic foods were not going to be quick, convenient, or cheap – at least not for some time to come. It costs more to produce food organically, at least in terms of dollars and cents, because conventional food producers don't pay the full ecological and social costs of their production methods. Fortunately, however, more and more people are finding organic foods to be worth the necessary time, effort, and money. However, that Canadian woman's comment caused me to think further about the nature of our food system and about what we have done to try to make foods quick, convenient, and cheap for consumers.

First, at the farm level, I concluded that our never-ending quest for cheap food is the root cause of the transformation of American agriculture from a system of small, diversified, independently operated, family farms into a system now dominated by large-scale, industrialized, corporately controlled agribusinesses. The industrial production technologies that have supported specialization, mechanization, and ultimately, large-scale, contract production, were all developed to make agriculture more efficient – to make food cheaper for consumers. As farms have become larger and fewer, millions of American farmers have been forced off the land, those remaining are sacrificing their independence, and thousands of small farming communities have withered and died – all for the sake of cheap food.

The agricultural establishment has boasted that ever fewer farmers have been able to feed a growing nation with an ever-decreasing share of consumer income spent for food. Admittedly, the increases in economic efficiency have been impressive, but what about the human costs. Economists have totaled up tremendous savings for consumers from lower food costs, but they have never bothered to place a value on the lives of farm families that have been destroyed by the loss of their farms, their way of life, and their heritage. They have never bothered to consider the value of the lives of rural people, – with roots in rural schools, churches, and businesses – who were forced to abandon their communities as farm families were forced off the land. The human costs of cheap food have been undeniably tremendous, but since they couldn't be measured in dollars and cents, they have gone uncounted.

The ecological costs of cheap food, likewise, could not be measured in dollars and cents, and thus, have been left uncounted and largely ignored. Today, only the most diehard industrialists bother to deny that we have degraded the productivity of the land through erosion and contamination and have polluted the natural environment with agricultural chemicals – in our

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never-ending pursuit of cheaper food. Certainly, we had soil erosion in the “dust bowl” days, but we were making great strides in soil conservation, before the dawning of industrial agriculture in the late 1940s. In spite of stepped up soil conservation efforts of the 1990s, American farms still are losing topsoil at rates far exceeding rates of soil regeneration. Feeble efforts to control soil loss through reduced tillage leave farmers increasingly reliant on herbicides that pollute our streams and groundwater and that disrupt or destroy the biological life in the soil. Future generations will still be as dependent upon the bounty of the earth as when all people were hunters and gatherers. We are risking the future of human life on earth, just so we can have cheap food.

The pursuit of cheap food also could mean the end of agriculture in America – at least agriculture, as we have known it. The globalization of agriculture, through so-called “free trade agreements,” means that food in the future will be grown wherever in the world it can be produced at the lowest dollar and cent cost. High costs of land and labor in the US – consequences of favorable employment opportunities and the urban-to-rural population migration – quite likely will keep production costs in the US well above costs in other food producing regions of the world. The multinational food corporations that increasingly control agriculture are not people – they have no heart, no soul, nor citizenship in any particular country. They will produce or buy agricultural commodities wherever they can produce or buy at the lowest cost, without regard for national origin. America is not likely to abandon agriculture completely, but we could well become as dependent on the rest of the world for food as we are today for oil – a high price to pay for cheap food.

The costs of making food *quick and convenient* probably are no less than the cost of making food *cheap*. Nearly eighty cents of each dollar Americans spend for food goes to pay for marketing services – processing, packaging, transportation, storage, advertising, etc. All of these costs are associated with making food more convenient – getting it into the most convenient form and package, getting it to the most convenient location, at the most convenient time, and convincing us to buy it. So, we pay far more for the convenience of our food than we pay for the food itself. In fact, we pay more to those who *package* and *advertise* our food than we pay to the farmers who *produce* it. So, by far the greatest part of the total cost of food is the cost of convenience.

Our addiction to convenience also is placing control of our food supply in the hands of a few giant, multinational corporations. As Dr. Bill Heffernan and his colleagues of the University of Missouri have pointed out, the global food supply today is dominated by a handful of giant agribusiness firms, allied by various means, forming three “global food clusters.”<sup>1</sup> These firms influence and, in many cases control, nearly everything that happens to our food because they control the processes that make our food convenient. Think of the political influence corporations will hold when they completely control our sources of food. The price of convenient food is not just the eighty cents of each dollar we spend for food; it's loss of control over our food.

The costs of *quick* food are similar in nature to the costs of convenient food. Our growing addiction to fast food is evident in the ever-increasing share of our food dollar spent at restaurants and other eating establishments – a share approaching half of total food purchases. And, *fast* foods places, such as McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Taco Bell, and Pizza Hut,

account for nearly half of all food consumed away from home. Erick Schlosser, in his recent best seller, Fast Food Nation, addresses the cost of our “love affair” with fast foods.<sup>2</sup> He states, “fast food has triggered the homogenization of our society. Fast food has hastened the *mall*ing of our landscape, widening of the chasm between rich and poor, fueled an epidemic of obesity, and propelled the juggernaut of American cultural imperialism abroad.” He documents how quick food has lured us into choosing diets deficient in nearly everything except calories, supporting practices deceptive in every aspect from advertising to flavoring, and systems that degrade nearly everyone and everything involved in the process.

The fast food industry has lured low-income consumers, along with the affluent, into paying ridiculously high prices for low-quality meats, potatoes, vegetable oil, and sugar. However, the high dollar-and-cent costs are but the tip of the iceberg. The true costs of quick food must include the costs of poor health, lost dignity in the workplace, degraded landscapes, and ethical and moral decay in business matters, including international trade and investment. We are paying a tremendously high price for the time saved by choosing quick food.

Our quick, convenient, and cheap culture of food also has decreased our enjoyment of food and has diminished, rather than enhanced, our happiness. Certainly, eating is a primal act. Everyone must eat, and in a physical sense, “we are what we eat.” But, what we eat also reflects who we are – our character, our temperament, our values, our ethics, and our integrity. As Brother David Andrews, a fellow advocate of sustainable agriculture says, “Eating is a moral act.” What we choose to eat affects not only how our food is produced, processed, and distributed, but also who benefits, who pays, and how animals, people, and the earth are treated in the process.

Perhaps even more obvious, eating is a social act. Historically, people have socialized with their family and friends, lingering over meals that nourish the mind and soul as well as the body. Historically, people have taken great care and pride in their preparation of food – reflecting their care and concern for those who were to eat what they had prepared. What we eat, how it is prepared, how we eat, who eats together helps to define our social and cultural identity.

A society also is shaped by how food and the benefits of food are shared. A society in which all are assured a diet adequate to ensure their physical and mental health and development is quite different from a society in which people must fend for themselves or starve. A society in which rewards are shared equitably among all who contribute to the value of food is quite different from a society in which rewards go to those with the greatest market power and political influence.

In our quest to save time and effort in preparing food and in eating, we have created a food culture within which much of the real satisfaction of eating has been lost. Our food choices are driven by urgency and economics, not by ethics or enjoyment. Most Americans don't know where their food comes from, who produces it, or the social and ecological consequences of how it is produced. We are told that we shouldn't waste our time preparing food or eating food. Food is treated as fuel for the body, of little social or moral significance. Our choice of quick and convenient food ignores the influence of food choices on the ethical and social dimensions of our quality of life. We have taken the joy out of cooking and eating.

Americans have become distracted from their historical pursuit of happiness – not just in our food choices, but in all aspects of our lives. In the pursuit of abundance, convenience, and leisure, we have lost our sense of enjoyment. Historically, happiness had been widely accepted as the motive of all purposeful human activity. The framers of the U.S. Constitution, for example, listed “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” among the inalienable rights of all people. Philosophers throughout the ages have spent a lot of time thinking about the meaning of happiness. Americans are so busy striving to become wealthy that we don't have time to be happy.

The *hedonist* philosophers equated happiness to the sensory pleasures of individual, personal experiences. This seems to be the average American's idea of happiness. However, another group of philosophers, including Aristotle, used the word *eudaimonia* for happiness.<sup>3</sup> *Eudaimonia* is inherently social in nature – it is realized by individuals, but only within the context of family, friendships, community, or society. Aristotle's happiness, a social happiness, was seen as a natural product of right relationships. Equally important, this social happiness was considered a by-product of actions taken for their own sake – not to achieve some sensory satisfaction, but instead, because they are intrinsically good. In essence, Aristotle and his followers believed that true happiness was not something to be pursued, but instead, was a natural consequence of right living. The urges that have driven us toward quick, convenient, cheap food are purely hedonistic in nature – they are about the pursuit of narrow individual self-interests. In our pursuit of hedonistic rewards, in all aspects of our society, we have abandoned the social happiness of *eudaimonia*, and we are suffering the inevitable consequences.

For those who need statistical evidence, Robert Putnam's book Bowling Alone provides measure after measure verifying that America is becoming a nation of increasingly disconnected, unhappy people.<sup>4</sup> For example, each decade since the 1960s, fewer Americans have voted in elections, belonged to organizations, participated in social activities, or even visited each other's homes. Most such measures of social connectedness or social capital have dropped by 30-50 percent since the late 1950s. And, as Americans have become disconnected, we have become a more contentious and less-civil society, as evidenced by our spending more per capita each decade for lawyers, courts, law enforcement, and prisons.

Putnam also points out that our increasingly dysfunctional personal relationships have been associated with our deteriorating physical and mental health, with a ten-fold increase in mental illness and a tripling and quadrupling of suicides among young adults and adolescents. Less serious, but far more common, incidents of “malaise” – headaches, indigestion, and sleeplessness – have shown patterns similar to those for mental illness. Between the late 1970s and late 1990s, each new generation, on average, are not only less healthy but also have indicated they are “less happy” than were those of previous generations.

If the hedonists were right, then we Americans should be the happiest people on earth. Americans would have the least trouble and strife and the highest sense of purpose in life among all nations of the world. We would have the fewest assaults and murders, the least drug abuse, the lowest incidence of crime in general. We would be the most mentally healthy people in the world, spending the least amount for mental health care and experiencing the lowest rate of suicide of any nation. Americans probably spend more money on themselves, for their own

sensory pleasure, than has any people at any time in human history. But, our wealth has not brought us happiness. The evidence continues to grow that true happiness is to be found in positive relationships, in family, community, and society, and in righteous living – in social happiness, not in hedonistic self-interest. We have a society that meets our material needs, but not social or spiritual needs. We have a food system that provides an abundance of calories, but leaves us hungry for enjoyment and happiness.

We don't need a lot of information or statistics to tell us that something is fundamentally wrong with the American system or to tell us what kinds of food system we need instead. It's mainly a matter of common sense. Our common sense tells us that food should feed not only our bodies, but also feed our minds and our souls. Our common sense tells us that food should bring us together, rather than tear us apart. Our common sense tells us the food we eat should reflect an ethical and moral sense of caring for each other and caring for the earth, rather than thoughtless, self-centered exploitation of people and the earth driven by cost and convenience.

While still a minority, a growing number of Americans are beginning ask some common sense questions about their food system, and we are beginning to see the consequences of their answers. The demand for organic foods has been growing at a rate of twenty percent per year over the past decade, doubling every three to four years. Consumers don't want chemicals in their foods. Parents have demanded that soda machines and fast foods be removed from their schools and replaced with wholesome local foods. They want nutrition in their children's food. Customers have sued fast food restaurants for obesity, accusing the corporations of peddling addictions. Consumers have demanded country of origin labeling, even though USDA has refused to implement it. Consumers are buying more of their food locally, so they won't have to overcook their hamburgers and eggs to avoid salmonella poisoning or worry about E coli contamination or “mad cow disease.” American consumers have lost confidence in the health and integrity of the industrial food system – in food safety, wholesomeness, and nutrition – and they have lost confidence in the ability of either the corporations or government to restore it.

These concerned Americans are not satisfied with quick, convenient, cheap food; they want something else. Obviously, they want their food to be safe, wholesome, attractive, flavorful, and reasonably priced. But, a growing number of are now asking for something more; they want it to be produced sustainably. They want their food produced in ways that respects people – including farmers and workers in the food system, as well food consumers. They want their food produced in ways that respect the natural environment. A growing number of consumers are willing to compromise, at least to some extent, on cosmetic appearance, preparation time, convenience, and price in order to ensure the integrity of their food. But, they will not compromise on food safety or wholesomeness, and most consumers expect even higher qualities of freshness, nutrition, and flavor from local, sustainably produced foods. These discriminating consumers are creating a new American food culture.

This new food culture is but one part of a broader, more inclusive new American culture. Psychologist Sherry Anderson and market researcher, Paul Ray, in their book, The Cultural Creative, indicate that possibly 50 million already are involved in creating this new American culture.<sup>5</sup> These cultural creating people believe that relationships are very important, share a strong sense of community, are committed to social equity and justice, believe that nature is

sacred, and are concerned for the natural environment and ecological sustainability. They also tend to be more altruistic, idealistic, optimistic, and spiritual than is the average American. They are less materialistic, are less concerned about job prospects, and have fewer financial concerns. These are all characteristics of people who are concerned about the issues that are driving the new food culture.

These “cultural creatives” have come together through various social movements, including those advocating social justice, civil rights, human rights, world peace, environmental protection, sustainable development, holistic health, organic foods, and spiritual psychology. These related issues are merging into a common movement committed to building a more healthy and sustainable human society. While this group represents less than one-third of the total adult population, their numbers are growing, and they are far more than sufficient in numbers to support a new sustainable alternative to the quick, convenient, cheap food system of today.

This assertion is supported by the nationally respected Hartman Report, which surveyed representative United States households to explore the linkage between food purchases and environmental attitudes.<sup>6</sup> The report identified two groups, the “true naturals” and “new green mainstream,” which already make up about 28 percent of the population, as prime markets for sustainably produced foods. Members of these groups are very similar in attitudes and in magnitude to the group identified by Ray and Anderson as “cultural creatives.” Armed with the ecological, social, and economic facts of today's food system, and an opportunity to choose a healthy, sustainable alternative, an even larger group of consumers likely would be willing to pay the full costs of a sustainable food system.

The members of the new food culture will pay premium prices for wholesome, nutritious food that really tastes good. They will pay premium prices also for crops that are grown organically or for meat from animals raised under humane conditions, without chemicals, without hormones or antibiotics. They will pay a premium for food that is produced in ways that protect the natural environment and the well-being of farmers, food industry workers, and other involved in the food system. And increasingly, members of the new food culture are showing strong preferences for foods that are produced locally. They want to know where their food comes from, how it is produced, and who produced it. They want their food to come from someone they trust.

The old industrial food system was built upon impersonal, economic relationships among farmers, food processors, food distributors, and consumers. The new food system must be built upon personal relationships of integrity. Farmers must form relationships with customers who care about the social and ecological integrity of their food – not just price, convenience, or even an organic label. The social and ethical principles of sustainability ultimately must be expressed through personal relationships among people and between people and the earth. Consumers of the new food culture are seeking a relationship with the earth as well as relationships with each other, and their relationships with the earth will be *through* their farmers. Corporations are not people, and thus, are incapable of forming personal relationships with their customers. This gives farmers, particularly on smaller farms, a unique advantage in meeting the expectations of the new food culture.

The food system that meets the expectations of the new food culture will need to be dramatically different from today's industrial food system. Quite likely, it will be a network of local, interdependent community food systems, completely separate from the corporately controlled global food chain clusters of today. The key to success in this new food system will be its ability to maintain a sense of *personal connectedness* between those who produce food and those who eat it. Such connections are far easier to establish and maintain in situations where farmers, processors, retailers, and customers all live in geographic proximity – in local markets. They become increasingly difficult, but not impossible, as farmers, processors, retailers, and customers become more numerous and dispersed.

The international Slow Food movement constitutes tangible evidence of the emergence of a global food culture that expresses a strong preference for local foods.<sup>7</sup> Slow Food is a worldwide movement with over 80,000 members in 100 countries committed to promoting the diversity of local and regional quality food produced and marketed in a way that guarantees farmers a fair price and protects the environment and the natural landscape. Those in the movement have a clear understanding of the industrial food system and they realize that a return to local and regional food systems will be necessary for ecological and social sustainability. In his book, The Pleasures of Slow Food, Corbey Kummer points out that Slow Food is not an elitist gourmet movement, but instead, encourages “good, honest food at reasonable prices” and its appreciation and enjoyment to the fullest by all.<sup>8</sup>

The Chefs Collaborative is a national network of more than 1,000 American chefs who are promoting sustainable cuisine by celebrating the joys of local, seasonal, and artisanal cooking.<sup>9</sup> Their fundamental organizational principles include “sound food choices emphasizing locally grown, seasonally fresh, and whole or minimally processed ingredients.” Their other principles are very much in harmony with the development and support of an ecologically sound and socially responsible food system. Independent restaurants everywhere, across all price ranges, seem to understand that their best defense against the national franchises is to advertise their reliance on local farmers who provide them with locally fresh, high quality foods.

These two organizations are just the proverbial “tip of the iceberg.” Increasingly, Americans are waking up to what is happening to agriculture, our farms, our food systems, and to our lives in general. We are beginning to realize that we have been so preoccupied with our pursuit of individual economic self-interests that we have wandered away from the path to real happiness. Slowly we are realizing that to regain our lost sense of happiness, we must make time in our busy lives to mend broken relationships and find new purpose and meaning in life. We must search for happiness within the context of caring families and communities and in a sense of rightness in our ways of living. And, we can begin that search by reexamining our food choices. We can invest the time, effort, and money in choosing food that reflect our need to rebuild relationships with of each other and with the earth. We can rediscover happiness in eating.

The emergence of a new food culture is good news for smaller independent farmers and small independent food processors and retailers, who have persisted against corporate industrialization of the food system. The new network of local community-based food systems will be sewn together from the remnants of these smaller, independent, community-connected farmers, processors, and retailers who have remained committed to producing food with quality and

integrity for customers who want and are willing to pay for food with quality and integrity. The persistence of small family farms provides a powerful example for the rest of society, of people who have refused to sacrifice the quality of a life that they love for the promise of greater prosperity. Sustainable farmers, those who refuse to exploit their neighbors, their land, or their customers provide a powerful example of people who realize that true wealth arises from the rightness of our relationships. The remaining independent food processors and independent food retailers likewise provide powerful examples of people who have been able to persist in the face of relentless competition from the corporate giants by not compromising their integrity.

From these remnants, a new ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible food system will be built. This new food system will help reconnect people with the earth and with each other in positive, mutually supportive relationships, which contribute to our happiness and quality of life. The creation of this new and better food system will point the way toward a brighter, more sustainable future in general for America and for the rest of the world. Building a new food system for a new food culture is a task that will take time and effort to complete, but now is the time to begin.

At first, such a task might seem impossible; it is so large. But, we should remember that the current quick, convenient, and cheap food culture and the industrial food system was not built all at once, by some fiat or decree, but was built by individuals, one person at a time. One by one, as consumers changed their attitudes toward food, changed what they ate and where they bought it, the America food culture was transformed from a culture of enjoyment and happiness to a culture of economics and expediency. One by one, as farmers changed what they produced and where they sold it, and one by one, as processors and distributors changed how and where they operated, the American food system was transformed from agrarian to industrial and from local to global. So, one by one, as farmers, consumers, processors, and distributors make different choices, the food culture will change and food system be transformed.

One by one, people all across America and around the world are beginning to wake up to the consequences of our food choices, not just for our individual health and safety, but also for our happiness and enjoyment of life. One by one, they are beginning to make choices to restore the health of our relationships with each other and earth, in hundreds or thousands of little, but highly significant, ways. As we begin to make different food choices, we begin to influence our little part of the world, and we begin to do our part in the transition toward a new healthy, sustainable national and global food system. One by one, as we make choices that change our world, we in fact begin to change the world.

The noted anthropologist, Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” So, let's do our part to change the world by becoming a part of the new American food culture, as farmers, food workers, or just as eaters. Let's start making food choices that only enhance our own health and happiness, but also help create a healthier, happier world.

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<sup>1</sup> For summaries of global food consolidation studies, see articles by Mary Hendrickson and William Heffernan, in Small Farm Today Magazine, April 1999 and July 2001, also available on the Internet at <http://nfu.org/images/heffernan.pdf> and [http://nfu.org/images/heffernan\\_1999.pdf](http://nfu.org/images/heffernan_1999.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Eric Schlosser. 2001. Fast Food Nation. Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, NY.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle. 1980. Nichomachean Ethics. Oxford Press, Oxford, England.

<sup>4</sup> Robert D. Putnam. 2000. Bowling Alone. Simon and Schuster, New York, NY.

<sup>5</sup> Ray, Paul and Sherry Anderson. 2000. The Cultural Creatives. Three Rivers Press, New York, NY.

<sup>6</sup> The Hartman Report: Food and the Environment – A Consumer's Perspective, 1999. <http://www.hartman-group.com/products/reportnatsens.html>

<sup>7</sup> Slow Foods International website: <http://www.slowfood.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Corby Kummer. 2002. The Pleasures of Slow Food. Chronicle Books, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>9</sup> See Chefs Collaborative website: <http://www.chefscollaborative.org/>