

LOCAL FOOD TO THE RESCUE

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Food recalls, high fuel prices, bioterrorism, distrust of global food companies: what's the answer?

A century ago the butcher, baker, and candlestick maker, embedded in villages and communities, provided the backbone of domestic economies. Their location guaranteed that neighbors would see what went in the front door and came out the back door. The inherent accountability created by this transparency provided integrity and security in the food system.

But as industrialism took over, production and processing sectors became ugly neighbors. Noxious odors, pollution, and unsightly Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) removed the food system from people. In fact, the industrial food sector flaunted fewer farmers and centralized, mega-processing and distribution as benchmarks of success.

As the opaqueness and concentration accelerated, new words permeated our culture: bovine spongiform encephalopathy, avian influenza, lysteria, campylobacter, E. coli, salmonella. This is nature's vocabulary, a language screaming to be heard. Amidst all this, rural economies crumbled as heartland towns vanished into oblivion. The food system became more a mechanical process rather than biological. Food manufacturing replaced domestic culinary arts. "Dashboard dining" now describes the way our culture ingests extruded, amalgamated, reconstituted, irradiated, genetically adulterated protoplasmic morsels.

This new industrial food system is now birthing ghost towns, recalls, biosecurity fears, nutritional deprivation, fish kills and outright poisonings, not to mention obesity and type II diabetes in epidemic proportions. What's the answer?

Local food to the rescue. When the butcher, baker, and candlestick maker return to the community, all the things that people fear begin to subside. Eaters can see their food growing in the field, creating a sense of plenty.

For all the variety in supermarkets, the supply chain that requires every morsel of food to be transported 1500 miles from field to fork is actually quite fragile.

Local economies revitalize when production, processing, accounting, marketing, distribution, and preparation happen locally. Nobody has to worry about their food stagnating in the belly of a Chinese merchant marine for a month before it arrives at the supermarket. Nobody has to worry about the hidden agenda of global empires hobnobbing with politicians who abscond peoples' wealth through burdensome taxes.

So what does a credible local food system look like? It has six components.

First, is production. And this production must be aesthetically and aromatically pleasant. Farms should be havens of romantic sights and smells. If they aren't, they will be relegated to society's fringes where social, environmental, economic, and nutritional shortcuts occur--out of sight and out of mind.

Good farms build relationships between multi-species working symbiotically and synergistically. Industrial food systems break relationships, not only of farmers with the land, but with the intricate choreography of chickens dancing with cows and field rotations dancing with different partner predecessor species. Local farms use stacking to build multi-tiered systems that act as pathogen cul-de-sacs. Portable, lightweight infrastructure offers flexibility on the landscape. Pasture-based animal production on perennial polycultures reduces equipment and building footprints, creating a more beautiful and dynamic landscape.

Second is processing. This farm production needs to be sliced, diced, killed, and packaged. Cottage industry can do this more hygienically and socially responsibly than centralized mega-facilities. Church kitchens, community canneries, and artisanal appropriate-scaled abattoirs turn local dollars over in the community so they aren't siphoned off into corporate offices where decisions are outsourced to people far removed from the land.

Third is accounting. Somebody has to watch the bank account. Too many local businesses pile all their receipts in one box and hope things will work out by the end of the year. Functioning local food systems need to watch their pennies just like any other.

Fourth is marketing. At the end of the day, this food must be sold. Somebody needs to be the gregarious, story teller schmoozer. Unfortunately, too many farmers don't really like people. Functional local food systems can't just rely on good farmers; these good farmers need to team up with marketers. Graphics artists to design catchy logos, tour guides to take visiting patrons around the farm or processing facility--a local food system requires the gifts and talents of far more than farmers. It creates a place for everyone to express their passion.

Fifth is distribution. Unfortunately, farmers' markets currently average a much larger energy transportation footprint per food pound than WalMart. The reason is that even though the industrial food is going 1,500 miles, rather than the 40-mile average farmers' market morsel, it's being transported in tractor trailers 24 tons at a time rather than vehicle trunks 200 pounds at a time. To be truly functional, local food systems desperately need to tighten up this distribution efficiency with networked economies of scale.

I call them food clusters. The idea is that food in a given area goes on a single vehicle for transport to metropolitan areas. Fierce independence has its cost, and one is duplication of transport. We in the local food business need to get over the my way or the highway

approach. We need to be putting honey, bread, eggs, and chicken on one vehicle. One of the ways Polyface has chosen to answer this need is through the Metropolitan Buying Club concept, whereby we service scheduled drop points with a diversified product portfolio. The rolling supermarket delivering pre-ordered merchandise to pre-determined urban drop sites hybridizes concepts of Community Supported Agriculture with the ubiquitous supermarket.

Sixth is patrons. When it's all said and done, none of this works without patrons who get it. What's to get? Lots of things: eating seasonally, knowing where your kitchen is, preparing meals from scratch, sitting down and eating together in the home, putting food by for the offseason. These heritage domestic culinary arts need to be recultivated on a massive scale if we have any hope of building functional local food systems. Indeed, the notion that food comes boxed, pre-marinated, pre-cooked, and bar coded is the single biggest cultural paradigm that local food systems must overcome.

In the final analysis, our current industrial food system, fraught with vulnerabilities and weaknesses, needs to be replaced with a strong, vibrant, local-economy-stimulating community-based food system. We'll still import some coffee and bananas, to be sure. But if everything that could be grown and consumed in a foodshed actually were, it would so fundamentally transform our world that we can't conceive of the next opportunity.

All of us, regardless of where we fit into this local food connection, can do our part in the healing process. At the end of the week, can we look back knowing that our food choices have encouraged healing or hurts? That's the question. Are the earthworms in the fields and forests surrounding our homes dancing happier as a result of our food purchases?

When the earthworms are dancing, all is right in the world.

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