A Portrait of Food Sovereignty

A book review of *The Town That Food Saved*, by Ben Hewitt

Ron Miller

Issue no. 37 • Autumn 2010

When we feed ourselves, we become unconquerable.
—gardening author Eliot Coleman, to Ben Hewitt

Food is a logical rallying point for the localization movement. Agriculture is the most fundamental of all economic activities, because food is essential to life. Food self-sufficiency, as Eliot Coleman (and Thomas Jefferson long before him) suggested, is the basis for independence. The corporate centralization of our food system has turned us into passive, unskilled consumers, utterly dependent on the money economy and on the availability of cheap oil. In *The Town That Food Saved*, Ben Hewitt explains why this system is on the verge of breakdown, arguing that "our nation's food supply has never been more vulnerable. And we, as consumers of food, share that vulnerability, having slowly, inexorably relinquished control over the very thing that's most critical to our survival."

The Town That Food Saved considers the economic and social dimensions of relocalizing our food system. Hewitt, the popular "Greenneck" columnist for *Vermont Commons*, spent many weeks exploring the dynamic agricultural enterprises emerging around Hardwick, Vermont—successful young businesses such as High Mowing Seeds, Pete's Greens, Jasper Hill Farm, Vermont Soy, and others that have attracted national attention. Persistently inquisitive and thoughtful, Hewitt provides a balanced, carefully nuanced study of the community. While the emerging local food system is widely praised and "feels right," Hewitt wants to know why it is right. Questioning simplistic assumptions, he asks "What should a decentralized food system look like?" and examines the ironies and controversies that lurk below the media hype of the Hardwick phenomenon. For example, if the economics of small-scale production lead to high-priced specialty products beyond the reach of a working class town's citizens, can the system still be called "local"?

Hewitt gives readers an unusually intimate look at the people involved—the "agripreneurs" who have become media celebrities, as well as farmers whose families have grown food in this community for generations, and back-road homesteaders who have lived off the land for decades—because this is his own community and he knows these people well. The information he gained from extensive interviews is spiced with wry and candid observations of their habits and attitudes. Hewitt is a thorough and careful researcher who gives us serious sociological insights, yet he is also an engaging writer who fills this book with delightful wit and humor.

Hewitt places the quirky stories of Hardwick's people into the larger context of an economically strained community trying to gain independence from the corporate system. This is the most significant story Hewitt tells. He explains how industrial food appears to be cheap because so many production and distribution costs are externalized—that is, they are paid for by degraded soil and compromised nutritional value, and by taxpayers in the form of subsidies to agribusiness and oil companies, rather than directly by consumers. As well, there are economies of scale to centralized production—and Hewitt gives a good bit of attention to the problem of defining appropriate scale—but at least a local economy is circular, and profits stay within the community. One of the keys to

Hardwick's success, writes Hewitt, is that its diverse agricultural businesses form a complete loop from seed gathering to planting and harvesting to compost. The system is relatively self-contained.

When the centralized economy implodes, due to resource depletion, ecological collapse, and financial chaos, this model of local self-sufficiency will prove to be vitally important. "If ever the chemicals and petroleum stop flowing, we will go hungry; we simply can't have 1 person feeding 140 of us without these inputs. . . . Chemical fertilizers and petroleum are to agriculture what easy credit was to the housing market, and we all know how that turned out." We will pay more for food, but as Hewitt suggests, we will be paying what this essential commodity is truly worth.

There is a political dimension to Hewitt's analysis, though for the most part he understates it. At one point, echoing the theme Eliot Coleman sounded, he asserts that "there's a bit of revolutionary lurking in every small-scale farmer," but he does not explicitly define the revolutionary politics of localization. This, I think, is what he is suggesting: A life rooted in land and community reflects "a desire to connect with something real and lasting." To pour one's energies into this strenuous and financially difficult way of life is to resist the role of passive consumer. To claim, through one's own effort, a life of self-sufficiency, is to refuse the seductive ease of mass consumption. It is a citizen's life, in the best Jeffersonian sense, one that is engaged with the life of nature and community; a citizen expects to participate in the world rather than simply to consume. And this, of course, suggests a more authentic democracy.

Toward the end of the book Hewitt acknowledges the local newspaper editor's lament that the Hardwick revolution has been brought about by a small number of prominent individuals pursuing their economic interests; in other passages he explains how some in the community feel alienated by the success and fame of the agrepreneurs. But ultimately Hewitt sees these as temporary flaws in the early, transitional phase of reclaiming local systems. He argues that a healthy food system has the potential to invite broad participation and reinvigorate democracy: "The participatory nature of local food systems holds tremendous power, not merely to secure and understand the cycle and source of our nourishment, but to reawaken a sense of responsibility for and toward the communities in which we live." Even after his thorough, critical inquiry into the Hardwick phenomenon, Hewitt concludes that it is a hugely important step in the right direction.