

The Food Less Traveled

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When I heard Michael Ableman, of the Center for Urban Agriculture, speak in Vermont last year, there was one statement he made that I have returned to frequently throughout the year—"pleasure is a better motivator for change than guilt." He continued, "How do we provide an invitation, rather than a harangue?" It is hard to determine what thing or combination of things motivates social change—this is a question that traverses disciplines, whether studying educational change or political change.

I have been interested in motivations for behavior change throughout my academic and professional careers—most recently, what will motivate kids to make different food choices in school; how can we most effectively impact child-eating behaviors? School food change has gained so much national attention, not because of the pleasure children will experience when they pull their first carrot out of the ground, but because of the increased incidence of type 2 diabetes and obesity. What determines which foods a second grader will choose when he or she gets to the end of the lunch line? Most likely, it will not be the school nurse's voice or their parent's voice or the memory of something they read; more likely, their decision will be influenced by the experience they have had with that food. Did they help plant those cabbage seedlings in their school garden, did they visit the farm and help harvest those potatoes, did they prepare a taste test for their peers in their classroom?

The Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT) has worked with Food Works and Shelburne Farms for over ten years on a collaborative project called Vermont Food Education Every Day (VT FEED). A focus of the project is to change the palettes of Vermont youth, so that when they get to the lunch line, they can choose food from farms in their community and they will choose those foods. It has always seemed commonsensical that if a school is within walking distance to a farm in their community, as many are in rural Vermont, then those schools should have a food purchasing relationship with those farms or at least other Vermont farms. Due in part to VT FEED's work, and to communities who were working on these efforts before VT FEED came along, there are now 75 schools out of Vermont's 300 public schools that are integrating the math, history, and science of local farms into their curriculum and purchasing local food for their lunch line.

I love that I can eat lunch at the Brewster Pierce Elementary School in Huntington that has been prepared with the vegetables harvested by the students from a neighboring farm, that the farmer has songs written about her by the students as part of an artist-in-residence program and that when farmer Sarah Jane comes to lunch she receives a standing ovation. I was, again, reminded of Michael Ableman when he said "I've seen chefs who prepare local foods receive mythical rock and roll status, it's time for farmers to receive the same." When adults think about their food choices, what is motivating them? What are the messages that influence those purchasing decisions? Consumer surveys say that "freshness" and "taste" are the predominant motivators, but factors such as the perceived health benefits, contribution to the local economy, and price are also influential. I think our greatest challenge and greatest strategy to influence food choices, as we have learned through our work with schools, is for individuals to experience food through growing, harvesting, preparing, or developing a relationship with that food and food producer.

The organization leading the crusade toward a new food culture nationally is Slow Food, "a non-profit, eco-gastronomic member-supported organization that was founded in 1989 to counteract fast

food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and people's dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes and how our food choices affect the rest of the world." I was fortunate to attend Slow Food's Terra Madre in Turin, Italy, last fall. Accompanying the event was a celebration of regional foods called the *Salone del Gusto* where small-scale food producers come from all over the world to showcase their products, and the event is dedicated both to excellent food and to the extraordinary people who produce it. At the *Salone*, I tasted the wines from the Piedmont Valley and the prosciutto from Sienna (not to mention the molten chocolate . . .). All of these foods have a history and a story. A focus of the Slow Food event was to celebrate food traditions, to recognize foods unique to a region, and to create a connection to a place through the foods of that place.

One of the speakers at Terra Madre was Davia Nelson, a National Public Radio correspondent working on a program called "Hidden Kitchens," a series that explores how communities come together through food. Davia spoke about her experience visiting and chronicling all kinds of American kitchen cultures. She said that "America is in need of a movement—there was a peace movement and an environmental movement and now we are in need of a food movement." Similar arguments have been made during the current Farm Bill debates. Michael Pollan recently wrote that most Americans are not engaged in the process of creating the Farm Bill, that many people don't know a farmer nor care about agriculture—but we all eat. He recommended that "this time around, let's call it the food bill."

Of course Vermont is different, in that most Vermonters know farmers, and most Vermonters care about agriculture, but it begs the question, "How would our agricultural system be different if our country created a Food Bill or a Farm and Food Bill every five years?" As with other massive pieces of legislation, it is hard to get individuals engaged in the process of commenting on sections of the bill, calling their congressional representatives, or understanding the finer details. Having conversations with my peers about the Farm Bill reminds me of trying to engage individuals in the finer points of NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement)—these are omnibus works that are hard to experience by individuals. NOFA-VT decided to go to where the people are this summer and have discussions about some of the details of the Farm Bill—we have tabled at places such as Hunger Mountain Coop and the Addison County Field Days. But, of course, the Farm Bill is not just about farms, it is about programs that impact farmers and reauthorization for nutrition programs that reach many Vermonters. And in our goals of influencing the food choices of children and adults in Vermont, we have to consider all of Vermont, and make sure that all Vermonters, including those with limited income, have access to fresh, local food.

It just makes common sense to circulate food dollars, as much as possible, within our local communities—the project gives terms such as "community economic development" and "relationship marketing" new meaning to me. Farmers' markets provide an opportunity for food consumers to purchase food directly from the person who grew that food—every individual who visits a farmers' market is engaging in a pleasurable food experience. That is what brings us back to a farmers' market or motivates us to renew our share in a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm, or plant our own garden to nourish our family—we are predominantly motivated by pleasure. And because Vermont has more farmers' markets and CSAs, per capita, than any other state in the country, then I guess we can argue that we have the greatest capacity for pleasure!

The energy of the Localvore movement in Vermont confirms that Vermonters at a very grassroots and community level are harnessing our capacity for pleasure using food as a medium. Localvores are individuals committed to eating food within 100 miles of their home. Referred to as the "100 mile diet" in Canada or Locavores in California, they serve as examples of the emergence of a local food movement throughout the country. In Vermont, there are Localvore Pods organizing in communities to challenge and support each other to eat local foods for a day, a week, a month, or throughout the year. These learning communities are operating at a much more complex level than just planning for

their meals for the week—in the Mad River Valley (www.vermontlocalvore.org), when a farmer's barn collapsed this winter due to the snow load, the Localvores held fund-raisers, supplied meals for the family, and organized work crews, and in, Brattleboro, Post Oil Solutions (www.postoilsolutions.org) is organizing a Localvore challenge and engaging the community in issues of climate change and peak oil. The Localvores meet quarterly to analyze Vermont's food transportation and storage infrastructure, to identify crops that we need in greater supply (grains, beans and oil crops), and to share community-outreach efforts.

Although many regions in the country are having the “local or organic” debate, fueled by high-profile stories challenging the emergence of organic food in Walmart and questioning the ethics of consuming food that has been transported so far when a consumer could buy those same products more locally, Vermont, fortunately, does not have to spend time on that discussion. The history of the organic movement in Vermont is a story of small farms, developing an infrastructure for local food sales and “food for the people, not for profit.” In Vermont, organic is synonymous with local. Vermont consumers don't have to debate whether to buy an organic strawberry or a local strawberry, organic wheat or local wheat, organic cheese or local cheese—we can have both. Let's debate more meaningful topics, such as how do we build a vital food culture in Vermont? How can we support all Vermonters to have positive food experiences that influence their consumption and purchasing decisions? If I were creating an agricultural testament for Vermont, the first principle would be “Know Thy Farmer.”