

# What Will You Eat if Vermont Secedes?

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“What will you eat?” is a good question to ponder whether or not you support secession. In James Howard Kunstler’s recent novel, *World Made By Hand*, food becomes a kind of currency after the governmental and economic infrastructure collapses. People in this story are forced to eat locally because they have little access to the outside world. Although secession is a much different scenario, it is worth considering what types of questions would need to be answered and what areas of the food system might need to be built up for Vermont to have true food security, and even food sovereignty.

In a July 2008 article in *Seven Days*, Bill McKibben suggested that the secessionist movement should “focus less on opposing tyranny and more on counting calories.” I would suggest to you that these two focus areas are actually the same. We will not be able to count our calories more locally and regionally, the way McKibben (and I) would like to, until we openly name and then dismantle the tyranny of our corporate-industrial food system—which is supported by our government.

McKibben listed a few of the many folks here in Vermont who are working to build our local food system. However, as he mentions only briefly, the state Agency of Agriculture and the federal government are, in the best cases, supporting these efforts with little enthusiasm, and, in the worst cases, actively opposing efforts to build our local food systems.

Earl Butz, secretary of agriculture for Richard Nixon, reshaped America’s food and agricultural policy when he urged farmers to “get big or get out.” Even before that, however, a movement toward consolidated, industrialized food production was well underway. In 1906, Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle*, a novel that exposed corruption in the U.S. meatpacking industry. Although Sinclair’s focus was on the labor conditions in the slaughterhouses and packing plants, the novel led to sweeping regulatory reforms focused on food safety.

These reforms did achieve a certain level of food safety; however, they also had a consequence of creating a system where small abattoirs and locally available meat are scarce because of the capital investment required to comply with all of the safety standards—which are designed to deal with the problems that occur when meat is processed quickly and on a large scale.

A similar history can be found in our country’s milk-production system. In his book, *The Untold Story of Milk*, Ron Schmid shows us how competing interests fought to ensure the safety of our milk supply. Two doctors, responding to the real safety issues caused by the industrial revolution, came up with two different approaches. One created standards and certified farms to ensure the farmers and animals were healthy, the cows were on pasture, and basic hygiene and sanitation were routine. The other boiled the milk to kill any germs that had contaminated it. Because pasteurization had the added benefit of extending shelf life, it allowed the milk to be shipped greater distances—and the rest is history. Now, it is very difficult to process milk on a small scale (even if you want to pasteurize it), and even more difficult to sell it without pasteurizing it, because of the regulatory system that is in place and the costs associated with compliance.

In an October 12, 2008, open letter to America’s next president published in the *New York Times*, Michael Pollan noted that “After WWII, the government encouraged the conversion of the munitions industry to fertilizer . . . and the conversion of nerve-gas research to pesticides. The government also began subsidizing commodity crops, paying farmers by the bushel for all the corn, soybeans, wheat and rice they could produce.” This eventually led to Butz’s encouragement for farmers to consolidate

and to value production and efficiency above all else, and thus to mono-cropping and petroleum-based farming.

Pollan noted that we have a real opportunity right now because of a double crisis in food and energy. You probably have heard all about the energy crisis, but did you know—as Pollan reports—that in the past several months more than thirty nations have experienced food riots?

At this moment, there may be a chance to shift our policy and create a new food system. Pollan suggests that we move from a petroleum-dependent system to one that uses sunshine, which he calls a “new solar-food economy.”

I agree with many of Pollan’s suggestions, including expanding farmers’ markets, creating agricultural enterprise zones, developing a “local meat-inspection corps,” establishing a strategic grain reserve, regionalizing federal food procurement, and creating a definition of “food” that focuses on nutrition rather than on calories. Pollan’s ideas are good places to begin for America’s new president.

But what about us? Here in Vermont, what will we eat? What will our food policy look like? How can we work toward a secure and independent food system? I think we need to begin working on our state-level policy right now, in the same way that Michael Pollan suggests working on the federal system. Whether you want to secede and have Vermont be an independent nation, or whether you’re not quite ready for that to happen yet, I would urge you to get involved in shaping Vermont’s food policy.

This past summer, Rural Vermont conducted an online survey for consumers who were interested in local food. More than 200 people took the survey, and the overwhelming majority were interested in being able to buy local food and support local farmers. One piece of data that stood out to me was that the overwhelming majority of people taking the survey believed that the number-one way to support local farmers was to buy their products. I strongly agree that this is an important thing to do if you want to support local farmers (or any local business). However, I think it’s also important to make sure that the policies in place encourage local production and processing on a reasonable scale, and also ensure that the farmers get a fair price for their products, so that they can make good choices for their farms, their land, and their families, rather than for their banks.

Here in Vermont, despite the amazing efforts of hundreds of people who want to support local and regional food systems, we still have gaps—gaps in poultry- and meat-processing capacity, gaps in food-storage capacity, gaps in some crops that could be grown here but aren’t, gaps in research and development, gaps in milk-processing capacity. Although we are slowly filling in the gaps in our agricultural system, it is in spite of the policies of this state, rather than because of them. Where there has been success, it is largely because of the creativity and perseverance of the folks working on these issues, rather than the vision and foresight of our policymakers.

There are exceptions, of course. There have been good successes with the Farm to School program and Vermont FEED. Farmers’ markets are strong, and many of them have EBT machines for food stamp customers. Last year, Vermont passed the “chicken bill,” which opened up possibilities for farmers to direct-market farm-slaughtered poultry at farmers’ markets and to restaurants. We’re slowly expanding farmers’ ability to sell raw milk directly to customers.

But these are relatively small steps. Rural Vermont has a vision for Food with Dignity—a Vermont local food system that is self-reliant and based on reverence for the earth. It builds living soils that nurture animals and people with wholesome, natural products, supporting healthy, thriving farms and communities. These communities in turn work to encourage and support current and future farmers, continuing our Vermont heritage. This abundant and generous way of life celebrates our diversity and interdependence. We want to achieve this vision because we believe farmers should have the first rights to local markets, and community members should have the first rights to locally produced food. We believe that farmers should get a fair price for their products, and we believe that, when these things happen, we are all healthier and happier.

Michael Pollan says we need to rebuild America's food culture by changing habits and diets, because we are used to "fast, cheap and easy food." Pollan suggests that in addition to working on food policy, we must work on food culture. He thinks that the new president should lead by example. He should take five acres of the White House lawn to plant an organic farm, which should be overseen by a farmer who would be selected with as much care and attention as the White House chef. Pollan also suggests planting gardens—lots of gardens—all over America. He wants us to plant gardens in every primary school, as well as at our homes, like the "Victory Gardens" promoted by Eleanor Roosevelt.

I agree that we should do these things; we should do everything we can to have more food produced in our home state, and I believe that these things are a matter of policy as well as culture. The state will need to create policy that encourages composting so that we can capture our nutrients and have fertile gardens. Towns could encourage residents to create neighborhood food councils the way we are now creating neighborhood energy teams.

The Second Vermont Republic could form a food council, too, to begin developing the ideal food policy for the new nation, if Vermont were to secede. This council could then work to have this policy implemented, whether we secede or not. The council could think about where people are more densely clustered, where the food is grown, and what sorts of infrastructure we must develop to grow, store, and distribute the food year round. What cannot be grown here that we need? How will we get it? What can we trade for it? What could we grow that we are not growing now?

For instance, if we are an independent nation, we could grow hemp. What sorts of processing facilities would we need for that, or for other crops? Where should we locate them? How can we encourage them to be opened? How will we train people to do this work? Where is the productive land that is not being used? How can we encourage its use? There are many beginning farmers looking for land; how can we connect them with the land that's available?

And, how can we begin thinking about ourselves as producers rather than consumers? I believe that this is the cultural shift that needs to happen. As long as we think about ourselves as consumers—people who use up resources—we will not succeed in achieving independence from the tyranny of the corporate-industrial food system. We must take responsibility at all levels and work to create a new system that adds health and value to our bodies, our soils, and our communities.