



# The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

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## *Consumption Issues and Barriers*

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As requested I will begin this brief talking paper by addressing one of the assigned questions: From a perspective that focuses on consumption issues, what would a "sustainable and secure" food system look like? I assume we're agreed that what isn't sustainable and secure is the food system we presently have--the one that produces food wherever that can be done most cheaply, processes it to create the greatest profit for the food companies, and ships the results all over the nation and the world at enormous cost to the environment and to the well-being of farmers everywhere. With bee deaths, droughts, new crop diseases, biotech failures and the like, Nature keeps signaling us that something is wrong, but the corporations just keep on merging to consolidate their power. We need to hope that escalating energy shortages (and, therefore, oil prices) within the next quarter century will puncture this inflated system before it is too late.

From the consumption standpoint, I believe a sustainable food system requires consumers who are aware of the fact that someone out there is growing them, and who will therefore create a strong, year-round demand for foods that can be produced by regional farmers--their neighbors, so to speak. "Organic" foods from Guatemala, Mexico or California cannot be a major part of a sustainable NE food system. Therefore, these educated consumers would have to be willing to give up some significant portion of the "out of season" produce

they now expect to find in the supermarket. It would probably also mean they would need to do some of the "processing" of these foods themselves or set up cooking collectives in neighborhoods so that "food processing" could also be localized.

The arguments in favor of local/regional diets as sustainable keep getting stronger. Not only is farmland loss an ongoing catastrophe, but as Sandra Postel's recent paper in *BioScience* shows, water will be a major constraining factor in food production in the next quarter century<sup>1</sup>. She urges that we need to aggressively utilize zoning and other boundary setting measures to keep in production good croplands that don't require artificial irrigation. That ain't California or Texas, folks, that's us.

If significant numbers of consumers are unwilling to change their diets, then we are talking niche markets and are whistling in the wind. We cannot have a sustainable regional food system if our farmers have to try to survive selling into the global market. Those of us who are rich enough now to afford food, probably won't go hungry within the foreseeable future (Unfortunately the same cannot be said for those who are presently too poor to eat well), but given global trends, even that cannot be guaranteed.

Right now, of course, nothing in the supermarket prompts food buyers to worry. Everything is still

there. So how do we educate consumers? Let's acknowledge that it's damn hard to find a sponsor for the real issues of our time, since a focus on them would divert us from the succession of games--sexual, political, criminal, extreme, basketball, you name it--to which the media wish to direct our attention. If we paid attention to the real issues, who would buy anything from the corporations?

So here are some ideas about what to do to create local demand starting most briefly with the most obvious:

- Encourage farmers markets (real farmers markets), CSA's, community gardens and other ways in which consumers can be brought into contact with local produce. Work to find ways to create direct farmer/consumer links in poor communities as well as affluent ones.
- Encourage farm visits--arrange bus trips for people to see not entertainment farming, but educational farming. Let people find out what is in season and when. Let them learn about the hard work and courage of farmers who are out there every day growing food for us.
- Scare people about the global food system. Read Nicole Fox's book *Spoiled* which tells a vividly dramatic story about the hazards our overblown food system has generated. Then encourage others to read it and spread the word. Fox sees local eating as a likely solution to many of the health hazards of our food system. Eating a raspberry from a country whose water you wouldn't drink ought to seem risky.
- Serve people local food in season: Have people to dinner; arrange harvest dinners in your communities--in the difficult seasons; in summer and fall feed home grown tomatoes to everyone you meet. We must create an underground of people who have the taste of

real food so embedded in their taste buds that they'll reject all substitutes. (Where tomatoes are concerned, perhaps it's even time for someone to bring out the subversive little sticker a friend of mine suggested that I have made up. It would show an orange tomato inside that familiar red circle with a diagonal bar across it. The text would read. "This is a winter-tomato-free community.")

- Help people learn to cook. We may already have lost a generation or two, but food preparation is not like language, best learned when very young. Adults too can play. Recipes and food demonstrations (of simple preps, not ones only chefs can readily do) at farmers markets can help. But programs in schools, which teach children about food from farm to table are especially vital, and will be a major asset to changing the food system in the long run.
- Tear down the dietary barriers. Jennifer Wilkins and I have demonstrated the nutritional adequacy of diets based almost entirely on seasonal northeast foods. We have also begun to look at assumptions that block seasonal eating: one of these is the conviction that the iceberg lettuce and tomato salad is an essential food group; another is the notion, encouraged by the California produce marketers, that Five-a-Day means a banana, an orange, a bunch of grapes and a lettuce and tomato salad, rather than, for example, an Indian stew containing five winter vegetables in a single dish. We are busy trying to educate our profession. And we are making progress. Sustainability was one of the themes of the last annual meeting of the Society for Nutrition Education.
- Create new food stories for kids and adults. I recently wrote a column for *WHY* magazine about the necessity to teach people new food

stories. This grew out of a conversation with Mas Masumoto, a stubborn California farmer who has written movingly<sup>2</sup> about his determination to keep growing a succulent but unmarketable variety of peach called Sun Crest. Mas says he has changed from argument to stories because they are true, and because they are a way of dealing with tensions--between the farmer's need to survive, for example, and his wish to pay fair wages--that cannot always be logically resolved. "We are managing more and more by stories," he remarked, "because there is no one single right story."

Susan Witt, director of the Society named after E. F. Schumacher the British economist and author of *Small is Beautiful*, has commented that "At the Schumacher Society, we say that our quality of life is dependent on the number of stories we know about the items we use in our daily life."

The stories we are now told are drably dishonest. A soybean farmer happy to be growing Olestra? Does Donna Shala really greet visitors with a milk mustache? We can tell better stories about seasonality and weather, about pulling up carrots, watching bees, or eating raw string beans. We can tell cooking stories about success and failure, taste and sensuality. We can tell true stories conveyed in produce that tastes of its history.

- And finally, support POCLAD<sup>3</sup> which is working to remove corporate charters on the grounds that giant enterprises like ADM are not serving the public interest as they were set up to do.

1. Postel, Sandra L.; Water for food production: will there be enough in 2025? *BioScience* 48: 629-637, August, 1998.
2. Masumoto, David Mas.; Epitaph for a Peach. San Francisco: Harper, 1995.
3. Program on Corporations, Law, and Democracy, [www.poclad.org](http://www.poclad.org)

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