



# The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

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## *Creating A Sustainable, Regional Food System – What Is Helping Us, What Is Preventing Us?*

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I would like to share some very basic ideas on what attracts people to a sustainable, regional food system, and what holds them back. There is nothing particularly original in the way I describe these entry points and obstacles, and others have explored them in much greater depth. I am mostly describing what has attracted me, as someone who has become involved in a regional food system only recently through joining Just Food in New York and entering a CSA. And I am trying to be honest about the struggles many people have in their commitment to a regional food system.

The first attractive force is local and regional food itself. Robyn Van En, in an interview with me a few months before her death, described growing food as “the common thread throughout the world, in that everybody eats. It connects everyone across all party lines, all ethnic and religious differences.”(1) Indeed, Robyn saw a regional food system as a major step people can take toward world peace. Thus, food attracts universally. Other forces are needed, however, to attract people to a regional food system.

Concerned with pesticide use in our farming system and chemical residues in our foods, consumers seek fresh, nutritious, safe food for their families. Gardeners follow the primal human attraction to the

soil, to growing their own food, and discover for themselves the cycles and seasons of nature in a particular place and region, with gardening now the most popular hobby in America.(2) Others experience the diversity and freshness of foods at a local market where they can talk to regional farmers. In my case, joining a CSA in New York City was the entry-point. Each Tuesday, between 4 and 7 PM, I left the swirl and stress of Broadway and descended into a church basement to pick up my vegetables, get to know the community which was forming around this food, and talk to our farmer.

This began a journey, still continuing, into our regional food system. I began to learn where my food comes from and I separated myself just a little from the supermarket world. With the help of fellow CSA members and their recipes, I am learning cooking skills. I am beginning to build community with these members, and through frequent working visits, I am experiencing the farm and the situation of farmers in this region.(3)

Just to describe this personal journey of discovery makes me aware of how many obstacles exist to a widespread shift toward a regional food system. Most people in New York take food for granted. There is an abundance of food from all over the world in supermarkets, produce stands, luxury

delicatessens and eateries, with every variety of food available at every season if you can afford it. (Mostly out of sight, there is also a serious hunger and poverty problem, with growing numbers of hungry people turning up at the more than 1,000 soup kitchens and food pantries.) A corporate food system, with huge advertising resources, controls most food choices. People lead busy and fragmented lives, and eat out or order in. Kids are hooked on fast food. Family meals are replaced with TV dinners.

Individuals and families are making the shift to a regional and sustainable food system more in a steady trickle than a mass movement, and the challenge is to find ways to intensify this shift. One way is to provide easy-to-read information on where people can find fresh regional produce, fruits, meats, dairy products and regionally-prepared foods. Lists of farmers' markets, food co-ops, restaurants, grocery stores, community gardens and CSAs are very helpful. Our educational, health care, city and state planning, and other systems can also be reshaped in terms of a regional food system but we are talking here about a long march through the institutions. Using our consumer choices and purchasing power to support regional foods is an everyday option.

A second attractive force is learning to live in a place. As I worked during the last three years at our CSA farm, Threshold Farm in Claverack, Columbia County, New York State with our farmers Hugh Williams and Hanna Bail, and as I visited other farms in the region, I experienced a subtle yet profound change in my relationship to the Hudson Valley. I already loved the Hudson Valley as a place to live, to visit and enjoy recreation in. Through working at Threshold Farm, weeding, harvesting, camping, stargazing, and enjoying its hospitality and the company of fellow CSA members, a new relationship began. After the work, the sun and rain and food and drink, I sometimes felt in a daze when

I got back to New York City. At the same time, the city and the country began to come together in my life. I was learning--consciously-- to live in a place which produced and consumed food.

I feel that this is an important entry-point because it connects a regional and sustainable food system to the ecological revolution which is making such a difference in many people's lives. Fred Kirschenmann describes this revolution in terms of becoming "lovers of the soil" -- learning to "...see its life and beauty, smell its rich aroma, hear its voice."(4) David Abram contrasts "the sensuous world" which is always direct, unmediated, local-- "the particular ground on which we walk, the air we breathe" with the "...apparently unlimited, global character of the technologically mediated world..."(5)

The more regional farms become again centers of education, nutrition, and healing--with agriculture becoming once more "the mother of our culture" in Robyn Van En's words, many who are drawn to the study of ecosystems, plants and trees, native species and habitats, will be drawn also to the task of restoring a sustainable regional food system for all these are closely connected. The obstacle, of course, to this restoration is that the grip of technology, media, virtual reality, and the monocultures of malls and suburban sprawl increasingly removes people from living, consciously and intensely, in a particular place. Thus, while alliances become possible between regional food activists and farmers on the one hand, and environmentalists and conservationists on the other, this convergence does not directly touch most people.

The Spirituality of a Regional Food System  
Implicit in much of what I have written is a spiritual question of reconnecting to a regional and sustainable food system and overcoming the separation and disconnection many of us feel today.

There are great resources in world religions, in local and regional religious institutions, and in non-denominational spiritual traditions, which can help us in this task. The farm economy, in Wendell Berry's words, must be understood within "the Great Economy", connected to an order which, like the Tao or the Kingdom of God, is both visible and invisible, comprehensible and mysterious.(6) Food is central to many religious and spiritual rituals. Sacred meals, and their relationship to everyday meals, could become a powerful source of meaning for a revitalized food system. It seems strange that churches, for example, are deeply involved in the emergency feeding movement, and in some parts of the country in dealing with the farm crisis, but seem scarcely conscious of their own food systems.(7) This indicates the need to build a spirituality which is earth conscious, aware of the sacredness of place, and able to empower people to work for a transformed regional and sustainable food system.

Generations: Making World Agriculture More Sustainable, edited by J. Patrick Madden and Scott G. Chaplowe (A World Sustainable Agriculture Publication, 1997, pp. 38-57 and 101-114.)

(5) David Abram, "The Spell of the Sensuous," in Earth Ethics, Spring/Summer 1996, pp. 36-39.

(6) Wendell Berry, "Two Economies," in Home Economics (North Point Press: San Francisco, 1987, pp. 54-75.)

(7) Peter Mann and Kathy Lawrence, "Rebuilding Our Food System: The Ethical and Spiritual Challenge," forthcoming in Earth Ethics.

#### References:

(1) "Everyone Can Have Crooked Carrots! Robyn Van En on Community Supported Agriculture." Interview with Peter Mann, Why. Magazine issue on Food Security, Winter 1996. Also, "CSA: Fresh Vegetables, Regional Farms, World Peace: A Personal Report on the Northeast CSA Conference," by Peter Mann, Just Food News, February '98, pp. 6-7.

(2) Richard Heinberg, "The Inner Gardener," Museletter, Number 64, April, 1997.

(3) Peter Mann, "Everything I Ever Needed to Know, I Learned at My CSA," Why. Magazine, Winter 1996, p. 32.

(4) Frederick Kirschenmann, "Expanding the Vision of Sustainable Agriculture," and "On Becoming Lovers of the Soil," in For ALL