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in the most inspiring way." —Robert Rodale

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A TASTE OF HOPE



EVERY TIME YOU EAT FROM YOUR GARDEN AND BUY FOOD DIRECTLY FROM A LOCAL FARMER, YOU ARE HELPING TO RESHAPE THE FUTURE OF **AGRICULTURE, THE ECONOMY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT.**

By Dawn Brigid Photograph by Christa Neu

Like many of you, my earliest memories of real food take me back to my grandparents' garden, where I picked tomatoes and peas and popped them right into my mouth. Those moments left me with a lasting taste of how good food can be, and inspire me today to work toward a food system that ensures everybody—now and for years to come—partakes of the bounty. Through my work with Sustainable Table, I meet others working toward the same goal—farmers, ranchers, chefs,

and merchants. The struggle to transform the current industrial food system is apparent to all of us, but we *all* have hope.

Cause for Optimism

The launch, in 1998, of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program established for the first time consistent standards for how food must be produced to bear the "certified organic" label. Every day since, new organic food products have been introduced into supermarkets everywhere. The organic standards were an important first step, but they did not create a sustainable system. Many organic foods travel the same distance from field to market as any other product on grocery-store shelves.

Today, conscientious consumers seek out not only organic but also local sources for as much of their food as possible. The USDA reports that in 2006, 4,385 farmers' markets gave consumers the opportunity to buy locally grown foods, up 50 percent from five years earlier. Farmers' market sales now exceed an astounding \$1 billion. In 2000, around 400 farms offered community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, which allow consumers to "subscribe" to a weekly basket of food directly from a local grower. Today, more than 2,000 such farms operate nationwide.

Even school cafeterias—hardly known for a commitment to fresh, let alone local, food—are changing. Nearly 2,000 school districts around the country have linked up with local farms to serve fresh vegetables and fruit to children. At colleges and universities, students are not only pushing for local food—many are getting involved with campus gardens and composting projects, too. These students will be the driving force for a renewed food system.

On the supply side, the 2008 Farm Bill includes \$2.3 billion for farmers growing specialty crops, such as the eggplants or salad greens typically grown by small, mostly organic farmers. That's a major increase from the \$100 million earmarked for small farmers in the previous farm bill.

PHOTOGRAPHED AT RED EARTH FARM STAND AT THE EMMAUS FARMERS' MARKET, EMMAUS, PA

The Shape of Change

These figures suggest we could be on the verge of a sustainable-food revolution. This is great news to all of us who grow some of what we eat and try to buy food from local producers. But what sort of food system would this revolution create?

A hopeful vision of our future includes thriving diversified farms, raising a wide variety of plants and animals. The animals have generous access to pasture, and crops are grown without synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. Farmers earn fair wages. Currently, as little as 8 cents of a dollar that you spend on food at a supermarket may go to the farmer, according to the USDA. When farmers sell direct at a farmers' market or through a CSA, they get as much as 94 percent of the total price.

In a sustainable food system, you eat what is in season in your region, harvested fresh the same day you buy it. Many people have backyard gardens, and members of your community—consumers and producers—work together so that no one goes hungry. There is still a global marketplace (we will not see this disappear), but we are consciously consuming goods through careful Fair Trade certification.

Fresh and Fair

Some critics have asserted that sustainable food is "elitist"; that it's too expensive and not widely available. As Anna Lappé, food activist and co-author (with her renowned mother, Frances Moore Lappé) of *Hope's Edge: The Next Diet for a Small Planet*, points out, "food is not sustainable if it is not affordable." She believes that the current food system is elitist, with fresh, healthful food often more available in wealthy communities, while in many low-income neighborhoods, processed food from convenience stores is the ready option. The term *food desert* is often used to describe these areas. Fortunately, sustainable-food groups around the country are addressing this problem.

For instance, Just Food, a nonprofit organization based in NYC, encourages food production by offering classes about gardening and helping communities set up gardens and farmers' markets. Often these new farmers' markets are supplied by their own community garden's produce.

Backyard Harvest, another nonprofit, provides opportunities for overloaded gardeners to get fresh food to low-income families. When founder Amy Grey grew more heads of lettuce than she could handle, she established a system for gathering the overflow from gardeners and distributing it to local food banks and meal programs. Backyard Harvest now operates in California, Idaho, and Washington. This responsibility to the community, a cornerstone of the sustainability movement, will ensure access to high-quality food for all.

Change might not be happening fast enough for many of us, but we must recognize the tremendous progress that is being made. We each have a

responsibility to our families, communities, and the future to bring about the change. And with simple steps, such as eating from our gardens and being conscious of where we spend our money, we can send a strong message to the industrial food system. None of us alone has the power to change the food system. But all of us together can. 🍅

Dawn Brighid is the marketing manager at Sustainable Table, a nonprofit organization dedicated to educating consumers about the what, why, where, and how of good food. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

RESOURCES

Sustainable Table, sustainabletable.org. Celebrating food, educating consumers, and building community.

Eat Well Guide, eatwellguide.org. Search for local, sustainable food by zip code.

Local Harvest, localharvest.org. Find farmers' markets and CSAs near you.

With farmers' market sales now exceeding \$1 billion, we may be on the verge of a food revolution.

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John and Aimee Good – Quiet Creek Farm – Kutztown, PA
PHOTO BY MITCHELL MANDEL

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