

## FOOD, CHEAP NO MORE

There's always been so much food we tend to think of America as the breadbasket of the world. But the U.S. is not the world's largest when it comes to growing wheat, the grain from which bread is made -- China is. Behind China and India, the U.S. vies for third place with Russia. Now the price of wheat is rising worldwide. The cost of corn, barley, canola, and soybeans, all staples of the world's food supply are also rising. There are many contributing factors, but the most significant is increased demand in developing countries where people reaching up from poverty eat a more varied and better diet. Per capita wheat consumption in Nigeria has tripled in ten years.

Here in the U.S. the race to replace fossil fuels has led to more acreage being turned over to corn for ethanol production. Adding to the problem is the growing awareness of food transportation costs and food contamination. 143 million pounds of beef, most of it destined for school lunch programs, has become the largest recall in the country's history. Despite the Food and Drug Administration's assurance that we have one of the safest food supplies in the world, the Government Accountability Office reported in March, 2008 that 76 million people in the U.S. contract some form of food-borne illness every year, 325,000 of them requiring hospitalization. Add again concern about genetically engineered foods, or consumption of trace amounts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides now used to grow the food supply, and draw a comparison with the growing numbers of people with severe food allergies, food related diseases such as celiac disease, and obesity. At the very least, attitudes towards food and the food supply are about to undergo a dramatic change. What that change may be remains to be seen.

Not surprisingly, the trend among food lovers in the U.S. is towards authenticity and moderation: smaller servings, vegetarian and organically grown produce and Asian cuisine with its emphasis on freshly prepared ingredients. Fresh greens have become an

American staple. The latest trend in vegetables is the introduction of micro-greens -- sprouts emerging from seeds and grown to the desired stage of maturity. Micro-greens are now being grown commercially on long, plastic trays where growing mats are kept moist and on which the seeds are left to germinate. Plants are harvested once the requisite number of leaves appear. Kits for growing micro-greens at home are now available. With one or two more recalls of contaminated spinach, an emerging industry for home-grown greens may well be on its way.

Growing one's own food supply is synonymous with the green roof movement. A green roof replaces traditional building materials with a lightweight living system of vegetation. The technology originated in Germany where about 12 per cent of roofs are green and several European countries have passed legislation that requires green roofs on a percentage of new buildings. In the U.S., the City of Chicago leads the green roof movement which now offers a Green Roof Grant Program to convert roofs to "Victory Gardens," a term coined in World War II to promote localized, agricultural production. Rooftop gardens in an urban setting can help reduce city surface temperatures which are, on average, five degrees warmer than their surroundings. Rooftop vegetation also absorbs storm water which later evaporates and can prevent the run-off that overwhelms city sewer systems. Future city or state legislation would greatly increase the movement toward rooftop gardens that also combat global warming.

Urban gardens are important in some of the world's poorest countries to stave off hunger. Aid providers are beginning to recognize that lessons in farming have begun to succeed where food handouts have not. For the first time, more people today are living in cities than in rural areas, and by 2020, seventy-five percent of them will come from developing countries. In some African cities, urban cultivation along road meridians and between cinderblock shacks in garbage-strewn slums is effectively combating malnutrition. Families have learned how to raise sweet potatoes, corn, bananas and sugar cane and there are now aid organizations such as UNICEF and the World Food Programme willing to support the effort. The more successful gardeners have gone on to help others or sell their produce in local markets.

What these examples show is the direct benefit that comes from a better understanding of the food supply: how it is grown, harvested and prepared for the table. Getting to know the provenance of food is the driver behind the Buy Local movement. Some areas still have small family farms now often selling organic produce to local restaurants or to the public at local farmers' markets. Farmers selling direct to the public is one of the oldest forms of trade, but to this is being added Community Supported Agriculture, which is really financial support for the farmer's crop before he puts it in the ground. The buyer invests by buying a share of the forthcoming harvest and the farmer delivers it weekly, supplying a variety of meats, eggs or vegetables from late spring to early fall. CSAs numbered about 50 programs in 1990. Today, that number totals over 1,000. Organizations such as Local Harvest offer a web-based directory of CSAs and farmer's markets. This Buy Local movement can only expand.

Some would go so far as to say the lost link between growing the food supply and consumption needs to be restored. Kids in school are taught about the disappearance of the Amazon rainforest but not about how a loaf of bread gets to their local supermarket. American eating habits tend to be so far removed from respect for food that some believe we need to create a whole new food culture. Writer Barbara Kingsolver, in a recent book makes a passionate case for putting the kitchen back at the center of family life, the kind of kitchen where meals are prepared. She suggests cooking is a shared activity to which everyone, even children should contribute. The whole Slow Food movement mimics countries that have a long tradition of wholesome food eaten by people sitting together. The American interpretation of those values can be found in upscale commercial kitchens patronized by professional women on their way home from work. There they can book time to cook a week's worth of family meals in an hour or two from basic ingredients already chopped and prepped prior to their arrival. Others can pick up a freshly prepared meal somewhere between the train station and their homes prepared from fresh ingredients by enterprising caterers. This trend can only grow.

No discussion of food would be complete without at least mentioning the role of convenience foods in American culture, and government price supports for crops grown by U.S. agribusiness that go into fast food manufacture. While showing a link between diet and diseases like autism and Alzheimers may seem to be far-fetched, what is now being discovered about brain chemistry may lead to direct evidence of the adverse effects of certain diets on brain function over time. Such evidence may be enough, as in the case of smoking, to reach a tipping point where these several grass roots movements to improve the food supply could result in government legislation in support of food labeling to show provenance, better food safety, more comprehensive food inspections, and government support for the kind of food supply that over time will drive down healthcare costs.

A hundred years ago, a loaf of bread was brought to the table on a round, wooden board carved with ears of wheat or a legend such as “Our Daily Bread” around the rim. These bread boards can now be found only in antique shops. As food prices rise and people become more discerning about their food supply, these time-honored bread boards could once more find their way to a place of prominence at the dining table.

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