

KENYON LOCAL FOOD CONFERENCE

Putting Local Food on the Table

—Howard Sacks

Where does your food come from? Most Americans don't think much about this question, and so their answer is most often a simple one: "From the supermarket." As a nation, we have taken for granted the availability of abundant, safe, and affordable food. But just turn on the evening news, or scan the newspaper, and you will find a great deal of alarm about childhood obesity, mad cow disease, eco-terrorism, spiraling petroleum prices, and the decline of rural communities. Such issues prompt us to think more deeply about the quality and sustainability of our food supply. No wonder, then, that many people are beginning to look for their food closer to home.

In June, over 300 people from throughout the United States and beyond gathered at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, for a conference entitled "Putting Local Food on the Table: Farms and Food Service in Partnership." Cosponsored by the Community Food Security Coalition, Farm Aid, Kenyon College, the Center for Food and Justice, Food Routes, and the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association, the conference explored efforts to connect food producers and area consumers. In three days of workshops, keynote addresses, films, and field trips, participants explored successful farm-to-cafeteria projects, strategies to promote food and farm education, the food policies of the U.S. government and of large institutional buyers, and the changing character of agriculture and rural life.

The gathering had a special flavor to it from having brought together a very diverse group of people, united in their commitment to enhance community life. Hopi corn farmers from Arizona broke bread with small-scale grass farmers from California; graduate students from urban universities walked the fields in a guided tour by Ohio Amish farmers. Bringing their unique perspectives and experiences, all attendees enriched the discussion of ways to change how we relate to food. It is also rewarding to note that the conference attracted national attention to the issues of food, farming, and rural life.

Farming Magazine invited three individuals to attend the conference and offer their reflections. The essays that follow offer the complementary perspectives of a farmer, consumer, and academician. Taken together, they convey the challenges and opportunities inherent in building a sustainable local food system. More importantly, they suggest the pivotal importance of the food choices we make for the well-being of ourselves and our society.

Where does *your* food come from?

Howard Sacks teaches and directs the Rural Life Center at Kenyon College. He and his wife, Judy, raise Cheviot sheep and hay in a grass-based pasture system.

[A farmer's perspective of the Local Food Conference, by Art Bolduc, will be in the Winter 2005 issue.]

The School Food Revolution Has Begun

—Kristi Bahrenburg Janzen

Imagine the children in your public schools happily eating locally grown collards, sweet potatoes, and fresh watermelon. See the cafeteria selling whole-wheat kid-size mini-bagels from the bakery down the road, organic milk from a local dairy, or grass-fed beef burgers from a



neighborhood farm. Envision kids developing recipes in class and then getting a chance to eat their creations prepared by their own cafeteria.

If you've ever visited a typical school cafeteria, you'll probably think these images are pipe dreams. Indeed, the same white flour buns that were great for making dough balls thirty years ago show up at my daughter's school today. Common choices still include sloppy joes, chicken patties,

hot dogs, and "fruited gelatin." While her school does offer salads, the lettuce is whitish iceberg, served with hard pink tomatoes, not very appetizing even to a grown-up who loves salads. The whole grains and fresh produce that nutritionists tell us are critical for good health are underrepresented at best.

Her school is not alone. Many schools offer far worse selections,

such as vending machines stocked with

candy and sodas high in corn syrup and caffeine. Even in the lower grades, kids are bombarded with junk food devoid of nutrients. Nursery schools and camps directed by otherwise well-educated, well-meaning teachers often miss the nutritional mark by routinely offering unhealthy snacks as rewards, holiday treats, or components of arts-and-crafts projects. Brightly-colored popsicles, lollipops, candy-coated cereals, and "crackers" high in sugar and trans fats are all too common.

Yet a growing number of schools across the country are starting to shift away from the mass-produced foods that are typically high in fat and sugars, and low in nutritional value. Innovative folks—around 300 of whom met recently at the Second National Farm to Cafeteria Conference at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio—are figuring out how to feed kids fresh, locally-produced food. The examples at the top of the story do, in fact, come from real schools. Now, more than 400 school districts in 23 states and approximately 200 colleges and universities have local purchasing programs, according to the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC). By buying local foods, schools are not only giving kids fresher foods with greater nutritional value than the typical frozen, canned, or processed items. They're also educating them about nutrition, culture, and the environment, supporting small-scale local farms, stimulating local businesses, and reestablishing community ties.

Contrary to popular lore, farm-to-cafeteria programs show kids do eat healthy, fresh foods, especially produce, if given the chance. "The argument that kids don't eat it just absolutely does not wash," says Marion Nestle, author of "Food Politics," a keynote speaker at the conference, and professor in the department of nutrition, food studies, and public health at New York University. Bonnie Hallam, senior associate at The Food Trust in Philadelphia, agrees. "We have no doubt about the fact that if we give the kids healthy snacks, they will eat them," she says.

Kids in public schools in the Southeast are eating loads of fresh local collards, green beans, raw sweet potato sticks, Southern peas and beans, muscadine grapes, strawberries, blackberries, and watermelon, thanks to the New North Florida Cooperative (NNFC). Initiated less than a decade ago, this cooperative is now considered the most successful

farm-to-school program in the country, providing food to around half a million kids in four states. "The biggest problem we have with green beans is not to overcook them," says Glyen Holmes, NNFC executive director.

Such innovative changes are coming none-too-soon, because food-related health problems are increasingly plaguing our children. In the United States, childhood

obesity is the most common nutritional disorder—one in three

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are overweight or close to it—and it is on the rise, according to a February 2005 article in the journal *Pediatrics*. Research also shows a third of all kids born in 2000 will develop Type 2 diabetes during their lifetime, thus increasing their risk of heart disease, stroke, kidney disease, and blindness. The healthcare costs associated with these diseases are expected to be staggering.

Bad food choices also hurt children's schoolwork. "Many studies show a direct link between nutritional intake and academic performance," according to "The Learning Connection: The Value of Improving Nutrition and Physical Activity in our Schools," a report by Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK), a group addressing overweight, sedentary, and undernourished youth. "Emerging research also suggests an association between weight problems and lower academic achievement," it says.

While parents obviously influence kids' food preferences, schools can play a critical role in getting them on the right track. "Schools provide all children equal access to information about nutrition and physical activity—regardless of their family's background or knowledge of these issues," argues former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher in AFHK's "Learning Connection" report. "Children spend nearly 2,000 hours each year at school," he says. "This influence cannot be overstated and shouldn't be underutilized."

Hallam's work with "The Kindergarten Initiative" in Philadelphia illustrates how teachers can alter kids' mindsets about food. "Because we're dealing with very young children, we have an opportunity to affect demand," she says. During math class, for example, teachers can ask, "Which apple tastes the best?" then tally preferences for green, yellow, and red apples, and make a bar chart, notes Hallam. "The farm trips that we take our children on are very much to show them how a farm works, not just for fun and games."

On the flip side, schools can influence kids by omitting unhealthy options. The Food Trust's "Healthy Beverage" project, for example, ensured milk, 100% fruit juice, and water are the only beverages offered to kids in the Philadelphia public schools.

Food service providers also have the chance to teach kids about nutrition right where they eat. Believing he should set



FM Photography

relational and problem-solving skills, says Neelam Sharma, projects director at CSU.

To be sure, a variety of hurdles await folks attempting to insert higher-quality food from local farms into schools—especially in large districts like my kids', which includes 136,000 students. Financial challenges complicate integrating local, healthier food into school meals. Many school officials argue they can't balance their budgets without income from junk food sales. At the same time, new food preparation practices or extra choices may require extra labor. Even if farmers are willing and able, navigating the bureaucracy associated with procurement

and distribution is not easy, while cafeteria workers must adjust storage and preparation procedures. Otherwise, attracting the attention of school officials, parents, and legislators may be difficult, especially if they're already grappling with problems such as crumbling facilities, limited resources, low test scores, high drop-out rates, on-campus crime, or school board corruption.

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as an example, Todd Fowler, food service director for schools in Bloomfield, New York, made big changes. "They served mashed potatoes and gravy every day when I started," says Fowler. So he told the kids, "I'm sorry. You aren't getting mashed potatoes and gravy with your spaghetti today! It ended with me!"

Similarly, Tony Geraci, food service director for the Contoocook Valley school district in southwestern New Hampshire, offers ten different fruit and vegetable choices each day. He also created a system in which elementary-age kids get a bonus star on a food chart each time they try new foods. He has "fruit of the month" and "vegetable of the month" clubs. And, to involve the kids, he started a recipe contest and incorporated the winning meals into the menu. Geraci also provides high-school athletes with snacks like wheat-germ fortified smoothies, whole-grain pancakes, sweet potatoes, lots of fruit, good field greens, and sunflower seeds before and during games. Cutting their fast-food intake, the kids perform better, he says. But "it's not just about the eating part," Geraci says. Sitting together at meals strengthened and focused the team, while injuries dropped, he says.

Incorporating locally grown foods into school menus can provide an opportunity to teach kids about farming and gardening, as well as nutrition, indigenous food history, and identity. Parents and policy experts involved in existing programs say it's these cultural and hands-on aspects of food that really draw in the kids. At schools in south-central Los Angeles, for example, Community Services Unlimited is not only engaging youth through intensive gardening and tree plantings. In their "Growing Healthy" and "From the Ground Up" programs, they're also offering youth training in carpentry, maintenance, and upkeep, while teaching kids

Federal legislation aimed at easing the way for more local farms to provide food to schools also appears to be on hold. The so-called "Farm-to-Cafeteria" legislation, which would provide grants of up to \$100,000 over three years for schools to start farm-to-school projects, has passed into law. But it is unlikely Congress will allocate any money to it for the next fiscal year beginning in October.

Yet there is much cause for optimism, not only in schools in affluent neighborhoods but also in struggling inner-city schools. On the financial front, some have gotten started by obtaining grants, donations, and labor assistance from individuals, colleges, or community groups, especially for school gardens. Others have simply found serving healthier, local food makes sound business sense. Dozens of schools around the country are improving the nutritional value of their food while maintaining or increasing revenue, says the AFHK. Iowa City schools, for example, partnered with Swiss Valley Farms to introduce milk in its vending machines, resulting in a 42% sales increase, while soda sales fell 58%, according to the AFHK.

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to 24 other items and four toppings, was "hugely successful." Average participation went up, he says. Even with the extra labor costs involved in serving the salads to the kids—to maintain proper sanitation and to prevent waste—"at the end of the year I did okay," he says.

Kim Seeley, owner of Milky Way Farm in Troy, Pennsylvania, also finds people are willing to pay more for better-quality, healthier, tastier food. Three years ago, Penn College of Technology, for example, decided to offer a grass-based burger at 10 cents more than their conventional burger, and see what would happen, he says. "At the end of the first trial year, the school wanted us to supply all their ground beef," says Seeley. The college just renewed again for next year with an increase in price to match the market, he adds.

As innovators dot the country with local, financially viable school food programs, word is getting out among the public and at the policy level as well. Popular celebrity chefs like Alice Waters in San Francisco and Jamie Oliver in England have played no small role in bringing the issue to the fore. Waters' "Edible Schoolyard" project and Oliver's "Feed Me Better" campaign have focused much-needed media attention on the issue.

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Some state-level politicians are also waking up to school food problems. Vermont State Representative Rosemary McLaughlin, for example, is working on developing state legislation that would offer Vermont's food service directors special training on farm-to-school programs and provide them with coupons to buy local products.

Parents are getting involved too. The so-called Wellness Policies that the federal government is requiring of most schools provide a new opportunity to jump-start changes in school food. Federal law requires every school district that participates in the federally funded school lunch program to implement a Local Wellness Policy by the start of the 2006-2007 school year. It also calls on the public, parents, students and teachers to be involved in the development of the Wellness Policies. The need to develop these policies provides a chance to discuss the importance of healthier, fresher, local food in school lunches, and to incorporate language on locally-grown food into the nutrition part of the policy.

Meanwhile, kids are getting the message, with some even instigating change. Twelve-year-old Makala Forster of Olga, Washington, for example, was fed up with what she says was "the worst food" at her school. So, last year, with some oversight from her father, a policy director at the CFSC, she began to conduct internet research. Then, she spoke to her school board, wrote an article in the local paper, involved the school nurse in her quest, and garnered the assistance of some local graduate students. Now, at the time of this writing, her school board is expected to approve the final version of a farm-to-cafeteria program, including a strong nutrition education component.

Especially inspiring, the school-food issue is bringing together diverse interests at various levels, at a time when many Americans are otherwise sharply divided. Grass-roots groups focusing on the nexus between food, agriculture, health, and community life are gaining influence. These include Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture in western Massachusetts; the Lane Coalition for Active Healthy Youth in Eugene, Oregon; the Michigan Land Use Institute; and the Southwest Marketing Network in the southwestern part of the country. Around the country, people promoting healthier, fresher, tastier school food include medical professionals, land-use activists, small-scale farmers, local business owners, anti-poverty activists, politicians, and typical parents and kids.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that healthy food can provide a bond among diverse people. Eating is, after all, one of our most basic needs. Sitting and sharing healthy food together is not only pleasant, it serves to remind us what we have in common. Local, healthy school food nourishes more than just our children. It also feeds our communities. 

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[More on the Kenyon Local Food Conference on the following pages]