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## Slow Food Nation

by ALICE WATERS

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It turns out that Jean Anthèlme Brillat-Savarin was right in 1825 when he wrote in his magnum opus, *The Physiology of Taste*, that "the destiny of nations depends on the manner in which they are fed." If you think this aphorism exaggerates the importance of food, consider that today almost 4 billion people worldwide depend on the agricultural sector for their livelihood. Food is destiny, all right; every decision we make about food has personal and global repercussions. By now it is generally conceded that the food we eat could actually be making us sick, but we still haven't acknowledged the full consequences--environmental, political, cultural, social and ethical--of our national diet.

These consequences include soil depletion, water and air pollution, the loss of family farms and rural communities, and even global warming. (Inconveniently, Al Gore's otherwise invaluable documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* has disappointingly little to say about how industrial food contributes to climate change.) When we pledge our dietary allegiance to a fast-food nation, there are also grave consequences to the health of our civil society and our national character. When we eat fast-food meals alone in our cars, we swallow the values and assumptions of the corporations that manufacture them. According to these values, eating is no more important than fueling up, and should be done quickly and anonymously. Since food will always be cheap, and resources abundant, it's OK to waste. Feedlot beef, french fries and Coke are actually good for you. It doesn't matter where food comes from, or how fresh it is, because standardized consistency is more important than diversified

quality. Finally, hard work--work that requires concentration, application and honesty, such as cooking for your family--is seen as drudgery, of no commercial value and to be avoided at all costs. There are more important things to do.

It's no wonder our national attention span is so short: We get hammered with the message that everything in our lives should be fast, cheap and easy--especially food. So conditioned are we to believe that food should be almost free that even the rich, who pay a tinier fraction of their incomes for food than has ever been paid before in human history, grumble at the price of an organic peach--a peach grown for flavor and picked, perfectly ripe, by a local farmer who is taking care of the land and paying his workers a fair wage! And yet, as the writer and farmer David Mas Masumoto recently pointed out, pound for pound, peaches that good still cost less than Twinkies. When we claim that eating well is an elitist preoccupation, we create a smokescreen that obscures the fundamental role our food decisions have in shaping the world. The reason that eating well in this country costs more than eating poorly is that we have a set of agricultural policies that subsidize fast food and make fresh, wholesome foods, which receive no government support, seem expensive. Organic foods seem elitist only because industrial food is artificially cheap, with its real costs being charged to the public purse, the public health and the environment.

The contributors to [this forum](#) have been asked to name just one thing that could be done to fix the food system. What they propose are solutions that arise out of what I think of as "slow food values," which run counter to the assumptions of fast-food marketing. To me, these are the values of the family meal, which teaches us, among other things, that the pleasures of the table are a social as well as a private good. At the table we learn moderation, conversation, tolerance, generosity and conviviality; these are civic virtues. The pleasures of the table also beget responsibilities--to one another, to the animals we eat, to the land and to the people who work it. It follows that food that is healthy in every way will cost us more, in time and money, than we pay now. But when we have learned what the real costs of food are, and relearned the real rewards of eating, we will have laid a foundation for not just a healthier food system but a healthier twenty-first-century democracy.