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One Thing to Do About Food: A Forum

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Eric Schlosser

Every year the fast-food chains, soda companies and processed-food manufacturers spend billions marketing their products. You see their ads all the time. They tend to feature a lot of attractive, happy, skinny people having fun. But you rarely see what's most important about the food: where it comes from, how it's made and what it contains. Tyson ads don't show chickens crammed together at the company's factory farms, and Oscar Mayer ads don't reveal what really goes into those wieners. There's a good reason for this. Once you learn how our modern industrial food system has transformed what most Americans eat, you become highly motivated to eat something else.

The National Uniformity for Food Act of 2005, passed by the House and now before the Senate, is a fine example of how food companies and their allies work hard to keep consumers in the dark. Backed by the American Beverage Association, the American Frozen Food Association, the Coca-Cola Company, ConAgra Foods, the National Restaurant Association, the International Food Additives Council, Kraft Foods, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the US Chamber of

Commerce, among many others, the new law would prevent states from having food safety or labeling requirements stricter than those of the federal government. In the name of "uniformity," it would impose rules that are uniformly bad. State laws that keep lead out of children's candy and warn pregnant women about dangerous ingredients would be wiped off the books.

What single thing could change the US food system, practically overnight? Widespread public awareness--of how this system operates and whom it benefits, how it harms consumers, how it mistreats animals and pollutes the land, how it corrupts public officials and intimidates the press, and most of all, how its power ultimately depends on a series of cheerful and ingenious lies. The modern environmental movement began forty-four years ago when *Silent Spring* exposed the deceptions behind the idea of "better living through chemistry." A similar movement is now gaining momentum on behalf of sustainable agriculture and real food. We must not allow the fast-food industry, agribusiness and Congress to deceive us. "We urgently need an end to these false assurances, to the sugar-coating of unpalatable facts," Rachel Carson famously argued. "In the words of Jean Rostand, 'The obligation to endure gives us the right to know.'"

The movie version of Eric Schlosser's Fast Food Nation, directed by Richard Linklater, will be released on November 17.

Marion Nestle

From a public health perspective, obesity is the most serious nutrition problem among children as well as adults in the United States. The roots of this problem can be traced to farm policies and Wall Street. Farm subsidies, tariffs and trade agreements support a food supply that provides 3,900 calories per day per capita, roughly twice the average need, and 700 calories a day higher than in 1980, at the dawn of the obesity epidemic. In this overabundant food economy, companies must compete fiercely for sales, not least because of Wall Street's expectations for quarterly growth. These pressures induce companies to make highly profitable "junk" foods, market them directly to children and advertise such foods as appropriate for consumption at all times, in large amounts, by children of all ages. In this business environment, childhood obesity is just collateral damage.

Adults may be fair game for marketers, but children are not. Children cannot distinguish sales pitches from information unless taught to do so. Food companies spend at least \$10 billion annually enticing children to desire food brands and to pester parents to buy them. The result: American children consume more than one-third of their daily calories from soft drinks, sweets, salty snacks and fast food. Worse, food marketing subverts parental authority by making children believe they are supposed to be eating such foods and they--not their parents--know what is best for them to eat.

Today's marketing methods extend beyond television to include Internet games, product placements, character licensing and word-of-mouth campaigns--stealth methods likely to be invisible to parents. When restrictions have been called for, the food industry has resisted, invoking parental responsibility and First Amendment rights, and proposing self-regulation instead. But because companies cannot be expected to act against corporate self-interest, government regulations are essential. Industry pressures killed attempts to regulate television advertising to children in the late 1970s, but obesity is a more serious problem now.

It is time to try again, this time to stop all forms of marketing foods to kids--both visible and stealth. Countries in Europe and elsewhere are taking such actions, and we could too. Controls on marketing may not be sufficient to prevent childhood obesity, but they would make it easier for parents to help children to eat more healthfully.

Michael Pollan

Every five years or so the President of the United States signs an obscure piece of legislation that determines what happens on a couple of hundred million acres of private land in America, what sort of food Americans eat (and how much it costs) and, as a result, the health of our population. In a nation consecrated to the idea of private property and free enterprise, you would not think any piece of legislation could have such far-reaching effects, especially one about which so few of us--even the most politically aware--know anything. But in fact the American food system is a game played according to a precise set of rules that are written by the federal government with virtually no input from anyone beyond a handful of farm-state legislators. Nothing could do more to reform America's food system--and by doing so improve the condition of America's environment and public health--than if the rest of us were suddenly to weigh in.

The farm bill determines what our kids eat for lunch in school every day. Right now, the school lunch program is designed not around the goal of children's health but to help dispose of surplus agricultural commodities, especially cheap feedlot beef and dairy products, both high in fat.

The farm bill writes the regulatory rules governing the production of meat in this country, determining whether the meat we eat comes from sprawling, brutal, polluting factory farms and the big four meatpackers (which control 80 percent of the market) or from local farms.

Most important, the farm bill determines what crops the government will support--and in turn what

kinds of foods will be plentiful and cheap. Today that means, by and large, corn and soybeans. These two crops are the building blocks of the fast-food nation: A McDonald's meal (and most of the processed food in your supermarket) consists of clever arrangements of corn and soybeans--the corn providing the added sugars, the soy providing the added fat, and both providing the feed for the animals. These crop subsidies (which are designed to encourage overproduction rather than to help farmers by supporting prices) are the reason that the cheapest calories in an American supermarket are precisely the unhealthiest. An American shopping for food on a budget soon discovers that a dollar buys hundreds more calories in the snack food or soda aisle than it does in the produce section. Why? Because the farm bill supports the growing of corn but not the growing of fresh carrots. In the midst of a national epidemic of diabetes and obesity our government is, in effect, subsidizing the production of high-fructose corn syrup.

This absurdity would not persist if more voters realized that the farm bill is not a parochial piece of legislation concerning only the interests of farmers. Today, because so few of us realize we have a dog in this fight, our legislators feel free to leave deliberations over the farm bill to the farm states, very often trading away their votes on agricultural policy for votes on issues that matter more to their constituents. But what could matter more than the health of our children and the health of our land?

Perhaps the problem begins with the fact that this legislation is commonly called "the farm bill"--how many people these days even know a farmer or care about agriculture? Yet we all eat. So perhaps that's where we should start, now that the debate over the 2007 farm bill is about to be joined. This time around let's call it "the food bill" and put our legislators on notice that this is about us and we're paying attention.

Wendell Berry

Alice Waters has asked me if I will propose one thing that could change the way Americans think about food. I will nominate two: hunger and knowledge.

Hunger causes people to think about food, as everybody knows. But in the present world this thinking is shallow. If you wish to solve the problem of hunger, and if you have money, you buy whatever food you like. For many years there has always been an abundance of food to buy and of money to buy it with, and so we have learned to take it for granted. Few of us have considered the possibility that someday we might go with money to buy food and find little or none to buy. And yet most of our food is now produced by industrial agriculture, which has proved to be immensely productive, but at the cost of destroying the means of production. It is enormously destructive of farmland, farm communities and farmers. It wastes soil, water, energy and life. It is highly centralized, genetically

impoverished and dependent on cheap fossil fuels, on long-distance hauling and on consumers' ignorance. Its characteristic byproducts are erosion, pollution and financial despair. This is an agriculture with a short future.

Knowledge, a lot more knowledge in the minds of a lot more people, will be required to secure a long future for agriculture. Knowing how to grow food leads to food. Knowing how to grow food in the best ways leads to a dependable supply of food for a long time. At present our society and economy do not encourage or respect the best ways of food production. This is owing to the ignorance that is endemic to our society and economy. Most of our people, who have become notorious for the bulk of their food consumption, in fact know little about food and nothing about agriculture. Despite this ignorance, in which our politicians and intellectuals participate fully, some urban consumers are venturing into an authentic knowledge of food and food production, and they are demanding better food and, necessarily, better farming. When this demand grows large enough, our use of agricultural lands will change for the better. Under the best conditions, our land and farm population being so depleted, this change cannot come quickly. Whether or not it can come soon enough to avert hunger proportionate to our present ignorance, I do not know.

Troy Duster and Elizabeth Ransom

Strong preferences for the kinds of food we eat are deeply rooted in the unexamined practices of the families, communities and cultural groups in which we grow up. From more than a half-century of social science research, we know that changing people's habitual behavior--from smoking to alcohol consumption, from drugs to junk food--is a mighty task. Individuals rarely listen to health messages and then change their ways.

If we as a nation are to alter our eating habits so that we make a notable dent in the coming health crisis around the pandemic of childhood obesity and Type II diabetes, it will be the result of long-term planning that will include going into the schools to change the way we learn about food. With less than 2 percent of the US population engaged with agriculture, a whole generation of people has lost valuable knowledge that comes from growing, preserving and preparing one's own food. A recent initiative by the City of Berkeley, California, represents a promising national model to fill this void. The city's Unified School District has approved a school lunch program that is far more than just a project to change what students eat at the noon hour. It is a daring attempt to change the institutional environment in which children learn about food at an early age, a comprehensive approach that has them planting and growing the food in a garden, learning biology through an engaged process, with some then cooking the food that they grow. If all goes well, they will learn about the complex relationship between nutrition and physiology so that it is an integrated experience--not a

decontextualized, abstract, rote process.

But this is a major undertaking, and it will need close monitoring and fine-tuning. Rather than assuming that one size fits all in the school, we will need to find out what menu resonates with schools that are embedded within local cultures and climatic conditions--for example, teaching a health-mindful approach to Mexican, Chinese, Italian, Puerto Rican, Caribbean and Midwestern cuisine. Finally, we need to regulate the kinds of food sold in and around the school site--much as we now do with smoking, alcohol and drugs. The transition from agrarian to modern society has created unforeseen health challenges. Adopting an engaged learning approach through agricultural production and consumption will help future generations learn what it means to eat healthy food and live healthy lives.

Winona LaDuke

It's Manoominike Giizis, or the Wild Rice Making Moon, here on the White Earth reservation in northern Minnesota. The sound of a canoe moving through the wild rice beds on the Crow Wing or Rice lakes, the sound of laughter, the smell of wood-parched wild rice and the sound of a traditional drum at the celebration for the wild rice harvest links a traditional Anishinaabeg or Ojibwe people to a thousand years of culture and the ecosystem of a lake in a new millennium. This cultural relationship to food--manoomin, or wild rice--represents an essential part of what we need to do to repair the food system: We need to recover relationship.

Wild rice is the only North American grain, and today the Ojibwe are in a pitched battle to keep it from getting genetically engineered and patented. A similar battle is under way in Hawaii between Native Hawaiians and the University of Hawaii, which recently agreed to tear up patents on taro, a food sacred to Native Hawaiians. At one point "agriculture" was about the culture of food. Losing that culture--in favor of an American cultural monocrop, joined with an agricultural monocrop--puts us in a perilous state, threatening sustainability and our relationship to the natural world.

In the Ojibwe struggle to "keep it wild," we have found ourselves in an international movement of Slow Food and food sovereignty activists and communities who are seeking the same--the recovery or sustaining of relationship as a basic element of our humanity and as a critical strategy. In the Wild Rice Making Moon of the North Country, we will continue our traditions, and we will look across our lakes to the rice farmers of the rest of the world, to the taro farmers of the Pacific and to other communities working to protect their seeds for future generations, and we will know that this is how we insure that those generations will have what they need to be human, to be Anishinaabeg.

Peter Singer

There is one very simple thing that everyone can do to fix the food system. Don't buy factory-farm products.

Once, the animals we raised went out and gathered things we could not or would not eat. Cows ate grass, chickens pecked at worms or seeds. Now the animals are brought together and we grow food for them. We use synthetic fertilizers and oil-powered tractors to grow corn or soybeans. Then we truck it to the animals so they can eat it.

When we feed grains and soybeans to animals, we lose most of their nutritional value. The animals use it to keep their bodies warm and to develop bones and other body parts that we cannot eat. Pig farms use six pounds of grain for every pound of boneless meat we get from them. For cattle in feedlots, the ratio is 13:1. Even for chickens, the least inefficient factory-farmed meat, the ratio is 3:1.

Most Americans think the best thing they could do to cut their personal contributions to global warming is to swap their family car for a fuel-efficient hybrid like the Toyota Prius. Gidon Eshel and Pamela Martin of the University of Chicago have calculated that typical meat-eating Americans would reduce their emissions even more if they switched to a vegan diet. Factory farming is not sustainable. It is also the biggest system of cruelty to animals ever devised. In the United States alone, every year nearly 10 billion animals live out their entire lives confined indoors. Hens are jammed into wire cages, five or six of them in a space that would be too small for even one hen to be able to spread her wings. Twenty thousand chickens are raised in a single shed, completely covering its floor. Pregnant sows are kept in crates too narrow for them to turn around, and too small for them to walk a few steps. Veal calves are similarly confined, and deliberately kept anemic.

This is not an ethically defensible system of food production. But in the United States--unlike in Europe--the political process seems powerless to constrain it. The best way to fight back is to stop buying its products. Going vegetarian is a good option, and going vegan, better still. But if you continue to eat animal products, at least boycott factory farms.

Vandana Shiva

Humanity has eaten more than 80,000 plant species through its evolution. More than 3,000 have been used consistently. However, we now rely on just eight crops to provide 75 percent of the world's food. With genetic engineering, production has narrowed to three crops: corn, soya, canola.

Monocultures are destroying biodiversity, our health and the quality and diversity of food.

In 1998 India's indigenous edible oils made from mustard, coconut, sesame, linseed and groundnut processed in artisanal cold-press mills were banned, using "food safety" as an excuse. The restrictions on import of soya oil were simultaneously removed. Ten million farmers' livelihoods were threatened. One million oil mills in villages were closed. And millions of tons of artificially cheap GMO soya oil continue to be dumped on India. Women from the slums of Delhi came out in a movement to reject soya and bring back mustard oil. "Sarson bachao, soyabean bhagao" (save the mustard, drive away the soyabean) was the women's call from the streets of Delhi. We did succeed in bringing back mustard through our "sarson satyagraha" (non-cooperation with the ban on mustard oil).

I was recently in the Amazon, where the same companies that dumped soya on India--Cargill and ADM--are destroying the Amazon to grow soya. Millions of acres of the Amazon rainforest--the lung, liver and heart of the global climate system--are being burned to grow soya for export. Cargill has built an illegal port at Santarém in Brazil and is driving the expansion of soya in the Amazon rainforest. Armed gangs take over the forest and use slaves to cultivate soya. When people like Sister Dorothy Stang oppose the destruction of the forests and the violence against people, they are assassinated.

People in Brazil and India are being threatened to promote a monoculture that benefits agribusiness. A billion people are without food because industrial monocultures robbed them of their livelihoods in agriculture and their food entitlements. Another 1.7 billion are suffering from obesity and food-related diseases. Monocultures lead to malnutrition--for those who are underfed as well as those who are overfed. In depending on monocultures, the food system is being made increasingly dependent on fossil fuels--for synthetic fertilizers, for running giant machinery and for long-distance transport, which adds "food miles."

Moving beyond monocultures has become an imperative for repairing the food system. Biodiverse small farms have higher productivity and generate higher incomes for farmers. And biodiverse diets provide more nutrition and better taste. Bringing back biodiversity to our farms goes hand in hand with bringing back small farmers on the land. Corporate control thrives on monocultures. Citizens' food freedom depends on biodiversity.

Carlo Petrini

By now it's practically a given that most people who produce food know nothing about gastronomy.

In the past sixty years even the word "food" has been slowly emptied of its cultural meaning--of all the know-how and wisdom that should be naturally bound up with it. Industry and the production ethos have robbed people of the knowledge of food and reduced it to pure merchandise--a good to be consumed like any other.

So now gastronomy is seen as little more than folklore: diverting, yes (and nothing wrong with that), but vacuous, detached from our everyday lives. In fact, gastronomy is much more complex and profound. Gastronomy is a science, the science of "all that relates to man as a feeding animal," as Brillat-Savarin wrote in *The Physiology of Taste* (1825). It is a different kind of science, an interdisciplinary one that wants nothing to do with the ghettoization of knowledge or balkanization by specialty.

With its historical, anthropological, agricultural, economic, social and philosophical aspects, the science of gastronomy asks us to open our minds to the complexity of food systems, to think again about our own approach to our daily bread. It asks us to give food back its central role in our lives and the political agendas of those who govern. This also means returning to a respect for the earth, the source of all sustenance.

And it means a return to a sense of community that seems almost lost. We are always members of at least three communities at once: local, national and global. As global citizens, yes, we are destroying the planet--its equilibrium, its ecosystems and its biodiversity. As local citizens, though, we can make our own choices--choices that influence everyone's future. By producing, distributing, choosing and eating food of real quality we can save the world.

Gastronomic science tells us that the quality of food results from three fundamental and inseparable elements that I call the good, the clean and the just. This means paying attention to the taste and smell of food, because pleasure and happiness in food are a universal right (the good); making it sustainably, so that it does not consume more resources than it produces (the clean); and making it so that it creates no inequities and respects every person involved in its production (the just). By bringing food back to the center of our lives we commit ourselves to the future of the planet--and to our own happiness.

Eliot Coleman

Farmers may have strayed down a wrong path, but it isn't just agriculture's mistake. An addiction to treating the symptoms of problems rather than correcting their causes is an unwise choice made by our society as a whole. But the attitude that makes organic agriculture work could be the impetus for

re-forming society.

The best organic farmers follow a pattern at odds with the pattern of chemical agriculture. As they become more proficient at working with the biology of the natural world, they purchase fewer and fewer inputs. Many purchase almost none at all. They use the natural fertility-improving resources of the farm by employing the benefits of deep-rooting legumes, green manures, crop and livestock rotations and so forth to correct the cause of soil fertility problems rather than attempting to treat the symptoms (poor yields, low quality) by purchasing chemical fertilizers. The same pattern applies to pest problems. By improving soil fertility, avoiding mineral imbalance, providing for adequate water drainage and air flow, growing suitable varieties and avoiding plant stress, organic farmers correct the causes of pest problems, thus preventing them, rather than treating the symptoms--insects and diseases--with toxic pesticides. Their aim is to cultivate ease and order rather than battle futilely against disease and disorder.

Like chemical agriculture, our economy is based on selling symptom treatments rather than trying to correct causes. For example, the medical profession peddles pills, potions and operations rather than stressing alternatives to destructive Twinkie nutrition, overstressed lifestyles and toxic pollution. Governments spend billions on armaments to prepare for wars or wage them (symptom treatment) instead of committing themselves to diplomacy and cooperation (cause correction). Although successful organic farmers demonstrate daily why correcting causes makes so much more sense than treating symptoms, this is not widely appreciated. If its implications were fully understood, organic farming would certainly be suppressed. Its success exposes the artificiality of our symptom-focused economy and shows why society's most intractable problems never seem to get solved.

Jim Hightower

In the very short span of about fifty years, we've allowed our politicians to do something remarkably stupid: turn America's food-policy decisions over to corporate lobbyists, lawyers and economists. These are people who could not run a watermelon stand if we gave them the melons and had the Highway Patrol flag down the customers for them--yet, they have taken charge of the decisions that direct everything from how and where food is grown to what our children eat in school.

As a result, America's food system (and much of the world's) has been industrialized, conglomeratized and globalized. This is food we're talking about, not widgets! Food, by its very nature, is meant to be agrarian, small-scale and local.

But the Powers That Be have turned the production of our edibles away from the high art of

cooperating with nature into a high-cost system of always trying to overwhelm nature. They actually torture food--applying massive doses of pesticides, sex hormones, antibiotics, genetically manipulated organisms, artificial flavorings and color, chemical preservatives, ripening gas, irradiation...and so awfully much more. The attitude of agribusiness is that if brute force isn't working, you're probably just not using enough of it.

More fundamentally, these short-cut con artists have perverted the very concept of food. Rather than being both a process and product that nurtures us (in body and spirit) and nurtures our communities, food is approached by agribusiness as just another commodity that has no higher purpose than to fatten corporate profits.

There's our challenge. It's not a particular policy or agency that must be changed but the most basic attitude of policy-makers. And the only way we're going to get that done is for you and me to become the policy-makers, taking charge of every aspect of our food system--from farm to fork.

The good news is that this "good food" movement is already well under way and gaining strength every day. It receives little media coverage, but consumers in practically every city, town and neighborhood across America are reconnecting with local farmers and artisans to de-industrialize, de-conglomeratize, de-globalize--de-Wal-Martize--their food systems.

Of course, the Powers That Be sneer at these efforts, saying they can't succeed. But, as a friend of mine who is one of the successful pioneers in this burgeoning movement puts it: "Those who say it can't be done should not interrupt those who are doing it."

Look around wherever you are and you'll find local farmers, consumers, chefs, marketers, gardeners, environmentalists, workers, churches, co-ops, community organizers and just plain folks who are doing it. These are the Powers That Ought to Be--and I think they will be. Join them!