

A Modest Proposal for Sustainable Eating

by Katrina Heron

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SAN FRANCISCO - No one knows less about food than us. We, the American people, having inherited an extraordinary and unprecedented wealth of native and immigrant culinary traditions and knowledge - a kind of Alexandrian library of edible wisdom - no longer know how to feed ourselves.

We love fast food, whether it's from a drive-through or a grocery aisle, and it's really bad for us. It's bad for our health, our culture, the environment. In short, it's unsustainable.

But our once-diverse food lore and skills have been scattered to the four winds. Our taste buds have been jammed on salt, sugar and every conceivable molecular permutation of corn. We literally eat petroleum-derived substances, and ask for more.

This is how we got here: Over the past couple of decades, processed food became more affordable, thanks to economies of scale, logistics and transportation developments, cheap oil and government crop subsidies, especially for corn, which quickly became the staple of our new national diet. This, in turn, further centralized farm operations, threatening the markets for small farmers and the preservation of a diverse food supply.



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Separation Anxiety: Getting Over Fast Food, Embracing
Slow Food. (Craig Lee / The Chronicle)

Essentially, the food economy was turned upside down, so that now, a cheeseburger and fries at a fast-food chain can cost less than a pound of sustainably and locally grown tomatoes.

How do we kick our fast-food addiction and re-establish a relationship with what's good for us and good for the planet?

Most of us are stuck somewhere in the grief cycle. Find your spot:

Denial: "There's nothing wrong with the food system."

Anger: "I don't have time for this."

Depression: "I can't do anything about it."

Bargaining: "What am I supposed to do?"

Acceptance: "We have to fix this."

More and more, people seem to be grouping at the last stage. That's good news - but where do we go from here?

It's actually easier than it looks to start making a difference now. This was the impetus for Slow Food Nation, an expo and conference that we're modestly billing as the largest celebration of food in history. We home in on celebration, because the pleasures of real food are the ultimate seduction, and because there's a little word in protective custody in California - fun.

Staged over Labor Day weekend at Fort Mason and on Civic Center Plaza in San Francisco - where the Slow Food Nation Victory Garden is already flourishing - the event is part detox program and part renewal agenda. Citizens, who are the heart of the event, will come away with a new awareness about food, ready to follow a 10-point checklist, shown on the preceding page, that makes the user-friendly South Beach diet look complicated.

The 10-point checklist goes on, of course, and people can and should make priorities according to their personal means and interests.

For example, a precious item on my list is: Teach children what you know. In 2001, I started working with the restaurateur and food activist Alice Waters on her campaign to feed American kids healthy and delicious meals and reinvent the public-school lunch program.

The Edible Schoolyard is a hands-on gardening and cooking program integrated into the public-school curriculum, teaching kids the principles of ecology, the origins of food and the cycles of all living things. It also shows that we care to nurture our children and respect their future.

Once you've reconnected with the basics of real food, the larger and much more complicated problems surrounding our industrial food system begin to come into focus. I think it's here that most people throw up their hands - and relapse in the grief cycle, looping back into citizen paralysis.

The large-scale problems are indeed daunting: Type 2 diabetes in the wrong age bracket, diet-induced obesity, death lurking in a bag of spinach, feedlot and slaughterhouse cruelty, famine, food scarcity and cost, the loss of biodiversity, the environmental and human-health impact of industrial farming's fatal chemical dependence. But if we learn about the benefits - cultural and biological - of a diverse food supply, if we empower ourselves, through our own actions, to consider real food a right and not a privilege, then we can demand action from our political leaders.

At Slow Food Nation, we'll unveil a Healthy Food and Agriculture Declaration, orchestrated by Roots of Change as a response to the farm bill, which will be posted on August 28 at www.fooddeclaration.org for public comment. We chose Labor Day weekend in homage to the harvest season and because farmers, who are the soul of the event, told us this was one of the few times of the year they could spare. But if citizens are the heart and farmers the soul of Slow Food Nation, political leaders are the target.

We also chose Labor Day weekend because, on the eve of the presidential election, we intend to send a strong message that food policy reform is a critical priority for the next administration, paramount in the creation of a just and sustainable food system.

The most important goal of this event is to restore the personal, visceral connection each of us has to real food, the hunger for it, the taste and the joy of it. But what really matters is what happens when we all go home. Our shared goals need to be taken up in the legislatures, the halls of Congress and the Oval Office. We know it, and they know it. It's time for a New Meal.

Here are some of the upcoming highlights of The Chronicle's coverage of the gathering Aug. 29-Sept.1. Note- books and blogs are also planned in The Chronicle and on SFGate.com for the week of Aug. 24:

Preview: The first ever U.S. event on the viability of sustainability, the benefits of eco-friendly farming, and the flavors of artisan foods.

The event: The Food section's "The Fast Track Guide to Slow Food," featuring what to see, what's for free and who the players are.

Food summit: Some of the brightest food minds gather for wide-ranging dialog on nutrition, poverty, the Farm Bill, even the salmon crisis.

Programs: Fifty thousand descend on S.F. to sample the Slow Food farmers' market, specialty food pavilions, workshops and talks by renowned authors, nutritionists and activists.

Ten points to better health

1. Know what you're eating. Find out where it comes from and what's in it. Think about what's in season now - what's ripe, not just fresh. A lot of these foods will turn out to be local.

2. Get cooking. And try making things from scratch. You'll save money and rediscover skills you forgot you had.

3. Plant something. It could be an herb pot on your kitchen counter or, if you have space at home, a small kitchen garden, or a communal plot in your neighborhood that you tend with family and friends. (The Victory Garden on Civic Center Plaza is a landscape of ideas, staffed by experts who can guide your hands to the soil.)

4. Pack a bag lunch.

5. Drink tap water. It's healthier for you, and it's free.

6. Learn about and celebrate the food traditions your family still possesses. These are like seeds, long stored and just waiting to be planted.

7. Invite someone to share a meal. Strengthen the bonds of friendship and community by cooking and eating together.

8. Learn about endangered foods and how we can bring them back to our tables.

9. Conserve, compost and recycle.

10. Vote with your fork.

Slow Food mission

"Slow Food" considers itself both a movement and a message - an alternative to fast food, industrial agriculture and the standardization pressures that it believes threaten local food variety and traditions as well as the health of humans and the planet. Slow Food Nation plans to encourage individuals to get involved in the food debate and to call for new initiatives from national leaders. It is urging the government to:

-- Identify and support food practices that are good, clean and fair - that is, that produce healthful and delicious food, humanely and without harm to the environment, in a manner that is socially just to both producers and consumers.

-- Ensure access to affordable, nutritious food for all - especially to residents of many low-income areas, commonly known as "food deserts," where fresh food is unavailable.

-- Provide and maintain resources and economic incentives that enable citizens, community groups and organizations to secure food directly from the source, thus strengthening the network of small producers.

-- Protect the rights of all farmworkers.

- Support edible education, providing children with the tools they need to choose healthy food and to understand the impact of food choices on their health, the health of their communities and the planet.
- Implement measures to restore and protect biological diversity.
- Support the development of renewable sources of energy for the agricultural sector.

Related Information

Here is a list of top resources for finding out more about food issues - and finding food.

The Eat Well Guide is a free online directory of thousands of family farms, restaurants, markets and other outlets for fresh, locally grown food throughout the United States and Canada (eatwellguide.org).

LocalHarvest maintains a public nationwide directory of small farms, farmers' markets and other local food sources (localharvest.org).

Community Alliance With Family Farmers is building a movement of rural and urban people to foster family-scale agriculture that cares for the land, sustains local economies and promotes social justice (caff.org). Go directly to alliance's local food guide at buylocalca.org.

National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service provides directory information and technical assistance for farmers, ranchers, extension agents, educators and others involved in sustainable agriculture in the United States (attra.ncat.org).

Sustainable Agriculture Coalition is a national alliance of grassroots family farm, rural and conservation organizations that advocate for federal programs supporting economic and environmental sustainability of agriculture, natural resources, and rural communities (msawg.org).

The California Coalition for Food and Farming is on a mission to build and mobilize a diverse coalition that will improve California's food system. (calfoodandfarming.org).

Slow Food USA, of which Slow Food Nation is a subsidiary, seeks to catalyze a broad cultural shift away from the industrial food system and toward the cultural, social and economic benefits of a sustainable food system (slowfoodusa.org).