

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO EAT WELL?

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People ask what I've been up to since L'Etoile. I've been busy "finding the good and *braising* it," working on two books...and the fullest answer is that I have been appreciating what *everyone else* has been up to. It's quite inspiring. I am very eager to hear what this amazing panel has to say.

There are so many advancements in the world of food. We've come so far—from the back-to-the-land movement of the '60s to the sustainable arts of today. We know so much more about the culture of food, its ancestry and provenance, and the diversity of its cuisines. We've deepened our understanding of the connection between the health of the land and the health of the people. These are the compelling issues of our time, and in the last decades they have come into focus, entwined, and grown exponentially. So it is very apropos that we have gathered to acknowledge 25 years of collaboration and contributions made by the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems.

I was able to participate in CIAS programs as a member of the community beyond campus that they served. I regret that I was never able to attend UW as a full time student. Running L'Etoile was all consuming, though I did manage to audit classes in conflict resolution and Chinese calligraphy! Nonetheless, I always felt that the CIAS had my back as a small-business person, and the backs of the farmers I worked with. And the entire mix provided a fantastic education. I got to taste and work with thousands of ingredients that came through our back kitchen door, and I got to know hundreds of farmers who supplied us. I was inspired and supported by a great staff at the restaurant. Together we taught ourselves how to turn all this bounty and goodwill into meals for people in our community—people from the UW and the hospitals, householders, business people, friends and lovers. "Food citizens" I like to call us: people who show up every day to vote and rely and invest—with each forkful—in the vibrancy of our regional food systems.

In anticipation of sharing what eating well means to me, I might disappoint anyone expecting specifics tonight—such as my recipes for a perfect dinner, or how many miles I venture afield for local ingredients, or what amazing things can be grown in this climate as we speak—though Lord knows I live for these topics. Today, I come to you as a food citizen with an even broader perspective. While at one time I was supplied by hundreds of farmers as the chef-proprietor of L'Etoile, these days I have to wash my own pots and pans, shop at a farmers market a tenth the size of Madison's, and buy much of my food from small ethnic grocers in a diverse neighborhood of Boston called Roslindale. The essence of what I do remains the same, whether I run a restaurant or a household. I seek out and celebrate the locality of where I am. And I am learning that food is never just local.

So, what does it mean to truly eat well? To approach this, I need to start globally and work my way through to local, through distances best measured by my heart. I like to navigate the network of connections and stories that underlay all food, and bring my understanding and respect, in addition to my appetite, to *everything* on my plate. This is what eating well means for me.

To elaborate, a couple of stories will help. I was recently asked for advice by the owners of a very popular restaurant near Harvard in Cambridge. The restaurant is themed to the era of the Beats and the Hippies. The back bar is decorated in colorful swirls and the bathrooms have Kerouac poems painted on the walls. The owners wanted to have identifiably “hippy food” on the menu. “No problem!” I said, being an old hippy myself and suspecting they were a bit too young to have really been, as Jimmy Hendrix would put it, *experienced*. But wait. How *does* one go about making a distinctly hippy menu?

Back in the day: Goat milk yogurt, whole grains, kale, and home brew were totemic hippy sustenance. And, in order to eat, we had to *milk* those goats and *crack* those grains and *organize* those co-ops. To polite society, anything smacking of a vegetarian aesthetic was considered communist. Fermented foods were downright insurrection. Fast forward to now. We’ve got yogurt in every flavor and texture, and Newman’s Own Organics makes Oreos. Chipotle is setting a new bar for animal welfare, and you can get lost in Wal-Mart’s organic section. Cafeterias dish up whole grain salads and chefs butcher bespoke pigs. Locavores compete to be ever more local, and vegans co-exist with conscientious carnivores. Glossy food multimedia follows all of this breathlessly, and of course pretty much *everything* is fermented.

Coming out of this reverie, I told my young restaurant friends, “There is no such thing as a hippy menu anymore.” Every restaurant in Boston and the entire country, not to mention every well-stocked grocery store, is bursting at the seams with ‘hippy’ ingredients. There is no unique message to brand. Our grains and greens have been assimilated into mass culture—and I’d like to emphasize, to everyone’s nutritional benefit.

The young people in tonight’s audience will have no direct memory of the late ‘60s, when Southwest Wisconsin didn’t look like it looks now. Where earlier farming communities had shuttered supermarkets and hardware stores, there now sits the bustling headquarters of Organic Valley surrounded by vibrant organic farms. Back then, some conventional farms were hanging on, planting fencerow to fencerow in a futile attempt to compete with mass-scale industrial agriculture. But their most precious export was soil, taken by the restless Kickapoo and its tributaries, sent down the Mississippi and on its way to clog the Gulf of Mexico. By the ‘70s, it became painfully clear that industrial farming methods didn’t fit the rolling hills of Wisconsin, or most other places for that matter. And the jobs just kept disappearing. People bought their sodas, lottery tickets and Wonder Bread from the quick stop out on the highway. Ironically, this farming community was turning into a nutrition desert.

During this time, the “back-to-the-landers” were also just hanging on. Our food and farming methods had no supporting infrastructure; but we had made a vital beachhead. We had consciously connected our eating to the ecology of our soils and our communities. This was a profoundly sustainable action that would bring countless gifts to the culture. This ecological sensibility continued to grow mostly under the radar, but it was internally recognizable to its growing community of practitioners who found unorthodox ways to support each other. At times, it felt like we were creating a new economy. And perhaps we are.

Back to the '80s. America got downsized and NAFTA upended the smallholder farms in Mexico. This had the unintended consequence of unleashing a torrent of South American cocaine on newly flush traders. A great diaspora of uprooted Central American famers began. Though they came from economic desperation in their own countries, they came to the United States like a Peace Corps with their outstanding work ethics, capable farming skills, and deep family values. Meanwhile, money in the U.S. got frothy and restaurant repertoires exploded with ethnic ingredients and techniques from all around the world. Supermarkets began to stock soy sauce *and* tempeh. "Sustainability" found its place as a dictionary word. By the '90's, the sustainable vocabulary began to really take hold with terms like "beyond organic," "regional reliance," "local infrastructures," and "foodsheds." *Simultaneously*, the most egregious problems of industrial agriculture were reaching a tipping point and terms such as "obesity epidemic," "collapsing species," and "food insecurity" began to occupy our national conversation.

Now, we are in a new century. These diametrically opposed cultural waves are growing exponentially and building toward a peak. So looking forward and looking back, what have we gained? And what have we lost? How do we hold course through so much exponential change?

I have found two recently published books very helpful to explain the insights I need in order to grapple with these questions. The first deals with narrative, the second deals with exponential growth. The book that explores narrative, or story, is by Heather Paxson and is titled *The Life of Cheese*. One of its chapters is called "The Economies of Sentiment." In these pages, Paxson puts a name to the human and social and ecological components of what we call the real price of food. The term "Economies of Sentiment" starts to capture the value of unique and often unpaid efforts to build infrastructure and grow markets for wholesome ingredients and skilled craftsmanship.

The coining of this term was a Helen Keller moment for me. Funny how there are things we already know, and yet are still just discovering. Much of the practice of sustainable agriculture, even when expertly done, is still uncharted and intuitive. We need story to convey what the sciences of soil and society are still learning to describe. As with the words "regional reliance" and "foodshed" and "sustainability" before it, "economies of sentiment" places a value on complex events that make food more intact, such as the gaining of wisdom and skills, the contribution of the farm to its town and countryside, the courage of the effort, the succession of generations, and the generosity in the making.

For me, all food has a narrative; all food comes with its story. Not just Local. Not just Organic, Equal Trade, Handcrafted, and In Season. No matter how much I decry industrial agriculture I need to understand that story too; I need to respect the workers who cultivate it, grieve for the land that it injures, challenge the politics that perpetuate it, and fight against what devalues it. I must know this story in order to learn how it can be healed and led into a more sustainable system. Lest you think I am naïve, remember: The back-to-the-land movement took root in economically devastated communities. There was a lot of limp kale on co-op shelves and empty supermarket calories before robust local food hubs and hundreds of apple varieties started coming back around. We can do this.

Here is a tiny example of what I am talking about. Decades ago, in the '80's, I abruptly took feedlot beef off my menu. In those years, I could only obtain a grass-fed steer once a month or so. For reasons we all know, pastured meat was infinitely preferable and I could not bear to revert back. But enough customers who insisted on having a steak every time stopped patronizing L'Etoile, undermining my already fragile ability to stay in business to work towards a better day. So I put the conventional beef back on and alternated it with the grass steer whenever it was available. My compromise also came as a great relief to the farmer who supplied me. I was the only restaurant buyer who could give him a return sufficient to clear the considerable barriers that he and his fellow graziers encountered around processing. There were many problems to be solved in order to bring sustainable beef to the table, and it seemed like all of them required some form of self-funding. We gradually brought more grass-fed beef onto the menu and found other restaurants to take parts we couldn't quickly use. Our willingness to challenge profit as the bottom line allowed us to stay in business long enough to find a different way to abundance. Fast forward. Now restaurants, CSAs and co-ops are able to offer all kinds of pastured proteins, and Madison's own L'Etoile and Graze do so every night.

The other book that helped me chart the significant developments of these times is called *The Second Machine Age*. The first machine age, of course, is the industrial revolution of the last two centuries. The "second machine age" refers to the computing machines of the digital age. The book's authors, Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, take a scholarly look at exponential growth due to all things digital. (Spoiler alert!) In the future, according to their calculations, most jobs could likely disappear. From what I have read it appears they made an omission in their job outlook, and didn't put sustainable agriculture into their algorithm.

I have no a priori resistance to technology. I love my computers! My quarrel is that we are cherry picking the benefits of computing technology and not thinking hard enough to balance the digital abundance we have unleashed. Meaningful employment is being culled too quickly to make room for computerized robots and new problems are springing to fill the void, not unlike what happened with industrial agriculture. Too many technological advances of the second machine age *ignore* our need to work. The union of head, heart, and hands is uniquely human, and we need all three pulling together to become good planetary citizens.

My back goes up when people say we need to industrialize agriculture more than ever because there is no other way to feed the world. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Sustainable communities are busy demonstrating that there is another way. But we must urgently petition governments and institutions to understand and support ecological studies and sustainable systems. Our agriculture is our culture and skillful, meaningful work depends on it.

It is only a cold comfort, then, that Wal-Mart recently announced it is committing to bringing back hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs to the U.S. and that McDonald's is pushing for larger poultry cages. In the transition, we shouldn't let the perfect become the enemy of the good. The sustainable approach can eventually win out. Meanwhile, let's start the reverse engineering of fast food by eating it slowly.

We can change the broken food system by changing the culture. Let's start by demonstrating respect for skilled manual labor in our schools. We can be teaching our children the art of solving problems with sustainable logic by using the patient arts of farming and cooking as curriculum. Give every school, K-12, a garden and a wood lot. Bring the children there and teach them an appreciation for literature, math, and science through lessons keyed off the abundant tasks of gardening and observations of the natural world.

To eat well, we need to celebrate our capacity for connection and look beyond the familiar to connect all the dots. We have a vast new ocean of food choices and food consequences to navigate. Understanding that all food comes with a narrative and learning to read its story will help us find our way, like the Polynesian navigators of old who read the waves to navigate their canoes across thousands of miles of apparently undifferentiated ocean. They sharpened their senses and skills of observation so that that they were able to translate vibrations in the slap of waves on their boat to read the echo of great continental seams under the ocean swells, distant weather, and currents. And it was enough, in tandem with the moon and the sun and the stars, to find the way to their island homes in the vast Pacific.

We do something similar when we attend to the inherent dignity of food and learn to read it, with our senses and our memory, to form a landscape of meaning. Call it intuition, call it second nature, but we are *capable* of distinguishing between the noise and the news. If we listen carefully, the food will tell us where it came from and the partnerships it will create along the way with soil and climate and culture and us. Then we take what we learn and we guide that seed with integrity and dignity into the best partnership we can form, with all of life.

Humans need food to be love, as well as sustenance. They need meaning as well as physical augmentation. How to truly eat well? Listen, share, and be grateful.