
IN FOOD WE TRUST

BY LARRY YEE

Not again!

One could easily imagine hearing this collective cry across the land as the recent news broke about the largest meat recall in U.S. history. This time it was 143 million pounds of beef (approximately 300,000 cattle) that was processed at the Hallmark/Westland plant in Chino, due to concerns over the health of some of the animals that were being slaughtered.

Hallmark/Westland is a large meat supplier to both retail and food service (mostly fast-food restaurants), but also to school lunch programs. In fact, it was reported that 50 million pounds went to schools, though not all of it had been consumed.

Emergency food recalls have become regular occurrences. Whether it's mad cow disease, *E. coli* in spinach or some other food-borne illness, they are inevitable. A food system that is heavily concentrated and centralized is a huge target for food safety problems. It's inherent in the way a scaled-up, industrialized food system works, especially if maximizing profits is the main driver. Then, other important considerations take a back seat. When school children eat hamburgers, neither they nor the food service staff have the vaguest notion of where the beef came from or how it was raised, and processed.

Do you trust the food you eat?

Simple question? Yes. Simple answer? Well....

For those who have full and reliable information about the food you eat—where it was grown, how it was grown, who grew it and how it was processed—or for those who have taken a leap of faith and have complete confidence in our food system, the answer is fairly simple.

But for the vast majority of the eating public, clearly there is growing confusion and distrust about our food.

A Food Revolution

Farmers' markets, organic and sustainable products, the Food Network, celebrity chefs, farm-to-school programs, Whole Foods markets, food magazines, heirloom varieties, locally grown produce, wild-caught fish, roof-top gardens, etc.—would anyone disagree that there is a food revolution in full bloom? The sleeping giant is beginning to awaken, as eaters/consumers everywhere are becoming more aware of the link between good food and their own health.

One of the best examples of this growing food revolution is this very publication, *Edible Ojai*, and the national group it spawned, Edible Communities. Riding the wave, Edible Communities has become a nationwide publishing phenomenon. Now in 50 communities across the U.S. plus two in

Canada, Edible Communities has a collective readership of over 15 million. What's truly remarkable is this has all happened in the last 3–4 years.

This is a revolution about quality and sustainability, and to a large degree it's being driven by concern over health and wellness, not only of us as individuals, but also of our communities and our planet.

There is an increasing realization that the globalized, industrialized, centralized, overly glamorized and of course heavily subsidized food system is just not sustainable. It was built and developed on cheap fossil fuels, of which much is used to produce high fructose corn syrup to sweeten our diets and increase our hunger for the overabundance of calories being produced on huge factory-like farms. As oil peaks and prices exceed \$100 per barrel, the industrial food system will begin to quake, dramatizing the need to alter course.

Fast, convenient, cheap, the mantra of the industrial food system, is giving way to good, clean, fair. Any food, any time, anywhere is giving way to fresh, local, sustainable. In short, we want good food we can trust from people we trust.

The Curse of Overabundance

How did we lose the *culture* from *agriculture* and replace it with *agribusiness*? How did we lose our way, endanger our health and foul our nest? How did we get away from simple pleasures and the cultures of food, family and community?

It's been a complex societal evolution, but perhaps a lot has to do with the acquired mindset that maximizing our wealth would lead to maximizing our happiness. And in this endless pursuit, we drugged ourselves with material things and have been eating ourselves into oblivion.

In our rush to industrialize and modernize, our embrace of technology solved the problems of food scarcity. Down through time, humankind has been faced with the opposite twins of feast and famine. Food, or the lack thereof, often drove societies and civilizations to the brink and in some cases over. As the science of economics developed along with this drive to industrialize, Malthus' theory, which forewarned that population growth would eventually outstrip our ability to produce enough food, formed the basis of many food and farm policies. This led us down the path to our obsession with quantity to the exclusion of quality, volume rather than values and business instead of culture. Efficiency and scale became the dominant strategies.

The result was abundance—in fact, overabundance—in food or, more accurately, food calories. In our current system,

most farmers don't produce food, but instead produce raw materials that get processed into food products, many now laden with empty calories. What many people don't realize is that over the course of the last century, there has been only one short, four-year period (1910–1914) when demand for food was higher than supply. Otherwise, for the last 100 years or so, we have overproduced. Today, in the U.S., our food system (excluding exports but including imports) makes available to us 3,800 calories/person/day. Doctors and nutritionists tell us that for optimum health we only need somewhere between 1,800 and 2,200 calories per day. So where are the extra 2,000 or so calories going? Dare we look in the mirror? Is it any wonder that obesity and diabetes and heart disease are such overwhelming problems?

You Are What You Eat

Years ago, a good friend of mine, who is a vegetarian, used to hand out turkey-shaped pins at Thanksgiving that read, "You are what you eat." It would always get a chuckle, but now I wonder if he'll have the last laugh.

And when you consider that food is much more than the sum of its individual nutrient chemicals, the simple statement rings evermore true.

In his book, *In Defense of Food*, author Michael Pollan writes, "If a food is more than the sum of its nutrients and a diet is more than the sum of its foods, it follows that a food culture is more than the sum of its menus—it embraces as well the set of manners, eating habits, and unspoken rules that together govern a people's relationship to food and eating. How a culture eats may have just as much of a bearing on health as what a culture eats."

We are what and how we eat. It's as simple and complex as that.

In the film documentary, *King Corn*, the two young filmmakers take a month-long road trip, eating typical road food along the way, in other words, food that could be conveniently found along our highways and byways. At the end of the trip they go to a laboratory on the East Coast and have their hair analyzed. What we eat eventually shows up in our hair, not like little kids in high chairs but chemically a part of our very own makeup. Sitting in the lab director's office following their tests, the director explaining the results, said, "Well, it's conclusive—you're **corn!**"

The 90 million or so acres of corn that's planted (up from 76 million a year ago) in this country ends up in almost every processed food you can think of, and in most animal feed. High fructose corn syrup, corn meal and many other derivatives from the amazing corn plant are found in most processed foods. And now the biofuel ethanol is competing for corn, driving historically low prices to all time highs.

Where Did All The Farms Go?

Following the Great Depression in the 1930s, the number of farms peaked in this country. Approximately 7

million mostly medium-sized family farms were spread from coast to coast. Today, there are less than 2 million farms and over 80 percent of them are small farms from which, perhaps, only 20 percent of the family income is derived. The other one fifth of the farms in this country are mid-scale or larger in size.

The large farms supply the ocean of commodities for our mainstream food system. These large operations are the mega-agribusiness corporate farms built many times on the consolidation and merging of smaller farms. Farmers, rather producers, of these large-scale operations are often contractors to the large food corporations who control most, if not all, of their decisions like feudal landlords of old. As an example of the consolidation in the food industry, 83 percent of the meat in this country is produced by four very large companies.

Interestingly, the type of food that is now in greatest demand—superior quality, sustainably and locally/regionally produced—food with a story—food you trust because you have some knowledge of who grew it and how it was grown—food that is simply delicious and healthy—full of flavor and freshness—you know, good, clean and affordable food—is best produced by small to medium-sized farms. Trouble is, most of the farms that we've lost since the 1930s are these mid-sized family farms. Furthermore, there is no efficient, effective infrastructure to get food from their fields to our tables.

For the past six years, I have been working with others to establish a new national organization, the Association of Family Farms (AFF), dedicated to saving family farms (focusing on mid-sized operations) by creating innovative marketing systems for high-quality, differentiated food products—food with special qualities that you can trust. AFF, working with the Ag-of-the-Middle organization, has developed "The New Food Declaration for the 21st Century," which is an attempt to articulate fundamental principles of food quality and sustainability to be adopted by all the players along the food supply chain—producers, processors, distributors, food service and retail.

If we, the eaters, would, in our communities, encourage and, in the marketplace, demand that the actors in our food system pledge to work towards the tenets of this New Food Declaration, we will begin to restore trust in the food we eat.

In food we trust will re-connect us to each other, to the land, to our communities and to the simple values and pleasures that give life meaning.

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A New Food Declaration for the 21st Century

“We acknowledge, with our signatures below, that access to wholesome, locally and regionally grown seasonally appropriate food, produced from healthy soil, is essential to environmental health; that good nutrition is necessary for human wellness, especially fetal, infant and child development, setting the stage for lifelong health and achievement; and that a healthy, local and regional, seasonally appropriate food supply bolsters a thriving, sustainable, local economy.

Therefore, we pledge to support, through our individual and collective efforts, a new food ethic that insures access to, and development of, local and regional food systems in which food is produced in a manner that:

- *Enhances biological diversity in harmony with biological cycles, including native plant and animal species and wild habitat,*
- *Builds and nourishes healthy soil,*
- *Promotes an ecological conscience that recognizes the need for proper stewardship of all plants and animals,*
- *Nurtures human and environmental health, revitalizes regional, community food systems, based on independent family farming,*
- *Builds families and communities together around the growing preparation and eating of wholesome food.*

We pledge this now with some urgency, knowing that access to wholesome local and regional, seasonally appropriate food is critical to our collective future.