

FULLY INTEGRATED FOOD SYSTEMS: REGAINING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN FARMERS AND CONSUMERS

By Rebecca Spector

The mechanization and industrialization of agriculture has played a significant role in the changing of the agricultural "culture" in America. Industrialization turned "agri-culture" into "agri-business," as farmers were encouraged to grow crops in large-scale monocultures, primarily for export. The growth of such agribusinesses has had many consequences, among them the decline of small-scale diversified farming, an increase in the use of chemical inputs, a decrease in the need for human labor on the farm, and the separation between food consumers and food producers.

THE CREATION OF CULTURAL DISTANCE

With the growth of large-scale, monocultured farming and a continuing focus on mass production, marketing, and processing, America's agricultural distribution system became a corporatized giant by the mid-20th century. This centralized distribution system resulted in a decrease in farm income, with a greater percentage of the food dollar going to middlemen for processing, packaging, storage, and distribution.

Decreased farm income is not the only negative result of our centralized distribution and export system. It has also created a huge separation between food consumers and food producers. On average our food is shipped 1,300 miles from production to processing to our plates. Although this system appears to offer us more choices in the supermarket, the increased distance between producer and consumer has resulted in a breakdown of environmental accountability and responsibility, and a lost connection between farmers and the public at large.

For one thing, this distance serves to block feedback between producer and consumer, so consumers have little knowledge about the production practices used in creating their food or the impact of these practices on their health or the environment. Costs associated with agricultural production are hidden. When purchasing strawberries in the winter, for example, few consumers are aware of the highly toxic pesticides needed to grow that crop in a tropical climate or the impact of those pesticides on wildlife, the environment, or farmworker health. Distance between consumer and producer enables the shopper to make such a purchase without any knowledge of the impacts of his or her decision.

Through all of this, we have created a profound cultural divide between farmers and the rest of society. No longer do we see small, diversified farms scattered across the American landscape. No longer do the majority of farmers maintain farming as their only occupation. As we have lost farmers to this "efficiency" in agriculture, we have also lost farmland—nearly a million acres a year just in this past decade. And we have lost our connection to our food source and to the land.

BIOREGIONALISM: REGAINING CONNECTIONS

The good news is that we are finally seeing a shift in attitudes about agriculture and food. Consumers now more than ever have an interest in purchasing foods directly from farmers and are demanding that these foods be grown in an environmentally responsible manner. At the same time, farmers are also changing their attitudes, and their production practices, as they recognize the importance of connecting with their buyers. This shift in attitudes and production practices is also having a more significant effect—it is closing the gap between farmers and consumers and encouraging more bioregionalism.

By connecting directly with the farms and farmers growing our food, we can gradually make a shift from being a passive consumer to becoming a more active one—one who takes the time to know the farmer growing our food and to learn about the ways in which that food is grown.

Bioregionalism is gradually becoming an essential part of today's agricultural economy. Many farmers seek more stable means of production, and of sales, and recognize the importance of diversification in both their production and marketing practices. At the same time, consumers are seeking a more direct connection to their food. As a result, we are beginning to see an increase in direct relationships between farmers and consumers. These relationships are created through various outlets—farmers selling their produce directly through community supported agriculture programs, farmers' markets, and roadside stands; farms holding more public events, including farm tours, volunteer days, and "u-pick" opportunities; and even farmers selling directly to small stores and restaurants that feature the farm in marketing materials or on menus to further the connection between farmer and consumer.

This change in the agricultural economy begins to reflect a "fully integrated food system"—one that connects the farm to the local community and allows the public to regain a long-lost connection with the people who are growing food. By connecting consumers directly with farmers, fully integrated food systems provide the public with the freshest produce available locally and farmers with a higher percentage of the food dollar than they would receive selling their produce through a distributor.

The following are just a few examples of how farmers and consumers are working together to develop more fully integrated food systems.

ALTERNATIVE MARKETING STRATEGIES: CONNECTING FARMERS AND CONSUMERS

Community supported agriculture farms (CSA) are a form of mutual cooperation between farmers and consumers who come together to produce healthy food in a sustainable way. In a typical CSA, community members purchase a share in a local farm's operation at the start of each growing season and in return receive a fresh, nutritious box of produce directly from their grower on a weekly basis. In this arrangement, members agree to pay the costs of production regardless of the actual harvest, so many of the financial burdens typically borne by the farmers are shared by farmer and consumer. CSAs range from small gardens with 5 to 20 members to large farms serving nearly 1,000 families. The number of CSAs in the United States was estimated at 50 in 1990 and has since grown to over 1,000.

Because CSA involves a direct and personal relationship with the farmer—and often the land on which the food is grown—it sets itself apart from the conventional agriculture system in which the farmer-consumer relationship is indirect and anonymous. The CSA farm model offers a positive alternative to the conventional food system, where consumers purchase days- or weeks-old produce from the supermarket shelf. It also provides farmers with a viable economic alternative—allowing them a greater percentage of the food dollar (close to or at 100 percent) and a stable revenue stream.

Farmers' markets are designated public places where a group of farmers sell their produce one or twice a week. Like CSAs, the number of farmers' markets has soared in the past few years, up from 1,755 in 1994 to more than 2,800 in 2000, according to the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service. Farmers' markets allow buyers to pick and choose exactly what seasonal produce they would like to purchase and whom they would like to purchase it from. Also like CSAs, farmers' markets provide farmers with close to 100 percent of the food dollar (minus a fee or small percentage paid to the market for maintenance) and a direct connection between farmer and consumer. In the words of the peach grower and writer David Mas Masumoto, farmers' markets "are one of the saviors of the family farm. All those barriers created by the conventional marketing system are torn down. The consumer sees it isn't just a commodity—it's a peach, or a carrot, or a cabbage."

Farmers' markets and CSAs provide an opportunity for all members of the community to reconnect with their food source and to have access to the freshest and most nutritious produce available. Many farmers' markets are located in the heart of cities and are easily accessible by public transit. Additionally, produce at the farmers' market is often cheaper than at the supermarket, especially if purchasing organic.

Other direct marketing alternatives provide even more ways of connecting farmers with consumers. Many farmers today sell their produce directly to local restaurants and local food stores, instead of going through a distributor. Many of these restaurants and stores are so pleased with the quality and freshness of the produce that they acknowledge the farms on their menus or use point-of-purchase materials as an opportunity to share the farmer's story with the consumer. Rainbow Grocery in San Francisco, for example, distinguishes products that are "farmer direct" using a stylish hangtag attached to the price display. Restaurant Nora in Washington, D.C., often lists the name of the farm where each local food item was grown.

CHANGING LIFE-STYLE

Fully integrated food systems are a way of putting the culture back in agriculture and giving consumers and farmers a new attitude toward food and toward life. By changing how we think about food and farming, we are changing our life-style from one of alienation to one of relationship. Through the new connections of fully integrated food systems, we are healing our farm communities, the earth, and ourselves. ♡

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