

THE ETHICS OF EATING: WHY ENVIRONMENTALISM STARTS AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE

By Alice Waters

The choices we make when we buy food are serious choices. More and more people understand this. They no longer see themselves as passive food “consumers.” Rather, they embrace their roles as “creators,” knowing that the foods they decide to grow or purchase will create a different future for themselves, their families, generations to come, and the natural world. As an obvious example, we all know that when people choose organic foods and avoid mass-produced and fast foods, they are voting for a sustainable future and against a network of supply and demand that destroys human health, local communities, traditional ways of life, and the environment.

But there is another ethical choice we make about food which is equally important. It’s not just what food we are purchasing, but also how we decide to eat our food. Just as there is an ethic to growing or obtaining food, there is also an ethic to eating. Perhaps the first step in eating ethically is to eat together, with each other and our children. When you eat together, and eat a meal you cooked yourselves, you are involved with the process in a different way. You shelled the peas, you peeled the potatoes, and you want everyone to enjoy every last bite. These are the kind of meals we should be eating with our children.

I think we can all agree on the importance of this, no matter where we fall on the political spectrum. Certainly it is the least we can do for our children. We have raised a generation of kids, far too many of whom have never participated in the growing of food or the preparation of meals and who have never sat down together at a table with other generations and learned the meaning of mutual responsibility, and the caring and love that families can only express, I believe, by sharing nourishment.

Once, not so long ago, food preparation and food service were both the solemn duty and the reward of family living. Once, families were food-producing and food-processing units. And humanistic values were instilled, more than anyplace else, at the dinner table. Families eating together passed on values such as courtesy, kindness, generosity, thrift, respect, and reverence for the goodness of nature—pretty much the whole Boy Scout package of virtues. But notice that William Bennett and his ilk don’t talk much about food, and that is because of a paradox at the heart of political conservatism: on one hand it values old-fashioned family virtues, but on the other it supports a rapacious economic system that, more than any other factor, is responsible for the disappearance of these values.

One compelling reason for the decline of the family meal has been the onward march of commercial “convenience” foods at the very same time the new economic order was devaluing the role of women in the home. Modern technology makes it easy for food to be consumed on the run, in small units. Fast foods, microwaves, dehydrated foods put a premium on speed. Speed is the enemy of the ethical preparation and eating of food. It dishonors food and ourselves. We have to make time for our food. People who have adopted the fast food pattern of eating have forgotten what well-prepared, delicious food is.

One group fighting against the onslaught of fast food is Slow Food, an international food and wine movement, active in 45 countries worldwide, with 65,000 members and about 560 local branches. The aim of the Slow Food movement is to rediscover the richness and aromas of local cuisines and to fight the standardization of fast food. Slow Food is a response to the fast pace of modern culture, which has changed our lives and threatens the environment and the landscape in the name of productivity. In our ongoing efforts to change how people relate to food, the Slow Food movement represents principles well worth fighting for.

But perhaps our greatest challenge is working to get our kids to join us at the dinner table. So we have to teach them why they should. And one of the biggest reasons is that you learn at the table. Above all, you learn to use your senses. And you either use your senses, or you lose 'em—they get dulled, you settle for the routine and the mediocre, in food and everything else. There is so much information that comes from sensual stimulation—information that comes to you immediately, even faster than over the Internet. I am convinced that teaching children to eat food together is the best way to teach them to open up their senses and use them—after all, eating is something everybody does every day. If children learn to use their senses, it will improve their ability to communicate—not just about food, but about everything else. And they will grow up to be wiser, happier people.

Kids have to be taught that fresh, nourishing food is their birthright—that wholesome, honest food should be an entitlement for all Americans, not just for the rich. To try and get this message across, I have joined some neighbors, parents, and teachers at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School in Berkeley, California, to plan a food curriculum. This project is called the Edible Schoolyard, and these are some of the events we have created: We have initiated a ritual seeding with 150 adults and children who broadcast seeds for the cover crop with drums timing the march across the field. We have made sherbets for 500 kids who had to decide which flavor they like best: lemon, tangerine, blood orange, or lime. There was a raffle and the winner won dessert of the fruit he liked best. We have built an adobe oven near the garden site for bread and pizza baking. And every October, we gather the community together on the full moon to celebrate harvest.

The kids are extremely receptive. Now at King School, they are getting boxes of produce from a community supported agriculture farm—each class receives a box every week. One of the teachers was telling us at a garden design meeting for the schoolyard about how the kids in her class washed and trimmed and cut up the ingredients and made a big salad. "Now wait," she said. "Before we start eating, let's stop and think about the person who tilled the ground, and planted the seeds, and harvested the vegetables. And then we chopped up the vegetables and put them in this bowl and made this big salad . . ."—and the kids stood up at their desks and gave the salad a huge standing ovation! ♡

Alice Waters is an internationally renowned chef, author, and proprietor of Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley, California. This article is excerpted from Fatal Harvest: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture.