

Food for Thought

Renewing the culinary culture should be a conservative cause.

By John Schwenkler

ALICE WATERS might not seem like a conservative. A veteran of Berkeley's Free Speech Movement, who once cooked a \$25,000-a-seat fundraising dinner for Bill Clinton, she eagerly compares her campaign for "edible schoolyards"—where children work with instructors to grow, prepare, and eat fresh produce—to John F. Kennedy's attempt to improve physical fitness through mandatory exercise. Her dream of organic, locally and sustainably produced food in every school cafeteria, class credit for lunch hour, and required gardening time and cooking classes is as utopian as they come. The name she has given her gastronomic movement, the "Delicious Revolution," strikes the ear as one part fuzzy-headed Marxism, the other Brooksonian bobo-speak. This woman is not, as they say, one of us.

But a closer look tells a different story. In a 1997 talk, Waters quoted from an essay by Francine du Plessix Grey about the film "Kids," which portrays the sex-, drug-, and violence-crazed lives of a circle of New York teenagers. Du Plessix Grey writes of being haunted by the adolescents' "feral" and "boorishly gulped" fast-food diet: "we may," she suggests, "be witnessing the first generation in history that has not been required to participate in that primal rite of socialization, the family meal." Such an activity "is not only the core curriculum in the school of civilizing discourse; it is also a set of protocols that curb our natural savagery and our animal greed, and cultivate a capacity for sharing and thoughtfulness." These teenagers "are

deprived of the main course of civilized life—the practice of sitting down at the dinner table and observing the attendant conventions."

Today's children, Waters goes on to say, "are bombarded with a pop culture which teaches redemption through buying things." But schoolyard gardens, like the one she helped create at the middle school a few blocks from my home in Berkeley, "turn pop culture upside-down: they teach redemption through a deep appreciation for the real, the authentic, and the lasting—for the things that money can't buy: the very things that matter most of all if we are going to lead sane, healthy, and sustainable lives. Kids who learn environmental and nutritional lessons through school gardening—and school cooking and eating—learn ethics." Good cooking, she writes in the introduction to her 2007 cookbook, *The Art of Simple Food*, "can reconnect our families and communities with the most basic human values, provide the deepest delight for all our senses, and assure our well-being for a lifetime."

The proposal, put slightly differently, is that our attitudes toward food—which nourishes and sustains us, which binds us most fundamentally to place, family, market, and community—provide a measure of our respect for what Russell Kirk called the "Permanent Things." We are not just what we eat but how we eat. The cultivation and consumption of our meals are activities as distinctively human as walking, talking, loving, and praying. Learning to regard

the meal not merely as something that fills our bellies and helps us grow, but as the consummate exercise of beings carnal and earthbound yet upwardly and outwardly drawn, is a crucial step in the restoration of culture. The suggestion that the inculcation of such values might be an essential part of an adequate education ought to resonate beyond the confines of the doctrinaire Left.

Adopting an alternative view of food does not require rejecting the possibility of a free and prosperous market economy. Indeed, the rise of the New American Diet—meals eaten in a rush and very often alone, made from processed and prepackaged ingredients—was not solely or even primarily the product of Adam Smith's invisible hand. Historian Harvey Levenstein has argued that the spate of government regulations in the wake of early 20th-century food-safety scares played a crucial role in the rise of industrialized agriculture and centralized food processors. Early nutritionists and home economists, many distinctly of the quack variety, found a key ally in their attempts to reform American cuisine in Herbert Hoover's Food Administration. The goal of reducing consumption of scarce foods and eating in accordance with "scientific" principles was tied to the cause of Allied victory in the First World War.

Official dietary guidelines inevitably became the product of collaboration between government agencies and representatives of the industries that stand to benefit. The substitution of state-

sponsored nutritionist technocracy for the collective wisdom of taste, instinct, common sense, and tradition is a perfect example of the triumph of Tocqueville's feared "immense tutelary power" ("absolute, detailed, regular, far-seeing, and mild"). The same goes for the extraordinary industrialization and global "flattening" of our culinary economy, which Waters's focus on community gardening, seasonal eating, and local markets is meant to combat.

Heavily concentrated industries demand expansive and centralized government. The converse is also true: bigger businesses are easier to regulate than smaller ones, and economies of scale are good for economic growth. "Get big or get out," Dwight Eisenhower's secretary of agriculture told American farmers—a directive updated to "bigger" by Earl Butz, the infamous Nixon agriculture secretary who instructed farmers to abandon crop rotation and plant "from fencerow to fencerow."

Price controls and multibillion-dollar farm subsidies prop up corporate agribusiness and discourage smaller producers from trying to find alternative market niches. Real local autonomy—setting regulatory standards that do not conform to national or international ones, restriction or taxation of imports or exports, and preservation of place-specific forms of agriculture and animal husbandry—is undermined because it makes for economic inefficiency. The natural capacities of location, season, and culture to link people together and shape the ways they farm and eat are countered by artificial measures designed to maximize yield.

But it is exactly these social and cultural dimensions of our culinary economy—the centralization of processing and production into an ever shrinking number of multinational corporations, the incredible distances over which

food travels before it reaches our tables (an average of 1,500 miles in the United States), the loss of idiosyncratic foods and food cultures, and so on—that should raise the greatest concerns for traditional conservatives. "Eating is an agricultural act," writes Wendell Berry. But Slow Food International founder Carlo Petrini argues that it is also a political one—a deed no less significant than the ways we cast our votes. Hence even the smallest acts of resistance to the hegemony of the present system, where corporate representatives and industry-funded scientists at public universities collaborate with government officials on regulatory policies and nutritional guidelines, are crucial steps in recovering local culture and reconstituting our "little platoons." This will nurture the ability to govern—or resist being governed.

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The seeds of change are already being sown. Many American cities are transforming blighted urban districts with neighborhood farms that raise food not just for consumption by those who grow it but for sale in local markets. In 2007, a group of teenagers at a community farm in Brooklyn brought in \$25,000, and a nonprofit organization that runs a one-acre plot in Milwaukee grossed over \$220,000 in local sales.

The website LocalHarvest.org lists over 3,600 farmers markets in the U.S., and the number of Community Supported Agriculture programs, in which supporters pay a set fee in exchange for regular shares of the produce from a local farm, grew from 50 nationwide to over 1,500 between 1990 and 2005. Such

efforts give growers and buyers the opportunity to relate to one another—one study showed that shoppers at farmers markets have 10 times as many conversations as those at supermarkets. These local ventures also provide families with fresh produce and allow farmers to diversify their crops and receive a far greater rate of return than when they deal with corporate middlemen.

Many of our best food writers are in full-throated rebellion against the corporate-industrial-governmental nutrition establishment. Michael Pollan's *In Defense of Food* deconstructs the pretensions of "food science" in often hilarious fashion and distills all you need to know about eating into three directives: *Eat food* (as opposed to things with unfamiliar or unpronounceable ingredients, packaged "food products" that make government-sanctioned health

claims, and pretty much anything from the middle aisles of the grocery store); *Not too much* (go for quality over quantity, and eat at a table, with others); *Mostly plants* (in unprocessed form when possible). Nina Planck's *Real Food* takes the traditionalist counterculture to the extreme by denouncing veganism and extolling the health benefits of everything from cheese, lard, butter, and raw milk to eggs, beef, chocolate, and wine. And Waters's wonderful new cookbook offers a step-by-step course in keeping a kitchen and preparing a range of dishes that, though simple, require time and effort to put together and are a joy to eat.

There are, of course, elements of leftism and elitism here. Pollan, for exam-

ple, has a puzzling line in which he condemns as “shameful” the fact that not all Americans “can afford to eat high-quality food.” It is sad, to be sure, and we should strive to remedy it, but life’s inevitabilities do not warrant our shame. And while Bill McKibben, in his brilliant communitarian manifesto, *Deep Economy*, takes care to insist that his program is not one that can be driven by top-down governance, Petrini very often rails against free markets, suggesting at one point in his *Slow Food Nation* that contemporary China’s “political homogeneity” and exploitation of labor and the environment are “the embodiment of perfect capitalism.” (The Chinese economic system, he says, is only “nominally communist.” One wonders what he made of the agricultural policies of the Soviet Union.) But that doesn’t alter the value of the Slow Food vision of a world of “gastronomes,” attentive to taste and cognizant of the sources of their food, and of thriving local markets driven by “economies of place.”

Proponents of a new way of eating are on shakier ground when they claim that a widespread turn toward small-scale and deindustrialized agriculture would not affect crop yields. McKibben proudly cites a study in which sustainable farming methods were found to lead, on average, to a near doubling of food production per hectare. He does not mention the many cases in which results have been less impressive. A much discussed study published in the journal *Science* in 2002 found that switching to organic farming reduced yields by 20 percent, though the possibility of lessening our reliance on petroleum may be worth the investment of some extra land. Reincorporating into the human food chain some of the millions of acres where corn and sorghum are now grown for ethanol production would also make a great difference.

But no reasonable person wants to remake the world or do away with modern agricultural technologies all together. The best solutions will come through honest, case-by-case engagement with the subtle demands of specific situations. As the UC Berkeley agroecologist Miguel Altieri puts it, a sound approach to agriculture “does not seek to formulate solutions that will be valid for everyone but encourages people to choose the technologies best suited to the requirements of each particular situation, without imposing them.” (That this could just as well be the summary of the ideal domestic or foreign policy ought to argue in its favor.) Respect for tradition and social and ecological responsibility can work together with technological innovation and capitalist resourcefulness to respect the ridges and valleys of regionalism in an increasingly flattened world.

Efforts to realize this vision ought to figure centrally in the projects of social and cultural renewal that traditional conservatives see as essential precedents to meaningful political reform. Neighborhood gardens, cooking classes in schools and church basements, and the promotion of local and co-operative markets are the kinds of projects that will build community; revitalize regional economies; encourage stable, healthy families; and instill the kinds of civic attitudes that make centralized government appear burdensome. These are not merely aesthetic or gustatory concerns, nor are they essentially private or familial ones: eating is part of our politics, too.

But things will have to take root in our kitchens first. It is here that Waters’s cookbook, which begins with the basics and consistently encourages the reader to modify recipes and vary ingredients with the seasons, provides as good an introduction as one could hope for. Each Friday, my wife and I walk with our 1-year-old son to a house down the

street where we pick up a box of just picked produce and pastured eggs from a nearby farm. Nigel Walker, who runs the farm and also has a stand at San Francisco’s Ferry Plaza Farmers Market, was involved in a nasty public spat with Carlo Petrini after an essay in *Slow Food Nation* called the prices at the Ferry Plaza Market “astronomical” and “boutique-y” and its clientele “extremely exclusive.” But at \$24.50, my family’s haul this week—lettuce, mixed leafy greens, arugula, potatoes, beets or summer squash, lemon verbena, cherries, peaches, carrots, strawberries, and chard—will cost us about \$8.50 less than similar (but non-organic, less fresh, and markedly lower-quality) produce from the local Safeway.

As with many CSA’s, our farm box comes with a newsletter that suggests recipes for some of its more exotic contents. But of late we’ve been making a point to turn to *The Art of Simple Food* whenever possible. So carrot soup, summer squash gratin with homegrown herbs, marinated beet salad, and wilted chard with onions are likely candidates for the days ahead. Obviously this is especially easy to pull off in the hometown of Alice Waters and Michael Pollan, the birthplace of Chez Panisse and California cuisine. It is, however, increasingly within the reach of anyone who wants to try.

Renewing the culinary culture, and restoring the kinds of values that are necessary for the proper functioning of a healthy republic, is not the sort of thing that can be left to activists, environmentalists, and government bureaucrats. This is a conservative cause if ever there was one, and it is going to have to begin at home. The revolution is coming. And it’s sure to be delicious. ■

John Schwenkler is a doctoral candidate in philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley.

Table Talk

Michael Pollan chats with Rod Dreher about how food culture can transcend the Left-Right divide.

Rod Dreher is the author of Crunchy Cons—the book and the Beliefnet blog—and an editorialist for the Dallas Morning News. On TAC’s behalf, he recently interviewed Michael Pollan, the best-selling author of The Ominivore’s Dilemma and In Defense of Food. Pollan’s work, like Dreher’s, is about more than just eating well—it’s also about the health of communities. Dreher’s “Birkenstocked Burkeans”—localist libertarians like organic farmer Joel Salatin and young conservatives of many stripes—have increasingly taken an interest in Pollan’s writing. So we brought together the original Crunchy Conservative and the defender of real food. Their conversation follows:

DREHER: What kind of conservatives do you find are interested in your work about food culture?

POLLAN: There is this Joel Salatin, evangelical Christian, libertarian right-wing, but there are not a whole lot of them. Frankly, it baffles me that this growing food movement doesn’t have more support on the Right. It’s very consistent with libertarianism, and it is very consistent with family values. Nevertheless, it is often portrayed in the media as a white-wine-sipping, arugula-chopping, liberal politic. Maybe you can answer for me why that is.

DREHER: It’s a point that I’ve struggled to figure out. I wrote about Salatin, too. He argues, as you do, that the state’s collusion with agribusiness has been disastrous...

POLLAN: For the last 40 years at least, our agricultural policy has been driven by an alliance of agribusiness interests and people in Congress. Farm policy has been organized around driving prices down, which is certainly not in the interest of farmers. It’s in the interest of people buying their products—Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, McDonald’s, and Coca-Cola. They are the beneficiaries to the way we’ve organized our agriculture.

Some farmers see this; many don’t. We have this institution called the Farm Bureau, which is believed to represent farmers, but they do nothing of the kind. They tend to represent agribusiness. And the states, in their regulations, have tended to favor the biggest interests against the people trying to do smaller things like raw-milk operations.

The USDA is also very much organized around promoting the interest of the largest meat packers. Four of them control 82 percent of the market, and all the rules are designed for them. Now, I can understand it from their point of view: one inspector at a national beef plant can inspect 400 carcasses in an hour. If you send him to a small regional plant that is only doing four carcasses in a day, that looks like bad business. But in fact, that small plant is supporting farmers in the community and putting out higher quality meat.

So the deck is really stacked against family farmers and people trying to build local food economies. The federal regulatory regime is choking out some

really vital start-ups in an important corner of the American economy.

DREHER: In cultural terms, how has consumer capitalism as applied to food traditions worked to undermine the family and, by extension, the community?

POLLAN: Look at what food marketing does to the family dinner. The American food industry spends \$32 billion a year marketing 17,000 new products to us. They are trying very hard to undermine parents’ roles as gatekeepers of the family diet. You have kids clamoring for dinners—as described to me by marketers at General Mills—that consist essentially of serial microwaving. Every family member microwaves his own entree and then they kind of cross paths at the table for a little while.

Food marketers work very hard to get us to eat 24/7, and if you look at the images on television, you see families too hurried to cook a meal. They’re so busy that all they can do is grab a cereal bar on the way out the door. All of this emphasis on snack food has the effect of eroding the crucial institution of families sitting down together. One of the great blind spots in American conservatism is not appreciating the role of consumer capitalism in eroding values such as the family dinner.

DREHER: And communal values. You are talking about how food traditions are a social glue...