

A View from the Dinner Table

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Thank you all very much for joining us at this symposium as we explore various aspects of our food system. I'd like to offer special thanks to Gladys Haddad for inviting me and giving me this opportunity to share my point of view and a bit of my history in the food world. I hope that my comments will become part of the collective voice of this symposium asking us to focus our attention on the very important issue of food in our culture and our daily lives.

From hearing the various presenters during these two days I believe it will be easy for us to see how the many aspects of food impact our dinner table. I believe it will be clear from these presentations that our attention needs to be focused and refocused on food and food production which touches every part of our lives today and occupies a serious part of our history.

I'd like to begin by calling our attention to this history—our food history. The view from the modern dinner table is quite different than it was some 30 or 40 years ago. The present view prompts some of us to ask what happened to that great comiconopia of variety that cared for our many and varied nutritional needs?

How is it today, here in the richest, most resourceful, technologically advanced and all knowing society that we have arrived in this world of food sameness?

Whether it be the slice of pizza, the bagel, the beverage, the burger or the pie—sameness is a most appropriate word in describing food in today's world. No matter where we find ourselves, the offerings are the same. Think of traveling in the United States. In any airport, at any time, on any interstate highway in any part of the country the offerings are the same.

We have lost that great American comiconopia of variety.

What do we see instead in our view from the dinner table today?

Unfortunately for many that view might not be from the dinner table. It might be a view from our automobile, the drive through window, the work space or desk, the sidewalk or the conference table. Food has, for many, become little more than fodder or filler that can be accessed anywhere and anytime. Food, for many, is not worthy of its own time and place. It is secondary to some more important activity.

The following observation is put forth by an historian in the recently published food history: *Near A Thousand Tables*. Author Felipe Fernandez-Armesto suggests that before man began to use fire to alter food, he ate alone, wherever he found edibles in his hunting and gathering. But as fire-cooked food became a part of his daily life, community resulted and eating became a tribal activity. People gathered together to dine, to share and to celebrate.

Fire-cooked food transformed solitary eaters into communal eaters. Cooking and eating became a civilizing tool.

Interestingly this author notes that now, however, we seem to be in an uncivilizing mode of anti-cooking, particularly "the loneliness of the fast food eater." Notice how many people "dine" alone at their desk, in the car, on a park bench or in front of a screen where other tasks are given much more importance.

So it appears that after many, many centuries of creating a cuisine or a culture related to our food we have come full circle. Food has become so secondary that one size fits all and dining is no longer given a very important place in our culture.

Here I'd like to talk about the word cuisine as part of one's culture and use this word to illustrate some of our history and some of our present day challenges. What is a cuisine and how does it relate to a culture or a nationality?

What is this cuisine that we have lost or that in many cases appears to be in decline?

In his book *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* anthropologist Sidney Mintz discusses the term cuisine and what it means to have a cuisine. He puts forth a very good working definition of this idea of a cuisine when he states that the only real cuisines are regional because of the enduring distinctiveness of local ingredients.

Think of this very important and defining point: the enduring distinctiveness of local ingredients.

This connection of one's food and one's kitchen or cuisine to the agriculture of where the food is prepared has to be the purest definition of cuisine.

Quite literally cuisine means kitchen, the type of cooking, the most typical food of a place, of a society or community. Some would quickly attach a nationality to the word. French cuisine, Italian cuisine are such examples.

But for those who have traveled in France or Italy, Mexico or Spain or Greece defining a whole country's cuisine as similar is rather difficult. It depends where in that country you are dining and in what season you are dining. Someone visiting southern France in August will have a very different kind of food than someone dining in Normandy in February.

I am reminded of this personal experience that served to illustrate this difference. After living for several months in central France I thought that I had a good understanding of French food. Then one week-end I drove to Bordeaux where I

learned otherwise. After about three hours of travel I stopped for dinner. Glancing at the menu it appeared that I had made a wrong turn and had arrived in another country. Many of the dishes on the menu reflected the cuisine of the Basque country. I remember well the chicken I enjoyed that night. It was redolent of garlic and stewed tomatoes. So different from the cooking of the town where I lived. Yet these were both cuisines of France. This was my introduction to regional cuisine. In regional cuisine the region is closely connected to the dinner table. The region should be a very important part of our view from the dinner table.

For those of us old enough to remember, great variety was once common here in the United States. Thirty or 40 years ago dining in New England, in the Southwest, in rural Alabama or around the Great Lakes meant having different kinds of food. The food was related to the region—its climate, season, economy and values.

Thus comes my definition of cuisine. A cuisine is based on the food that is produced in the region where it is cooked. Food reflects the time and place in which one cooks. In real cuisine the dinner table and the garden, the farm, the land are very clearly connected, related and interdependent.

The sameness of which I spoke earlier and the sameness that you discover in every airport in every city you visit today is not a reflection of the true cuisine of that place. It is instead a reflection of corporate agriculture and corporate food service. Or perhaps we should say food disservice. A pleasant view from the dinner table this is not.

To give further illustration of the importance of region and climate and season in defining cuisine I share another dining experience—this one a rather unpleasant bit of dining several years ago here in my own state.

I stopped for dinner one evening in central Ohio. Although I am a realist and knew that I would be disappointed in what would arrive at my table I tried hard to be optimistic. Perhaps, thought I, things might be different. They were, absolutely not.

Keep in mind that I had driven on a country road passing farms and fields. Just across the way from the restaurant was a large blue silo with the silhouette of a pig on top and the famous “Pork the Other Wine Meat.” written in bold white lettering.

I knew I was in trouble or perhaps I should say I knew I was in culinary hell when I saw the salad bar a kind of altar to food service and the art of preservation and transportation. My worst suspicion regarding the sources of the food was confirmed, however, when dinner arrived with an apology. Of the two pork chops promised on the menu only one appeared on my plate. Your other pork chop is thawing, said the waitress, it will be just a couple more minutes. Regional cuisine this was not. I knew that my pork dinner was totally unrelated to the farm next door with the blue silo. It was in fact much more a part of a food service establishment located somewhere like Secaucus, New Jersey, where the products had been packaged oh so many months ago. Season? What season?

When leaving the restaurant I glanced at the silo and wondered about the farmer who worked that farm. Did he know that he was part of an industry not part of a regional cuisine?

So here we are at this cross roads

As our regional cuisines, food based on local seasonal products, continue to fade and the sameness of industrial food continues to rise our view from the dinner table has a sameness as well as a great void no matter where we sit. In any place in America the view from the dinner table can be equally unpleasant and distressing.

How did we lose our regional cooking?

Why, when, how, by whom, with whom or for whom did our culinary horizons dim? The simple answers is that we began to devalue the art of cooking. We allowed others to do the job for us and thus gave them control.

The most common justification for our not cooking and for giving such a low priority to food in today’s society is time. Supposedly we are just too busy. With both parents working out of the house and children having full schedules of team sports, recreational activities and social situation gathering around the table is no longer a part of the day’s routine.

Notice, that we never hear people say I’m too busy to go shopping. I’m too busy to having another meeting. I’m too busy to go out of town for a few days. I’m too busy to answer my cell phone or surf the net or sit in front of a television.

Industrial agriculture and the corporate food distribution systems love to hear us say we don’t have time to cook because they are quite happy to take full responsibility for giving us what they have chosen. The result is this. We are eating what someone else has chosen for us. Isn’t this rather serious? You may disagree and say that you can choose from oh so many kinds of take out, take home, heat and eat, just microwave, boil in a bag or eat it warm from the bag.

What you fail to consider, however, is that the cook in your kitchen is a stranger and has chosen ingredients from the profit column of his balance sheet not from the honesty and wholesome side of the ledger. We have just relinquished control of what goes into our bodies to perfect strangers.

Here we might look at a bit of our social history to determine how and when this was all put in motion.

Our abdication of home cooking began some 50 years ago. The first examples of this came in the late forties and throughout the fifties. American families of that time were headed by men and women who had survived WWII and who had experienced the Great Depression. One of their major goals was to provide a life for their children that would not include any of the hardships associated with those two world tragedies. Their government, their employers, their communities told them that they had earned this right to a comfortable life filled with convenience and void of struggle.

World War II had also introduced a variety of technologies that made food preservation available to the masses. These necessities of war time food shipment and preservation were moved to the grocery store.

And having “store-bought” became a mark of affluence. Only poor folks had to make their own clothes, bake their own bread or eat from the larder or the root cellar.

Once this movement gained momentum the dinner table became the domain of corporate agriculture, the USDA, the medical community, the dietitians and nutritionists.

Today these folks believe they, and only they, should tell us what to eat, where to buy it, who should produce it and how it should be processed? Our government regulates food in the name of safety yet this system often forces small independent producers and farmers out of the market place. It should be noted that this same system that claims to protect us is the same system that recently had to recall 19 million pounds of potentially harmful ground beef. Who is being served by this kind of system?.

You and I have lost control of our food supply.

At this point I believe you can see quite clearly that I have very strong feelings about food production and the American dinner table. I am a strong advocate, a practitioner, a researcher and an untiring champion of local, seasonal food. My cooking and sourcing of products is absolutely a definition in practice of cuisine as regional cooking. Food on the table should be very clearly the result of local farming. If I were writing the dictionary—Cuisine would be defined quite simply: Food that results from cooking local, seasonal products and serving those products close to their place of origin.

I would not apply the word cuisine to food processed in Secaucus, New Jersey, stored for several months or indefinitely and served anywhere and anytime that a delivery service can accommodate the recipient.

I would place that definition with a clearly drawn illustration next to the words fodder and filler.

How does one move out of this food system that has been born from the marriage of government and corporate agriculture?

Here I 'd like to share a bit of my history, the culinary catharsis I experienced, that metamorphosis that brought me to my present state of stormy advocacy and kind of orthodox approach to cooking.

And, I am hope that I can lure you folks to join me in the restoration of regional food and cooking. Perhaps you too will experience a culinary epiphany.

I came to food and cooking as an eater. I learned to cook for reasons of self-preservation and the desire to have on my table those kinds of things that I liked.

Early on I realized however that no matter how carefully I cooked, no matter what techniques I employed the dish that reached the table was still lacking in flavor and exciting taste.

And with only a slight bit of reasoning I faced the fact that my cooking and thus my dining pleasures would always be limited by the kinds of products I brought to my kitchen. A mediocre tomato, a limp chicken raised with the aid of chemistry, lettuce that had traveled through more of the country than I had and cream pasturized to such a degree that it could last for weeks would never allow me to create the Poulet Basquaise I still remembered from my trip to Bordeaux.

And so, some 20 years ago, I set out on a journey—both figurately and literally speaking—that has taken me to nearly every county in Ohio in search of good food, safe food, local food, food without chemicals, food that returns to the farmer, the grower the full share of my food dollars.

To be a good cook I had to befriend farmers. And in that case I had an advantage. I grew up on a dairy farm in Ohio, in the Western Reserve, only about 45 minutes from here. And though I never thought of it at the time, the food, always so dependent on nature, so indicative of the season, had created the taste memory that was now the guide, the benchmark by which I would judge food.

Our role as local food loyalists and sustainable agriculture defenders will be a challenge. We are reinventing a lost system and this is not easy. We can begin by learning what others have said about our dilemma and how we need to speak to it.

One of the founders of the New York Green Markets offered this illustration of what he believes is wrong with the agri-business in the United States: “How is it,” he asks, “that on any day of the year, I can go into an open-air market in a grindingly poor city in Mexico and routinely find more variety of consistently more flavorful vegetables than in an American supermarket?”

The answer, he says, is that we need small producers who are raising for quality, and flavor rather than tonnage and shelf life.

Secondly, we need markets and distribution systems that support these specialty producers and help move their products to the customers.

Our present food delivery system, designed and controlled by government agencies and special interest groups, has systematically excluded specialty and small scale producers.

This simple analogy illustrates his point. You cannot land planes without an airport.

Before we move on to issues of how we can restore our food system we need to make sure that we are truly honest about the view from our dinner table.

That view is fast becoming universal.

Hear what still another advocate has to say about the challenge we face in taking back our kitchens.

James Home shares the following in his recently published book: *The Next Green Revolution*. He would nail this message to the door of every office in the USDA, every land-grant university agriculture department and every corporate agribusiness. This is his three point message: He accuses them of:

1. Endangering the essential natural resources of soil, water and life, thereby jeopardizing the future productivity of agriculture and inheritance of our children
2. Hooking farmers on fossil fuels and the fertilizer and pesticides made from them, while downplaying the consequences of overusing such products
3. Desolating rural America by bankrupting farmers and ignoring the well-being of rural communities, thus leaving them open to exploitation.

Small, independent, owner operated, sustainable managed farms are important to all of us.

The Rodale Institute suggests in a recent study that small scale farmers must be supported rather than squeezed out of the market place because they are our safety net. Large scale corporate agriculture so dependent of petro chemicals, mass transportation, and so concentrated is much more vulnerable to bio-terrorism than many, many small independent family farms.

These are dinner table issues and all will be part of our view from the dinner table.

I'd like to explore this issue of small scale production and the family farm. As we know this institution has been devastated by industrial agriculture and is still threatened.

Up and down the highways of rural Ohio, right here in the Western Reserve, family farms lie idle—their frontage sold off for building sites. Or worse yet whole farms sold to developers. The corn fields and meadows are now growing houses.

Where then is our food being produced you ask. Look further down the road, much further, perhaps to the western part of our state where one 700 cow dairy produces the volume of milk that was once done by 20 family farms. For those with a corporate mentality or penchant for efficiency this might seem like progress, good business especially when we are told that this system of factory farming brings food to our supermarkets at lower prices.

AND this is true. It does. For the most part Americans have the cheapest food of any developed country. We spend less of our disposable income on food than any other country. But what is the real price of our food.

Is this kind of farming really good business? If it costs the farmer \$3.00 to produce a bushel of corn how can he stay in business if the corn is sold for only \$2.00 per bushel? That's where we come into the picture. The Federal government uses our tax dollars to subsidize this kind of operation. Forty percent of the farmers income is derived from the government. That's us. Thus we learn that those cheap grocery store prices are not telling the whole story.

There are many other costs that are not paid at the check-out counter.

One of those costs is the devastation of our environment. Row cropping, the system that is used to produce cheap corn causes soil erosion. The petrochemicals needed for this kind of farming washes into streams and rivers and eventually kills the aquatic life of our water ways. Ground water and wells are often harmed by the run off of these large factory farms. This is not a pleasant thought and certainly not the view that we would want to have from our dinner table.

To me, the worst violation of these factory systems, is the kinds of animal husbandry that are practiced there. Imagine 700 cows spending their entire lives on cement, under cover—never experiencing sunshine. Never having their coats washed by gentle rain.

Still another part of the view from our dinner table is very close, in fact sitting next to us. Our children, our family, our friends are eating food from industrial sources—food with chemical and hormone residue. Prevailing statistics from the medical community tell us that one in ten children suffers from obesity. Cases of childhood diabetes are continuing to increase. Yet, the presence of corn syrup, from a government system of subsidies, appear again and again as major ingredients in our food.

Still another view, though not always visible from our dinner table, is the row of vending machines at public schools. Food service business often have contracts with lucrative trade-offs that give them exclusive rights to your children's snack foods and beverages. The lucrative benefits, however, are not for your children. These benefits go directly to school officials and administrators. What do your children get from this system? Serious health problems.

At this point most of us want to close our eyes, or pull the window shades or block the view from the dinner table because the reality of that view is not very pleasant.

Yet we cannot give up nor can we give in to those who want to control our food supply.

No matter how dim or discouraging our dinner table view might be we must have hope and we must create a better view.

What can we do to improve our view from the dinner table or to change that view?

Attending a symposium such as the one we have here this week-end is a small example. If each of you can take one idea from this conference and put it into practice and then share that idea with one neighbor, friend or family member you are starting on the road to recovery. Remember the first step to creating change or solving a problem is admitting that the problem exists and the you are part of the solution.

Ghandi said: We must become the change we seek for the world.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has,” was the classic statement by Margaret Mead.

Without a doubt the place that every cook should begin is at the local farmers market. Promise yourself when you leave here today that you will begin buying food directly from farmers. Joan Dye Gussow, author of *This Organic Life*, offers this suggestion. Begin by assigning a portion of your weekly food budget to local, seasonal food. Set aside \$5 for each family member.

Cook one meal each week based entirely on local seasonal food. Make this a family night with no phone calls, no television, no outside distractions. Direct the dinner conversation at that meal to the sources of the food.

After a couple of months, increase each of these activities. AND take your children to the farmers market. Let them make selections. Help them find recipes to use the selections they made at the market.

And here is a very, very personal suggestion—one that is so politically incorrect that I, a most politically incorrect person, actually delight in offering it as a subtle form of harassment.

Organize a group of friends from your religious institution. Ask the leader of your religious community to meet with you to discuss the issues of food production, the decline of the family dinner table and the environmental devastation that factory farming causes to the Creation. Ask one sermon or homily each month be devoted to this issue of food and agriculture. Ask that food served at religious gatherings be purchased from local sustainable sources.

Organize families in your community willing to oppose vending machines and junk food in the public schools. Remember the one thing that public school administrators fear most is parents and the interruption of tax dollars flowing into the bureaucratic trough.

As each of you considers how you might do your part in the restoration of regional, seasonal food that links your dinner table to local bounty there are any number of angles or launching points you can use.

- Nutrition • Children • Elderly • Families
- Environment • Health and safety of migrants • Reasonable forms of animal husbandry

Producers of food can continue to operate in these systems that appear to be threatening to our health, our society and our environment only if we continue to relinquish control of our dinner table.

In dealing with the threat of the Soviet Union former president Ronald Reagan did something that his predecessor did not. He stated clearly that freedom as we know it in the United States was morally superior to the system of tyranny practiced in totalitarian countries like the Soviet Union.

Former President Reagan stated clearly that freedom as we know it in these United States was morally superior to the system of tyranny practiced in a totalitarian society such as the Soviet Union. It was with this strong moral argument that he opposed the USSR.

I'd like to take this page from the Reagan notebook and apply it to agriculture and food production in the United States.

Let's compare the two systems. A system that is sustainable for generations to come, a system that provides families with safe, unadulterated food, a system that respects our natural resources of soil, water and air, a system that believes that livestock and poultry should be treated humanely, a system that return the bulk of our food dollars to the farmer is in my opinion far superior from a moral point of view than an industrial system that practices horrific forms of animal husbandry, that destroys soil, pollutes water and fouls the air, that sends to the market place products that more and more cause illnesses and death, that forces family farms out of business and that erodes rural economies.

I'd like to close with still another kind of definition of local, seasonal food. This one is more poetic and I'd like to think somewhat lyrical.

Cooking can create a natural rhythm, the rhythm of the seasons and their resulting bounty. At our dinner table we are always lamenting the end of something, those last strawberries or the final presentation of asparagus. Yet we smile as we enjoying something at its peak. The sweet corn and the tomatoes are good examples. Meanwhile there is an underlying rhythm much like a figure base. It is our eagerness and anticipation of something to come. The Bosc pears of fall or the return to hearty dishes such as slow roasted pork and long simmered beans. Our tastes and pleasure undulate with this rhythm, this natural rhythm of the seasons.

Your view from your dinner table can be one of your own choosing. Just as you set the table with china, silver and glassware you can create your own view. Where you buy your food, whose farming system you support, whose health and welfare you protect is in your hands.

Introducing the farmers

One of the great pleasures of my work is my direct contact with farmers and growers. As part of this work I try to encourage them and serve as a resource person for them. Two of those farmers are with us today, and I have asked each of them to share with you what they do, and why they farm and grow in the way they do.

Mark Welton has a market garden at his home in Norton Township just off I-77 in Summit County. His yield per acre I would guess is one of the highest of any specialty grower as he applies his multiple skills and abundant talents to intensive growing.

John Johnson, from Knox County, raises grass-fed beef at his farm. I have helped him convince the butcher that grass-fed beef must hang longer before cutting than grain feed beef. We have worked together to bring grass-fed beef to many home cooks who purchase through our informal network.