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The New Food Revolution

by Gordon S. Clark

During my youth, I never thought much about food - like where it came from, or what was in it. I visited the occasional farmer's stand or pick-your-own strawberry farm with my mom and brother, but for the most part our food came from the supermarket, and the question of its safety or healthfulness wasn't even an issue.

How times have changed. Just a few months ago peanut products made by the Peanut Corporation of America - which supplied food companies, hospitals, nursing homes and cafeterias - were discovered to have salmonella. Nine people died, leading to one of the largest food product recalls in U.S. history. A U.S. pistachio recall followed only a few weeks later. In 2006, much of the U.S. spinach crop had to be destroyed due to an e.coli contamination that killed three Americans. Overall, disease outbreaks from food have risen from about 100 a year in the early 1990s to some 350 now.

Bad as this is, the problem of food disease outbreaks pales in comparison to the dangers posed by our actual national food policies. Determined by Congress, with the friendly help of lobbyists from major agribusiness corporations, these policies are not only harming our national health, they are at the same time systematically destroying our planet .

For starters, most of our food is currently grown far, far away - an average of 1500 miles away, from field to plate, a disaster from the global warming or peak oil perspective. That one pound plastic box of organic lettuce contains maybe a couple hundred calories of food energy, yet requires roughly 4500 calories of fossil fuel to grow, process, package, and ship from the other side of the country, under constant refrigeration.

It gets worse. Take corn, which ends up in an astounding array of food products. Our federal government spends billions of dollars each year subsidizing the industrial production of corn, a process that both burns and depletes the soil with the heavy use of petrochemicals, and creates huge dead zones in bays and oceans due to the chemical runoff. (The seasonal dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico is now as large as the state of New Jersey, due largely to the runoff from the corn belt states).

A good chunk of the subsidized corn is converted into non-food items such as corn ethanol - a fuel which is both a lobbyist's dream and any sane person's nightmare, as it takes almost as much fossil fuel to produce as you get ethanol out of it. Not to mention the fact that it increases hunger worldwide.

And the industrial corn that does end up in food often goes into patently unhealthy high sugar and high fat food products (the ubiquitous high fructose corn syrup being the poster child), or it's used to artificially fatten cows at cruelly inhumane, toxic cesspools known as CAFOs, or concentrated animal feeding operations. The resulting beef is not only tremendously fatty, it's filled with antibiotics because the cows, having evolved to eat grass, not corn, are constantly sick and on drugs themselves.

Not surprisingly, coronary and heart disease are rampant, the incidence of "adult onset" diabetes is skyrocketing among children, and obesity is a national epidemic. It is predicted that the youngest generation of Americans will, for the first time in our history, lead shorter lives than their parents.

Clearly, our national food policy is failing us, and badly.

What can one do? Lobbying Congress for change is a necessity, and many good groups organize such efforts. But this is also one area where we don't have to wait for government - we can (and should) take matters into our own hands, as large and increasing numbers are.

One big change many people are making is to buy local, and to buy actual, fresh "whole" food, not processed "food products."

There has been an explosion over the past several years in farmers' markets and community supported agriculture farms (CSAs). Buying local food is by far the best way to guarantee its healthfulness, and that it's doing the least possible harm to the environment. (This also means eating mostly what's in season; just because a corporation wants to sell you produce from the other side of the planet doesn't mean you should buy it.) Local food is also the freshest, most nutritious food you can buy, and it keeps money in the local economy. We are blessed with great farmers markets and CSAs in our area, and everyone should patronize them.

Another important change is to reduce or eliminate meat in your diet. Yes, I love meat - my wife and I are in the "reduce" category right now - but we cannot ignore the destruction that industrialized meat production is wreaking on the planet (it's one of the top producers of

greenhouse gas emissions) or on our national health. So if you do eat meat, once again, look for locally raised.

Perhaps the biggest - and most revolutionary - change you can make is to start growing some of your own food. Michelle Obama is one of millions of Americans now doing just that - food gardening grew by 10% in 2008 according to the National Gardeners Association, with a whopping 20% increase predicted for this year.

There are plenty of people who can help you (check out Takoma Park's own Purple Mountain Organics, or the Master Gardeners' "Grow It, Eat it" program at www.growit.umd.edu), and our temperate climate allows for an especially long and productive growing season. It's economical as all get out, and there is no healthier, tastier, more satisfying and more environmentally sound food than that you have grown yourself - guaranteed. Too many trees in your yard? Grow in a container on the porch, join or help form a community garden, or find a neighbor with a sunny plot to share at www.sharingbackyards.com.

Of course, replacing our current dysfunctional food system with a largely locally based one will take lots of work, but it can be done - at another time of great crisis Americans managed to grow almost half their own produce in millions of World War II Victory Gardens. Getting back to that won't be easy, but such an effort will bring the immense benefits of local self-reliance, community-building, good exercise and reliably safe, healthful and delicious food.

And ultimately, in the face of global warming and a demonstrably unhealthy, unsafe and even toxic corporate-controlled food supply, is there a better option?

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