America's New Farmer: A Slow and Local Practice

Global food culture is in the midst of a major transformation, driven by changing consumer preferences and an overall shift away from mass-produced food. In the United States, this transformation has come in the form of several interrelated shifts in consumer purchasing, cooking, and dining preferences, namely, the "slow food," "local food," and "alternative agriculture" movements. Taken as a whole, these movements represent a desire to avoid the ecological, ethical, and nutritional detriments of processed food and the large-scale agricultural industry, while simultaneously enhancing the quality and ethics of local food communities.

These growing food movements have taken hold primarily among affluent communities in and around urban areas, where consumers earn sufficient income to afford expensive alternatives to traditional, mass-produced products. Popular criticism of the ecological, social, and ethical detriments of the big-food industry is becoming more widespread; however, persons living in low-income communities are far less likely to be aware of shopping and dining alternatives. Further, low-income consumers are often faced with more immediate concerns with regard to meeting their daily needs, and many do not attend to the largely intellectual outrage over the perceived evils of the big-food industry.

Local Food Movement

The local food movement is an international consumer movement that seeks to encourage and facilitate consumers purchasing foods that are locally grown, produced, procured, and prepared. In part, the movement is one of economics, aimed at stimulating local economies by creating increased demand for locally produced products. Proponents of the movement sometimes call themselves "locavores," a name inspired by a popular San Francisco–based website promoting local food options.

The local food movement has taken hold in a number of American cities, as well as in parts of the United Kingdom and several other countries. The movement takes a variety of forms, including the establishment of farmers markets and food co-ops that specialize in locally produced products. Markets of these types have become increasingly popular in American cities and have come to form one of the cornerstones of the local food movement, as well as the related slow food and alternative agriculture movements.

The local food movement's focus on economics has earned support from those approaching local food as a way to build community cohesion. Co-op and local farmers markets promote cooperation among members of the immediate community, while also providing access to foods that have not been processed or stored for

long voyages overseas. In many cases, consumers support local food because products produced locally tend to be superior in freshness and flavor to vegetables and meats procured through big-market retailers.

Defining the local food idea starts with defining the concept of "local" in terms of production and distribution. Some choose to define "local" in terms of the number of miles that food must travel to reach its final retail destination, while others define it in terms of states or regions. This aspect of local food becomes more important to those looking to reduce the greenhouse emissions caused by the global transport of food products.

Slow Food

Italian activist and writer Carlo Petrini was the founder of the "slow food" movement, and established the principles that have remained at the core of the movement as it has spread internationally. Similarly to the local food movement, the slow food movement encourages consumers to favor locally produced and procured foods in an effort to promote the consumption of more nutritious, better-tasting products while simultaneously stimulating local demand. Unlike the local food movement, Petrini and other slow food purists also promote the idea that consumers should limit their diets to foods that occur naturally in their geographic area or ecological zone. Consumers in the northeastern United States would simply not eat avocados or bananas if adhering to a strict slow food regimen.

The slow food movement also promotes the idea that consumers should limit their diet choices to products that are "fair trade," meaning purchased at a price that is equitable to farmers and/or ranchers. While the concept of fair trade has become a buzzword in dining and shopping, consumers and food-service professionals are currently attempting to create systems for determining guidelines for fairly obtained goods.

In addition, the slow food movement eschews the use of chemicals, hormones, and genetically altered crops that have become common in the industrial agricultural industry. Avoiding these products is believed to provide healthier dining options and access to foods that are superior in flavor, as it is widely accepted among adherents of these new food movements that processed and altered crops tend to be deficient in both nutritional value and the more aesthetic qualities of taste.

Like the local food movement, the slow food movement asks consumers to follow a number of shopping guidelines and to become educated by learning about the origin and other characteristics of various products. Therefore, local food fans support the farmers markets and local food co-op movements that have emerged in cities around the world, providing affordable access to products often sold directly by farmers and ranchers.

Alternative Agriculture

The increased demand for locally produced products, in conjunction with spreading dissatisfaction with the ecological and ethical hazards of industrial food production, has led to a new trend in the United States and other countries: alternative farming.

Hundreds of new small farms and alternative food-production businesses have been established, often in rural areas near major cities or in urban areas traditionally seen as unsuitable for farming.

In many cases, the farmers and ranchers operating these alternative agricultural enterprises are not the type of individuals traditionally associated with agriculture. Many are young people who began farming as a way to provide themselves with healthier and more flavorful food, but who have then turned this newfound interest into a career. To cite one example, Duke University student Emily Sloss, formerly a member of the university's Urban Planning Department, started a campus farm as an experiment in urban farming. Sloss utilized the educational resources of the school coupled with her own research to learn about the farming process, and she concentrated on vegetables known to grow well in the North Carolina climate. Over the course of her first two seasons, Sloss provided more than two tons of produce to the school cafeteria and was inspired to pursue farming as a career after graduation.

Like Sloss, many individuals not traditionally trained in agriculture have decided to try their hand at farming, with varying degrees of success. Some food writers and industry analysts have characterized this phenomenon as little more than a passing fad, but some believe that the movement may continue to gain steam and may eventually constitute a cornerstone of the American food market.

It is likely that many of those entering the alternative agriculture business are motivated by the fact that traditional farming, like curled mustaches and vintage fashion, is in vogue, especially among a subset of young adults in upper- and middle-class white communities. Undoubtedly, some who approach agriculture because it is trendy will find themselves motivated to remain in the field. In addition, the broader social movement away from industrial food products is enhanced by youth trends but based on more lasting environmental and social concerns, and this creates an economic incentive for the creation of businesses that provide alternatives to big-market retailers.

Challenges to the New Food Movement

Building the new food and farming industries beyond their current state is a difficult task, partially because the industrial food industry continues to strategically protect its share of the market. Increasingly, major food brands like Nestlé, PepsiCola, and Kellogg are creating subordinate brands aimed at marketing products that appeal to ecologically minded and health-conscious consumers.

In some cases, these new products are superior in terms of nutritional value and the ethics of production methods, but purchasing any product from a mass-food retailer also supports the questionable manufacturing procedures of the company on a larger scale. In addition, the big-food industry spends millions in marketing each year to dilute concepts like "organic," "fair trade," and "farm fresh," producing products that are not nutritionally or ethically superior, but differ largely in marketing terminology.

In addition, though farmers are often underpaid and exploited by the dominant food production companies, a major shift toward local products could have

devastating effects on the farmers and farming communities dependent on international sales. Concern for the welfare of these agricultural communities has led to the formation of a variety of companies aimed at supporting the ethical import of international products. A variety of companies in the United States and around the world now attempt to procure coffee and other types of produce in ways that support agricultural communities and provide farmers with a living wage. Some food analysts have suggested that ethical import of some crops must accompany a shift toward local or slow food in an effort to protect the small-farm industry worldwide.

For those hoping to ensure the integrity of the earth's ecological balance, purchasing local foods and supporting local farms will do little to address the overall effect of human culture on natural environments. More than 90 percent of the greenhouse gasses produced by the food industry come in the form of agricultural production, rather than the national or international transport of products. Buying locally therefore does little to affect this environmental consequence of food production. Shifting to a vegetarian diet and purchasing only products that can be produced with limited ecological impact are far more effective measures toward limiting the environmental impact of the food industry.

In addition, the cost of local, environmentally friendly, and ethically procured produce and other products remains too high for many consumers operating within a budget. This cost can be greatly reduced by utilizing food co-ops and farmers markets, but these resources tend to be seasonal and cannot, for most consumers, replace the need to purchase products from retail markets. If the new food movement is going to replace the big-food market in a substantial way, efforts to curtail the costs of alternative products will need to become a more widespread goal of the movement.

The Transition from Movement to Mainstream

The slow food movement has been ongoing since the 1980s and has continued to enjoy strong international popularity. The local food movement and alternative farming movements are both comparatively recent developments, but have gained increasing momentum as the proliferation of shopping and dining options combine to create a more powerful international shift in consumer trends and preferences.

Social, economic, and consumer patterns are constantly in a state of flux, hence the term *movement*, which is often used to describe a net shift in tastes or purchasing patterns. The full potential of the alternative food and farming trends will be recognized when these phenomena have evolved beyond the movement stage and have become an established part of mainstream food culture. For this to occur, consumers would need to permanently alter their views of shopping, cooking, and dining.

For an average restaurant owner or chef, local produce may be a desirable option when it can be obtained at a reasonable price. Locavores and slow food aficionados often flock to restaurants that offer specials such as local heirloom tomatoes or local berries and cream, but they may refuse to patronize the same restaurant during the off season when local products are unavailable or too expensive to purchase. This

type of short-sighted consumer behavior does not serve the longevity of the movement because it penalizes a restaurant for being unable to afford the ideal products on all occasions.

Consumers must therefore make informed decisions to support restaurants that show the tendency to favor local food, and to increase their support whenever the restaurant can obtain and serve the idealized local cuisine. As the restaurant thrives and the owner and chef respond to customer support for their local offerings, these may become a more regular part of their menu, causing them to increase purchases from local farms and keeping the local farms alive in the process. In general, the new food and farming movements do not benefit from absolutism in consumers as much as they benefit from consumers who favor local and alternative options when they are available.

In addition, attracting the affluent consumer can help to build a steady subset of the food industry but will not cause major changes to the food industry as a whole. For this to occur, local and alternative products must be made available at vastly reduced prices to consumers in low-income communities. This type of change requires both a combination of grassroots involvement to set up new co-ops and farmers markets in low-income areas and dedicated support from companies and individuals with the resources to finance efforts to change dining, shopping, and eating habits within these communities. Until alternative products become a viable option for people at every income level, the new food phenomenon will remain a luxury movement and will never constitute a true challenge to industrial giants that currently dominate the food industry.