

Out of reach

How the sustainable local food movement neglects poor workers and eaters

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On a sunny afternoon in Civic Center Plaza, a remarkable bounty covered a buffet table: coconut quinoa, organic mushroom tabouli, homemade vegan desserts, and an assortment of other yummy treats. The food and event were meant to raise awareness about public school lunches, although it was hard to imagine these dishes, brought by well-heeled food advocates, sitting under the fluorescent lights of a San Francisco public school cafeteria.

The spread was for the Slow Food USA Labor Day "eat-in," a public potluck meant to publicize the proposed reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act, national legislation that regulates the food in public schools. The crowd was in a festive, light-hearted mood. There was a full program of speeches by sustainability experts and a plant-your-own-vegetable-seeds table set up in one corner of the plaza.

A bedraggled couple who appeared homeless made their way through the jovial crowd and started scooping up the food in a way that suggested it had been a long time since their last roasted local lamb shish kebob. Their presence shouldn't have been a surprise; most events involving free trips down a food table are geared toward a different demographic in this park, which borders the Tenderloin.

In a flash, an event volunteer was on the case, nervous in an endearingly liberal manner. "Sir," she began. "This food is for the Child Nutrition Act." And then she paused, searching for what to say next. I imagined her thinking: "Sir, this food is to raise awareness about the availability of sustainable food to the lower classes, not to be eaten by them," or, "Sir, this good, healthy, local food is not for you."

But there was no good way to say what she meant to convey. She knew it, and delivered her final line hurriedly before walking away. "If you could just, well, just don't take like 25 things, okay?" Indifferent to the volunteer's unspoken reprimand, the couple continued to eat, ignoring the whispers and stares of the social crusaders around them, who all seemed to take issue with their participation in this carefully planned political action.

It was a telling scene from a movement that has yet to really confront its class issues. Though organic grocery stores and farmers markets have sprung up on San Francisco's street corners, it remains to be seen whether our current mania for sustainable, local food will positively affect the lower classes, be they farm workers or poor families.

Even iconic food writer Michael Pollan acknowledges the challenge the sustainability movement faces in widening its relevance for the poor, citing the high cost of local and organic food as just one of the issues that Slow Foodies and their allies must tackle before they can count the "good food" movement a success.

LOCAL ORGANIC LABOR

For the average heirloom tomato eater, the words "organic farm" often conjure up an idyllic agrarian picture: happy communes of earnest farmers growing veggies straight from the goodness of their hearts. In reality, a lot of the people who plant, tend, and harvest produce are poorly paid Latino immigrants. And it might come as a surprise that those who work on small or organic farms often face the same exploitative working conditions as those in conventional agriculture.



To learn how organic farm workers should be treated, consider Swanton Berry Farm, whose fields stretch out along the coastal highway just north of Santa Cruz. Swanton was the first organic farm in California to sign a contract with the United Farm Workers, a move that highlights the owners' conviction that farm workers be viewed as skilled professionals. Employees are offered ownership shares in the farm and are provided health insurance, retirement plans, comfortable housing, and unlimited time off to attend to pressing family matters.

"Organic is a lot cleaner. Working with pesticides, you have to worry about wearing gloves and covering your skin. Here, you can pick that strawberry right off the plant and eat it," Adelfo Antonio told the Guardian. He has worked these fields for 20 years, the last five as a supervisor. His high regard for his job and employers is apparent. As we talked, he kept at least one eye fixed on his coworkers, who stretched plastic sheets across the dirt of the field to protect their rows of seed from the coming autumn winds.

Antonio said he appreciates the culture of mutual respect on this farm. "People like how they are treated here. When conflicts come up, our management is open to working through them," he said. A few minutes later, a break was called, illustrating his point. There had been some disruptive behavior in the company housing and a discussion ensued between the crew and one of the farm's owners about house rules. The group formulated a plan to avoid trouble in the future.

But Swanton's egalitarian fields are the exception among American organic farms. The average salary of the estimated 900,000 farm workers in California — the birthplace of the organic and farm labor movements in the U.S. — is around \$8,500, more than \$2,000 below the federal poverty line.

In 2006, the California Institute for Rural Studies put out a rare study of working conditions on the state's 2,176 organic farms that suggested that in some respects, workers are better off on conventional farms. Although the average wage was higher on organic fields — \$8.20 for entry-level work, compared with \$7.91 on conventional farms — traditional agriculture outstripped organic on certain employee benefits. A mere 36 percent of organic businesses were found to provide health insurance to their employees, as opposed to 46 percent on conventional farms.

Unable to rely on chemicals for pest control, organic farms often face higher labor costs in the fields. "Wages and benefits should always be viewed in the wider context of sustainability, and that includes a farm's ability to stay in business from one year to the next, i.e. its profitability," said Jane Baker, a spokesperson for California Certified Organic Farmers, the state's major organic certification agency.

The inequity faced by farm workers belies the fact that the organic movement began as an alternative to the industrialized food system. "Back then, we never would have imagined that you'd be buying an organic product that was built on the backs of workers. For us, social justice was every bit as important as the environmental part," said Marty Mesh, an organic farmer since 1973 and executive director of Florida Certified Organic Growers & Consumers.

Mesh was involved in the debates over the U.S. Department of Agriculture's first codification of the National Organic Program. He said that although many farmers advocated for regulations surrounding working conditions, the federal government found it hard to stomach labor stipulations. Many involved felt their inclusion would hurt the growth of the organic industry. So the social movement aspect of organic farming was left on the cutting room floor.

That has not been the case overseas. The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, whose organic label is recognized worldwide, adopted explicit social justice language in its basic standards in 2003, stating in their "Principles of Organic Agriculture" document that "organic agriculture should provide everyone involved with a good quality of life and contribute to ... reduction of poverty."

CCOF now offers a dual track certification process wherein California farms can forgo specific IFOAM requirements. The lack of guidelines of worker treatment has led to some problems. "We've seen many of the same issues on organic farms that we do in conventional agriculture, on small and big farms alike," Michael Marsh, directing attorney of California Rural Legal Assistance, told us. CRLA is an organization that regularly provides low cost legal assistance to agricultural workers, whom Marsh has seen bring charges against organic farmers for cases of sexual harassment, underpayment, and job safety concerns.

Sometimes the organic label is even used to justify violating workers rights. In 2003, the California Legislature considered a bill that would ban "stoop labor," activities like hand-weeding which require working in bent positions that can cause musculoskeletal degeneration. Organic farmers' associations lobbied against the bill, claiming that pesticide-free agriculture would suffer under such restrictions. Also, although chemical pest-killers are banned from organic farming, some popular natural pesticides like copper and sulfur have been known to cause irritation of the throat, eyes, and respiratory system.

"This is one of the hardest nuts to crack in the sustainable food world," said Michael Dimock, executive director of Roots of Change, a San Francisco-based foundation that has developed campaign strategies for improving agricultural working conditions. Three years ago, Dimock left his post as chairman at Slow Food USA, at a time when farm labor conditions

"were generally not at the top of the list. Slow Food as an organization is just beginning to figure out what it can do in a meaningful way on this issue."

Roots of Change has found some success in identifying farm labor challenges and possible solutions through a series of worker-grower forums. It has pinpointed immigration reform as one key to progress. Anywhere from 50 to 90 percent of farm workers in California are undocumented, which puts even fair bosses at risk of being prosecuted for employing illegal immigrants.

Many farm owners turn to labor contractors — essentially agricultural temp agencies — to supply field hands. Use of these middle men largely shields the owner from legal responsibility for illegal hiring, but "the bad farm labor contractors cheat workers, take their pay, and risk their health and safety," Dimock said.

Some Californian farm labor contractors have become notorious for their disregard of minimum wage and other labor standards, taking advantage of workers who are discouraged to seek help for fear of deportation. The role played by irresponsible contractors is one of many issues that can remain unseen by the buyers of food from farms that rely on the inadequate public information available on agricultural working conditions.

WHEN BUSINESS AND LABOR COLLABORATE

Food management company Bon Appetit in Palo Alto has built a good reputation as a sustainable company, buying its produce and other foodstuffs as locally and organically as possible. "I've learned a lot working here," said Jon Hall, head chef of Bon Appetit's University of San Francisco cafeteria. "In other kitchens, if you can get something for five cents a pound cheaper, that's what you buy. If I did that here, people would notice. [My bosses at Bon Appetit] would say, 'Why'd you buy that?'"

But when Bon Appetit executives decided to take on the issue of worker treatment on the farms that supplied their food, they found it difficult to find reliable information on the subject. "We always felt like there was something there that needed to be done and change that needed to take place," said vice president Maisie Greenwalt. "But we didn't know who to talk to."

Her cue to act came from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a group from Immokalee County, Fla. The farm workers' organization brought nationwide publicity to the slavery-like conditions in the area's tomato fields. Greenwalt accompanied the group on an information-gathering trip to Immokalee and saw firsthand the places where recent immigrants were held to work against their will, living in squalor and being paid little as \$20 a week.

Greenwalt saw the travesty as a wake-up call. Collaborating with the Immokalee activists, Bon Appetit developed a workers' rights contract that all their tomato suppliers must now sign. "After Bon Appetit sent me the contract, I sort of at first didn't see the point. But then I spoke with the [Coalition of Immokalee Workers] and it made sense. Worker abuse has been around for centuries," said Tom Wilson of Alderman Farms, one of the company's tomato growers.

Greenwalt says Bon Appetit cafeterias were prepared to eliminate tomatoes from their menus. "Every chef and manager I talked to said they would rather not serve tomatoes than serve the tomatoes that were coming from these conditions." But every one of their suppliers signed, agreeing to conditions such as a mandatory worker-controlled safety committee and a "minimum fair wage."

The success convinced Bon Appetit that this style of food buyer participation is crucial to making positive progress on farm worker treatment. The company is now conducting a nationwide survey of working conditions on organic farms. "Labor's not a new issue," said Carolina Fojo, one of the company's researchers. "But for some reason, people are just now talking about it. We've found it can be a sensitive topic for a lot of farmers."

Visually, Hall's USF food court is similar to traditional college eateries. But plate-side, Bon Appetit's commitment to sustainability is clear; specials vary seasonally and food is sourced locally whenever possible. The price for a semester's meal plan is \$3,810, more than twice that of San Francisco State University. Hall's customers, college students who may eat three meals a day here, often approach him with questions about their food. Queries range from where to how the food was grown, but in no instances that Hall has been aware of, about the workers who grew it.

Labor issues are not the popular cause these days, at least in the sustainable food movement. Unlike the "eat local" and organic food movements, equitable treatment of farm workers has yet to spawn trendy slogans for tote bags or a book on the best-seller list.

One UC Santa Cruz study found that, when asked to rank their concern about food system related topics, Central Coast grocery shoppers assigned higher concern levels to animal treatment on farms than that of humans. But Hall is confident this will change as Bon Appetit and others continue to bring attention to the economically disadvantaged on the front lines

of our local and organic food systems.

"This is the next frontier," he said. "I can see it brewing."

SERVING THE CHILDREN

In school cafeterias across the city, a different low-income group has its own challenges fitting into the sustainable food movement. San Francisco Unified School District manages one of the city's most important food sources.

Every school day, Student Nutrition Services dishes out 31,000 cafeteria meals; of those, 84 percent go to students who qualify for free lunch or for the reduced price of \$2 for elementary school students. It is not a stretch to say that for many of these kids, this is their one chance at healthy food for the day — certainly their only chance to learn about local and organic food. But the school district faces one of the major issues the sustainability movement has yet to resolve. Local and organic food costs a lot to produce, which makes it more expensive. If pricing was more socially equitable and accounted for living wages for farm workers, costs might rise even more. This is a problem. Federal funds supply about \$2.49 for each free student lunch in San Francisco and less for the meals of students who do not qualify for reduced prices. After logistical costs like labor and transportation are accounted for, 90 cents per meal is left over for the food itself.

This is not enough to fund a menu like Hall's. Given the numbers, it should come as no surprise that examining an average SFUSD school lunch — as San Francisco Chronicle food critic Michael Bauer did in his Oct. 29 "Between Meals" online column — turns up a lot of recently thawed, bland food matter. But this is not to say that cafeteria meals have not seen progress. Student Nutrition Services eliminated junk food in 2003, signaling a new attention to nutrition on a menu previously dominated by pizza and french fries.

Unlike working conditions for farm workers, school lunches have the benefit of visibility to middle class consumers and activists. Demonstrable efforts are being made to send some of that 90-cent budget toward local food. But with such a limited budget, institutions like SFUSD can only address a small slice of what is important about sustainable food. Yes, efforts are being put toward buying kids local, pesticide-free food that doesn't further jeopardize their future by using excessive fossil fuel on transportation. But these limited efforts do nothing to affect the social aspect of sustainability — those who produce the food are again left invisible.

The school salad bar program, started in 2007, uses organic and local vegetables in its buffet line as much as possible. The majority of the bars are strategically located in schools where more than half the student body qualifies for free and reduced-price lunches, a response to a Community Healthy Kids survey that put the number of ninth-graders who had eaten a single vegetable in the last week at 29 percent. Student reaction to the bars has been encouraging. Many poor families credit them with increasing the amount of produce in their kids' diets.

"This program is an anomaly," said Paula Jones, director of San Francisco Food Systems. "Other schools around the country just don't see things like this."

But a generation's worth of antitax sentiment has limited the variety of the salad bars and other attempts at getting fresh food onto kids' lunch trays. Due to high labor costs, the school district buys pre-chopped vegetables, severely limiting sourcing options. In the meantime, another generation of low-income kids is growing up on processed, packaged foods. Jones said making sustainable food available to all children is an issue the community must help take on. "The bottom line is, it's going to take a lot of people talking about this to realize this is not just the school district's problem."

Jones' organization works on getting healthy food to the city's underserved populations. Nutritionally, this is the salient mission of our age. Despite its current vogue, only 10 percent of Americans buy organic, and shoppers who consistently choose healthy foods usually find themselves spending 20 percent more. Several California studies have indicated that socioeconomically depressed neighborhoods have disturbingly high rates of food insecurity and obesity.

Despite the enormity of the challenge, Jones remains positive. "We lead in this issue. San Francisco is ready, and we have the will." She counts among the city's biggest successes in this area the fact that all farmers markets, typically more expensive than average supermarkets, now accept food stamps.

THE FRESHEST FOR THE POOREST

On a bright autumn Wednesday, market assistant manager John Fernandez stands outside his "office," a white van with the Heart of the City logo. The Heart of the City Farmers Market takes place in a plaza just between City Hall and the Tenderloin twice a week, year-round. Fernandez said it has the highest food stamp sales — second only to that of the Hollywood market — in California and has played a role in allowing low income families and individuals in the area to fit local and organic food into their budget.

Fernandez has worked here for 13 years, and said that the use of food stamps has doubled since last summer. Most of his

food stamp customers are families and individuals coming back week after week. They pass by the van to have Fernandez swipe their food stamp cards through a machine and hand them the yellow plastic coins used to buy everything from persimmons to what is far and away the market's most popular item: the live chickens that squawk from cages at one end of the line of stalls.

Efreh Ghanen was one of the shoppers we talked to who felt that being able to use her food stamps at the farmers market had improved the health of her family. Ghanen, who shops with her mother and sister, likened Heart of the City to the Yemeni markets where they bought their food growing up. "The honey, fruit, and vegetables here are fresher," she said. "They just taste better."

"I definitely wouldn't be able to shop here if it weren't for the food stamp program," echoed Shana Lancaster. She teaches at Paul Revere Elementary School in Bernal Heights, a position funded through AmeriCorps whose low pay automatically qualifies her for the food stamp program. She selects an armful of organic Gala apples while noting the value of shopping local for working people like herself. "I like supporting the farmers. Everyone here at the market has a story. These days, everyone is struggling."

But both Lancaster and Ghanen tell us that when they can't afford to shop at the farmers markets, they head straight for corporate retailers like Safeway and Walgreens, buying whatever they need to get by.

Programs like these are essential if the sustainability movement is to remain relevant and widen its reach. Just as the environment will degrade if industrial agriculture continues unabated, so too will local and organic food sources falter if the majority of our society cannot afford to buy their wares.

In the end, the obstacles are about class. Low-income groups, be they the people who grow the organic food or the schoolchildren who benefit from eating it, need to become more of a focus of the "good food" movement. What Slow Foodies and other activists must keep in mind is that over-accessorizing a cause (as with esoteric artisan products and exclusive dining experiences) makes it less a vehicle for change and more like reshuffling of the same old injustices. Social change, by definition, has to be for everyone. Because elitism tastes as bad as it always has.

For more information, check out "Fair Food: Field to Table," a multimedia project recently released by the California Institute for Rural Studies. CIRS is one of the leading researchers of working standards on Californian farms and its data is found throughout this article. Watch the Fair Food documentary for free at www.fairfoodproject.org.

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