

Healthy eating vs. feeding the world

Rich Heffern | Oct. 28, 2009



First lady Michelle Obama and some 36 fifth-grade students harvest vegetables in the White House Kitchen Garden in Washington June 16. (AFP/Jewel Samad)

At the meeting of the G-20 in Pittsburgh last month, first lady Michelle Obama invited spouses of the world's economic leaders to a dinner at Rosemont Farm in Fox Chapel, Pa. Owned by Teresa Heinz Kerry, wife of Sen. John Kerry, the farm produces and raises chickens and cows. Salad greens and apples from the farm were also on the menu in addition to the farm's sustainably raised meat.

Michelle Obama has taken on the cause of promoting locally grown food and healthier eating through a produce garden she planted on the White House lawn. She also helped open a farmers' market near the White House.

Meanwhile a debate intensifies about local food and its promise for feeding people, as discussion about food production has become more polarized with organic and local purists on one side and supporters of conventional agriculture on the other.

James E. McWilliams, an associate professor of U.S. environmental history at Texas State University, in August published a widely reviewed book titled *Just Food: Where Locavores Get It Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly*.

The term *locavore* refers to the collaborative effort to build more locally based, self-reliant food economies. Those who prefer to eat locally grown/produced food sometimes call themselves 'locavores' or 'localvores'.

That emphasis on local foods, McWilliams says, crowds out more complicated but accurate measures of environmental good because, in his view, locavorism is more about 'identity politics and anti-corporate angst' than about 'the realistic achievement of a more sensible system of food production.'

He looks for a middle ground on such issues as biotechnologies, pesticides and big agribusiness, arguing that the best efforts of well-intentioned American consumers cannot feed a growing world, that their version of eating responsibly is too narrow for global needs.

McWilliams feels that myths and outright propaganda surround both the organic farming movement and

conventional chemical-based production. In that mythology, he includes the 'fallacy' of calculating food miles and the mistaken belief that organic pest control is safe for people and the environment. He cites a now famous study that showed it is actually more efficient and environmentally responsible for Londoners to import lamb from New Zealand than to raise that meat in England.

McWilliams takes conventional production to task as well for its waste of resources and environmental degradation, but his focus remains on the local food movements.

'It's so much sexier to reiterate the mantra of eating local, growing rooftop gardens, foraging for wild dandelions and keeping backyard hens,' he writes. 'And this is wonderful. We can keep things local -- we *should* keep things local -- but we must stop insisting that our behavior is, if universalized, a viable answer to the world's present and future problems.'

Another blast came from an article published in July in *The American*, the journal of the American Enterprise Institute, by farmer Blake Hurst titled 'The Omnivore's Delusion: Against the Agri-Intellectuals.' Blake asserted that the results of organic and localized farming are troublesome, and include proliferation of molds, fungus and bug attacks. 'Since it is difficult to sell a religion with such readily quantifiable bad results, the trusty family farmer has to be thrown into the breach, saving the whole organic movement by his saintly presence, chewing on his straw, plodding along, at one with his environment, his community, his neighborhood.'

Hurst points out that the reality is rather giant organic enterprises dependent on lots of hired labor doing backbreaking work 'in order to save the sensitive conscience' of the organic locavore.



At the debate's other pole stands Michael Pollan, journalism professor at the University

of California in Berkeley and author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*. Pollan also contributes to *The New York Times Magazine* and is often featured as an opinion writer in *The New York Times*.

Pollan has become the leading spokesperson for the local food movement. In his most recent book he dispensed this often-quoted advice about healthy eating: 'Eat Food. Not Too Much. Mostly Plants.'

When Pollan spoke last month at the University of Wisconsin, hundreds of Wisconsin farmers attended the event wearing green shirts that read 'Eat Food. Be Healthy. Thank Farmers.'

Pollan acknowledged that not everyone in that audience was sympathetic to his work but said he appreciated them partaking in a crucial national conversation, adding that those who disagree with his ideas would likely be surprised by the amount of common ground they share. 'America's farmers hold the key to solving the national health care crisis, as well as the climate and energy crises,' he said.

At the event, farmer Randy Roecker said: 'We're never going to be able to feed all the mouths in this country and in the world without having technology.'

That technology includes controversial techniques and entities, such as genetically modified seeds and crops, growth hormones for cattle, fertilizing with fossil fuel-based chemicals and intensive cultivation.

“Feeding the world is not simply a matter of technology. I know that merely increasing yield does not necessarily solve the problems,” Pollan countered. “There need to be ways to utilize technology in ways that eliminate the reliance on excessive amounts of fertilizer, growth hormones and feed additives.”

Beyond the technology dispute, according to Pollan, is the concept of “nutritionalism,” the controlling ideology that shapes the way Americans think about and approach food. “It’s a marketing tool for large corporations to sell highly processed food under the guise of being healthy.” These processed foods vie for a spot in our grocery baskets, claiming to lower cholesterol, weight, glucose levels and much more.

“This and other practices have effectively created a market where 90 percent of the money spent on food by Americans goes to marketers and processors, while farmers are left with mere fractions of actual food revenue.”

Food in a country that is driven by a \$32 billion marketing machine is a loaded term and a holy grail. Big agribusiness lobbyists have made it such that the most unhealthy foods get the biggest government subsidies (see sidebar), according to Pollan.

“The food system, not the farmers, needs to change its incentives, as well as move the focus from quantity to quality,” Pollan said.

Holy Cross Br. David Andrews, senior representative for Washington-based Food and Water Watch, told *NCR*: “On one side they argue that the key to feeding the world is increasing production through fertilizer use and biotechnology. International studies such as the U.N. International Agricultural Assessment Report, a Michigan State study, one by the U.N. Environmental Program, and one by the Rodale Institute, all show that sustainable approaches are capable of feeding the world, approaches that respect biodiversity and would support millions of small farmers, most of whom are women. The old industrial approaches are supported by big business and multinationals. They continue to influence, with power over public policy.”

In the midst of this ongoing debate, on Sept. 10, Pollan wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* titled “Big Food vs. Big Insurance,” forecasting the rise of a major new player in the controversial American food conversation.

In it he argued that if health insurance companies are required to accept everyone, as called for by even weak health care reform legislation now in Congress, then the insurance industry will become a powerful ally in fight for better food and against the agribusiness lobby.

Bringing our health care costs under control ultimately depends on whether Washington “can summon the political will to take on and reform a second, even more powerful industry: the food industry.” He cites Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that indicate three-quarters of health care spending now goes to treat “preventable chronic diseases” -- such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and the many kinds of cancer that have been linked to a Western diet that is high in fat intake.

“The American way of eating has become the elephant in the room in the debate over health care” but so far food system reform has not figured in the national conversation about health care reform,” he wrote.

Pollan asserts that even minimal health care reform will include a provision that health insurers be required to take everyone at the same rates, provide a standard level of coverage and keep people on the rolls. As a result, the relationship between the health insurance industry and the food industry will undergo a sea change.

For example, a patient with Type 2 diabetes incurs additional health care costs of \$6,600 a year; over a lifetime, that can come to more than \$400,000. Insurers figure out that every case of Type 2 diabetes they can prevent adds nearly half a million to their bottom line. “Suddenly, every can of soda or Happy Meal or chicken nugget

on a school lunch menu will look like at threat to future profits.?

As a result, when health insurers can no longer evade much of the cost of treating the collateral damage of the American diet, the movement to reform the food system -- everything from farm policy to food marketing and school lunches -- will acquire a powerful and wealthy ally.?

According to Pollan, a team of designers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and New York's Columbia University was asked by the foundation of the insurer UnitedHealthcare to develop an innovative systems approach to tackling childhood obesity in America. Their conclusion surprised the designers as much as their sponsor; they determined that promoting the concept of a "foodshed" -- a diversified, regional food economy -- could be the key to improving the American diet.?

We all need to eat so the debate over organic and local vs. industrial agriculture will doubtless continue. We don't know if we can feed the world sustainably but we have to try," Pollan says. "And you're not powerless in choosing between options. You can vote with your fork.?"

Rich Heffern is an NCR staff writer. His e-mail address is rheffern@ncronline.org.

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