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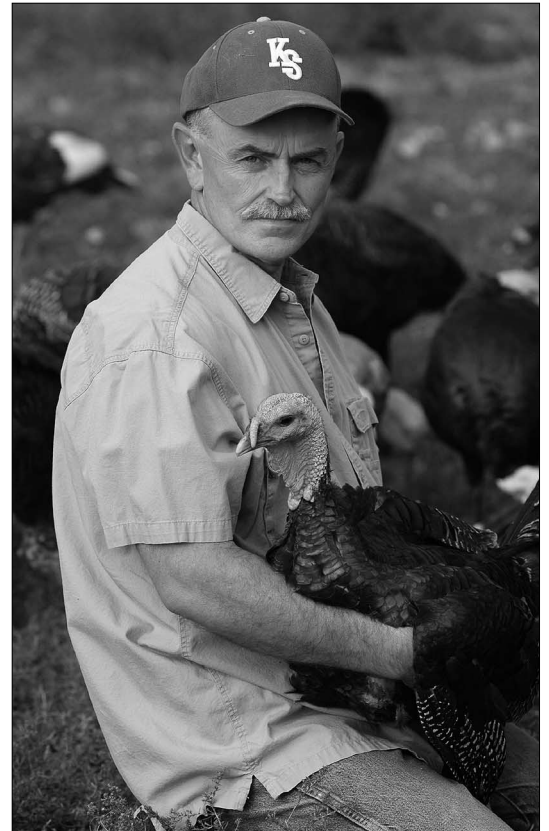
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Slow Food Movement

Can it change eating habits?

The Slow Food movement began more than 20 years ago with a protest against the opening of the first McDonald's in Rome. Today there are more than 300 McDonald's in Italy, and the campaign to elbow out fast food has grown into an international movement with adherents in more than 140 countries. Initiated by young Italian leftists who appreciated their country's regional cooking, the movement has focused on preserving endangered foods, promoting local cooking traditions and farming without polluting. Recently, its increasingly political rhetoric blames industrialized agriculture and the fast-food industry for environmental degradation and the loss of biodiversity as well as the waning of good, healthy eating. Amid growing concern about rising rates of childhood obesity in the West, some school systems have responded by switching to local, fresh ingredients. But critics say Slow Food's message is just for rich gourmets and doesn't appreciate modern agriculture's higher yields and lowered food costs.



Kansas poultry breeder Frank Reese's heritage turkeys are among several traditional U.S. foods in danger of disappearing.

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Slow Food Movement

BY SARAH GLAZER

THE ISSUES

This past Thanksgiving, most Americans who sat down to eat turkey ate exactly the same kind. That familiar Butterball turkey has been bred since the 1960s to maximize breeders' profits. It grows to market size within weeks, instead of months, and has an enormous breast to feed the American preference for white meat.

Compared to turkeys bred up until the 1920s, the Broad-breasted White, as the breed is officially known, has such an ample breast that it cannot be relied on to mate naturally. Its legs are so short it can barely run or fly. To prevent diseases in the crowded, confined spaces where commercial turkeys are raised, they're routinely fed antibiotics, contributing to concerns about the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.¹

But most crucial for the person about to enjoy one of the most festive meals of the year, today's "industrial" turkeys have lost the complex taste and texture of earlier varieties, say Slow Food chefs, farmers and consumers in the growing niche market for so-called heritage turkeys.

Now discerning diners have a choice, largely thanks to Frank Reese, a farmer in Lindsborg, Kan., who raises turkey breeds that were popular in the late 19th century. In the mid-1980s, he recalls, "I got to a point where I realized all the breeders [of heritage turkeys] I got turkeys from were dying on me. I realized if I couldn't find a way to get into the market, these breeds would disappear off the face of the Earth."



CQ Researcher/Sarah Glazer

A Libyan date seller joined more than 8,000 farmers, breeders, fishermen and food producers from 140 countries at Slow Food International's Terra Madre Food Summit last October in Turin, Italy. With more than 80,000 members worldwide, the Slow Food movement is adopting increasingly political rhetoric, blaming industrialized monoculture and the fast-food industry for environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity and the waning of healthy eating.

As Reese tells the story, the "Lord answered" his dilemma by sending Marian Burros, a *New York Times* food writer, who wrote an article declaring his turkeys the best in America. Reese was suddenly flooded with orders. A small family farmer at the time, Reese didn't even have a way to process credit cards. The U.S. chapter of Slow Food International, which sees fast food as a threat to America's food heritage and works to preserve endangered foods, came to his aid. With their help processing orders and marketing on the Internet, Reese has gone from selling a few hundred turkeys in the mid-1980s

to 8,000 last year. And he expanded his operation from one family farm to seven.

The growing market interest in heritage turkeys is probably the biggest success story for the American wing of the Slow Food movement, which is trying to save some of the 63 percent of indigenous crop varieties that have disappeared from cultivation since Europeans first set foot on the North American continent. Their list of plant and animal varieties that need saving includes: endangered oysters that live in the waters off Cape May, N.J., Ozette potatoes from the Northwest and wild rice cultivated by Native Americans in Washington state.²

The international Slow Food movement, launched in the mid-1980s by a small group of leftist Italian epicureans, was originally aimed at preserving the local foods and traditional cooking styles of Italy, then coming under siege from fast-food chains.

The U.S. movement is gaining adherents at a time when fast food is coming under

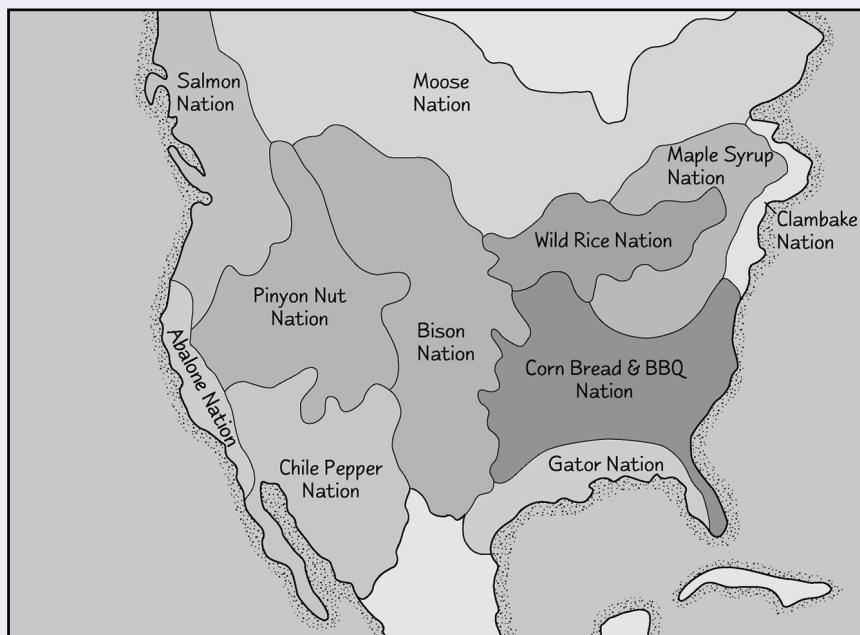
increasing criticism and Americans are discovering the joys of ethnic and gourmet cooking and eating. Salsa has surpassed ketchup in popularity, and balsamic vinegar — once obtainable only by traveling to Italy — is now a staple in supermarkets across the country. Since 1963, when a small, devoted audience first viewed Julia Child's "The French Chef," cooking shows have grown into a popular staple of American television — from the popular '90s-era "Frugal Gourmet" to today's perky cooking superstar Rachel Ray.

Indeed, well-prepared, exotic food is no longer the province of the gourmet

Mapping America's Regional Foods

To preserve America's biodiversity, the U.S. Slow Food movement has created a map of North America based on regions — or “food nations” — where certain traditional foods are at risk of extinction. The group aims to educate consumers and chefs about America's diminishing agricultural biodiversity and promotes conservation strategies for those crops. Up to 63 percent of North America's native crop varieties have disappeared from cultivation since European arrival on the continent.

Regional ‘Food Nations’ of North America



Source: Slow Food USA

elite, argues David Kamp in his 2006 book, *The United States of Arugula: How We Became a Gourmet Nation*. He recounts how America progressed from the sickly sweet Jell-O salads of the 1940s and '50s to a nation much closer to France in its preoccupation with sophisticated food.³

Meanwhile, recent books and films have exposed what some see as the distasteful underbelly of the U.S. food industry. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*, Eric Schlosser's best-selling 2001 exposé of the fast-food industry, charged that fast food endangers health and robs food of its natural taste. It recently was

turned into a movie. Now an even wider audience will see a food-industry executive sniffing a Q-tip doused in artificial flavor and exclaiming, “Wow, it tastes like it's right off the grill!”⁴ A raft of other food-industry exposés have also been released in recent years, including *Food Fight: The Inside Story of the Food Industry*, *America's Obesity Crisis*, and *What We Can Do About It*; *Diet for a Dead Planet: How the Food Industry Is Killing Us* and *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*.

Perhaps responding to such revelations, the Slow Food movement — boasting more than 80,000 members

worldwide — wants to become a much more radical political force, judging from the rhetoric at its international conference last October in Turin, Italy.⁵

“Good, clean and fair” is the new slogan of the movement, founder Carlo Petrini told 8,000 delegates from some 140 countries ranging from Mongolian yak-cheese makers to California organic farmers.

Until now, “good” — as in delicious — was the movement's primary motivating force and indeed the focus of critics who see Slow Food as an elite group of wealthy gourmands. But increasingly, the movement emphasizes the last two elements, with far more political implications. “Clean” refers to food that has been grown with sustainable-farming practices — without pesticides and fertilizers that degrade the environment. “Fair” means food raised by producers — whether farmworkers or owners — who are compensated fairly.

In taking up the cry for sustainable agriculture, the movement has also waded into some hot-button issues — blaming farm subsidies and genetically modified foods for contributing to the shrinking diversity of plants and animals used for food.⁶

In the United States, where experts are alarmed by skyrocketing rates of childhood obesity, the movement has focused on school cafeterias as its most promising training ground for expanding children's palates and building a demand for local ingredients.⁷ Activists have helped several school systems switch from fast-food, deep-fried offerings to menus emphasizing fresh, local ingredients.

But that movement has a long row to hoe, judging by the opposition in England to the government's new policy banning potato chips — “crisps” — in school lunches and requiring more vegetables. Many British children have refused to eat the new, healthy menu designed by celebrity chef Jamie Oliver. And students in Berkeley, Calif., also revolted when faced with vegetarian pizza.⁸ (See sidebar, p. 84.)

Rescuing Traditional Foods Around the World

The Slow Food movement is working to save dozens of traditional foods around the world from extinction, from lentils in France and sheep in Norway to blue egg hens in Chile and mustard oil pickles in India.

Selected Endangered Traditional Foods

Western Europe		
France	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Dominican Republic
Bigorre black pig	Pozegaca plum slatko	Sierra cafetalera coffee
Pardailhan black turnip	Sack cheese	Mexico
Rennes coucou chicken	Croatia	Chinantla vanilla
Saint-Flour Planète golden lentil	Giant Istrian ox	Tehuacán amaranth
Greece	Hungary	Peru
Mavrotragano wine	Mangalica sausage	Pampacorral sweet potatoes
Niotiko cheese	Poland	San Marcos Andean fruit
Netherlands	Polish mead	Venezuela
Aged artisan gouda	Middle East	Barlovento cacao
Chaam hen	Lebanon	Africa
Oosterschelde lobster	Darfiyeh cheese	Egypt
Norway	Keчек el fouqara cheese	Siwa dates
Sørøya Island stockfish	Latin America	Madagascar
Sunnmøre cured and smoked herring	Argentina	Andasibe red rice
Villsau sheep	Andean corn	Mananara vanilla
Spain	Andean potatoes	Mauritania
Euskal Txerria pig	Bolivia	Imraguen bottarga fish eggs
Ganxet bean	Pando Brazil nut	Morocco
Jiloca saffron	Potosí llama	Argan oil
Tolosa black bean	Brazil	Asia
United Kingdom	Barù nut	Armenia
Artisan Somerset cheddar	Canapù bean	Motal cheese
Cornish pilchard	Jucara palm heart	China
Fal River oyster	Sateré Mawé native warana fruit	Tibetan Plateau yak cheese
Old Gloucester beef	Chile	India
Central and Eastern Europe	Blue egg hen	Dehra dun basmati rice
Belarus	Purén white strawberries	Orissa mustard oil pickles
Rosson wild fruits and infusions	Robinson Crusoe Island seafood	Malaysia
		Bario rice
		Rimbàs black pepper

Source: Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity

The Slow Food movement stresses that it's about the pleasures of the table, not morality or health. In this spirit, advocates prefer to promote the delicious tastes of regional meats, fish, fruits and vegetables by exposing chefs and consumers to their wonders and by encouraging farmers and breed-

ers to raise endangered varieties.

In that vein, the American media "still regard Slow Food as a dining club," Michael Pollan, author of the 2006 book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, told American delegates in Turin. His book lays the blame for America's highly processed fast-food culture in large part on gov-

ernment subsidies for a few commodity crops like corn and soybeans. "The idea that pleasure and politics occupy the same room is hard to swallow" — at least for Americans, said Pollan. As a journalist-turned-activist, he is helping to organize a Slow Food conference in San Francisco next year.

SLOW FOOD MOVEMENT

Indeed, most of the movement's work takes place through its chapters, known as "convivia" to emphasize the convivial nature of eating together. And judging by a meeting of the Martha's Vineyard convivium last August, the event was more about enjoying the homegrown heirloom tomatoes at its potluck dinner and sponsoring public tastings of island food than about trying to change national agricultural policy.

Pollan recently urged a new direction, arguing in *The Nation* magazine that people who care passionately about food should get involved in reforming the arcane farm bill being considered by Congress this year.⁹ Among other things, he argued, it is expected to perpetuate vast corn subsidies that largely benefit a handful of agricultural interests and encourage the overuse of products like corn syrup in food manufacturing, contributing to America's obesity epidemic.¹⁰

But while the American Slow Food movement supports moving the nation away from such subsidies and toward sustainable farming, lobbying Congress won't be its focus, says Erika Lesser, executive director of Slow Food USA. The U.S. movement has grown rapidly — from 1,500 members in 2000 to 15,000 today — "because people want to feel good about doing good." Unlike environmental advocacy with its "guilt and dire predictions," she says, "we're trying to tap into a collective desire to live well — but it shouldn't be limited to just a few."

Some critics wonder if a movement that attracts "posh" people interested in rare and frequently expensive types

of food has much to offer the majority. Others argue that the modern agricultural techniques criticized by Slow Food have banished hunger for many low-income families by making food far more affordable and frequently just as healthy as food raised to be environmentally sustainable.

As the movement tries to change poor eating habits and the farm prac-

known effort to farm without hurting the environment — the organic food movement. Like proponents of organic farming, Slow Food advocates argue that food is better for the environment if it doesn't degrade soil and water with pesticides and fertilizer and avoids the overuse of antibiotics in animals. Many of the foods championed by Slow Food advocates are grown along these principles even if they don't carry an official government-approved organic label. Indeed, most of the foods that Slow Food has singled out for safeguarding are not grown with organic methods because government-certification requirements are too burdensome, the group notes on its Web site.¹¹

Organic food is "slightly better nutritionally, because it's grown on better soil," says Marion Nestle, professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University. Some organic advocates prefer organic food on the grounds that it contains little or no pesticide residue, but as Pollan notes, "remarkably little research" has been done to assess the effects of regular exposure to the government-accepted levels of pesticide or growth hormone.¹²

Indeed, "The organic movement has overclaimed on the nutrition benefits," says Kath Dalmany, deputy coordinator of SUSTAIN, a London-based coalition of 100 organizations interested in food and the environment. "There are some micronutrient benefits [vitamins and minerals] within traditional food varieties, but there's some debate about whether it's the traditional variety or organic method that gives that difference."

When produce is local and fresh, as at farmers' markets where the peas have



Organic farmer Denise Walton displays smoked pork from her farm in Scotland during Slow Food International's October 2006 conference in Turin, Italy, as Alan Roe, development director of Slow Food UK, pours British wine. The group strives to educate the public about the joys of eating tasty, locally raised food.

CQ Researcher/Sarah Glazer

of food that feed them, here are some of the questions being debated:

Is Slow Food better than conventionally grown food?

"Eating is the ultimate environmental act," chef Alice Waters, founder of the legendary Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley, Calif., recently told the Slow Food conference in Italy.

And indeed that has long been the main rallying cry of the most well-

been picked that morning, the sweetness is something that can't be found in industrial varieties, especially those grown for shipping rather than taste. Organic food is not always better, says Waters, who pioneered the restaurant wave in sourcing fresh vegetables and fruits. The crucial variable, she says, is ripeness: "If you get a ripe commercial tomato, it will taste better than an unripe organic tomato. If you get a ripe, organic tomato, it is one of the most incredible taste experiences of your life."

Taste, of course, is personal. Take the heritage turkey. "The flavor is much bigger than you've experienced in the past," says Don Schrider, communications director of the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy in Pittsboro, N.C., devoted to saving endangered breeds.

But is it worth \$4.25-\$10 per pound vs. the \$1.50 per pound for a supermarket turkey? "If you can't taste the difference between a \$6 and \$50 dollar bottle of wine, it's not worth tasting," says Schrider. There have been no scientific taste tests of heritage turkey where subjects are blinded, according to R. Scott Beyer, agricultural extension specialist in poultry for the state of Kansas.

Some experts are concerned, however, that the nation's dependence on conventional industrial farming may also be robbing Americans of their health. Experts suspect, for instance, that the nation's dependence on industrialized farming has contributed to the recent increase in *E. coli* outbreaks. Since September, lettuce from Taco Bell restaurants and bacteria-tainted spinach and tomatoes have made hundreds of people sick and killed three. Over the past 30 years, instances of food-borne illness — often linked to fresh produce — have increased.

Although the reason is uncertain, Christopher Braden, chief of the outbreak response and surveillance team for enteric diseases at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), has surmised, "You have these huge

processors and distributors that produce tens of thousands of pounds of a particular produce in a particular day. If something goes wrong with that produce, you've got a big problem, whereas with small farmers if there is a problem it's much more limited." ¹³

To be sure, outbreaks also have been blamed on small farmers. For instance, an outbreak of fatal *E. coli* in schoolchildren in Wales in 2005 was traced to locally produced meat products. ¹⁴

Another major concern is the monoculture practiced by industrial-size farming operations. Raising a variety of plants and animals provides insurance against a disease to which one variety may be particularly vulnerable, helping to guard against a single virus wiping out a breed of animal or widely planted crop. "As you narrow the gene pool, it's a worrisome issue," says Beyer.

Greater biodiversity also provides better, more varied taste. "The apples we eat aren't the kind that are best for cider. We want them tart," says Patty West, an ethno-ecologist with the Center for Sustainable Environments, at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. She has been interviewing a farmer in his 90s about the apple trees on his homestead that were cut down years ago to make room for varieties that produced more apples, but that may have sacrificed taste.

"When you look at dwindling varieties of foods, there's the genetic cost of losing seeds and the human cost of losing flavors, and nobody can really measure that," West says. Although natural selection continually weeds out certain varieties, she says, "A lot of natural selection happened because [certain varieties] were marketable and transportable, not because of taste."

Conventional farming methods produce higher yields, cheaper food and are better for poor countries fighting widespread hunger, say some critics of the Slow Food and organic food movements. Rob Lyons, a health writer for the British online magazine *spiked*, has argued that organic yields are 20-50 percent lower

than conventional farming because organic farmers can't use fertilizers or pesticides when they need them.

"Organic farming, because it's much less productive, must take up more land — including wilderness," he says. Ironically, that would contribute to loss of biodiversity, since natural habitat would have to be destroyed to increase the amount of land used for organic farming. "If we went over to an organic system, production would drop and people would have less choice," he says.

Lesser of Slow Food USA concedes there isn't enough available open land to raise all of the animals eaten for meat in this country on grass pasture, which Slow Food adherents generally consider the ideal environmental system because grazing animals fertilize the soil naturally and produce less fatty, tastier meat. "But it would also be OK if we ate a little less meat" that was of higher quality, she says.

Slow Food's emphasis on thinking locally leads to a reluctance to buy produce from Third World markets and to an "antidevelopment ethos," charges Ceri Dingle, director of WORLDwrite, a London-based organization that fosters cultural exchange between youths in Europe and in the developing world.

Dingle says that even when Slow Food supports indigenous producers of dates in Libya or nuts in Mali — whose representatives attended the Slow Food conference in Turin — their life is far from the romanticized ideal envisioned by Westerners. "Most development worldwide is organic not by choice but because that's all they've got," she says. "They haven't access to new technology or new, genetically modified strains of guava."

Should schools radically change the lunches they provide?

The Slow Food movement views schools as a prime locus for revamping the way people think about food. Researchers find that children must be

Rescuing Threatened Traditional U.S. Products

Slow Food USA is dedicated to preserving the six foods below as part of its effort to restore America's agricultural biodiversity and counter what it perceives as the negative effects of biotechnology and industrial farming. The group seeks to stabilize production techniques, promote artisan products, establish stringent production standards and guarantee a viable future for traditional foods.

American Raw-Milk Cheeses — With U.S. raw-milk cheesemakers challenged by a lack of regional identity and frequent changes in health and food-safety regulations, Slow Food USA decided to focus their first rescue efforts on saving these cheeses. The group works with about 30 producers to improve American raw-milk cheeses and create a network of cheesemakers.

Anishinaabeg Manoomin (wild rice) — The indigenous wild rice harvested by the Anishinaabeg Indians of the Great Lakes region provides a bountiful harvest that can be stored during the winter. Slow Food USA says manoomin is threatened by contamination from genetically engineered rice species, mass-cultivation techniques that do not observe Native American traditions and recreational zoning and dams that destroy the region's natural ecosystems.

Cape May Salt Oyster — Slow Food USA supports growing salt oysters in Delaware Bay in an effort to maintain a low environmental-impact cultivation system. Developed in France,

the technique allows oyster sprats to be produced in hatcheries and placed on nets stretching across the shallows exposed to the tide, thereby feeding naturally by filtering ocean water without the addition of artificial feed or antibiotics.

Heritage Turkey Breeds — Commercial turkeys are selected for low-cost production, resulting in unnatural turkey breeds that require intervention for reproduction, according to Slow Food USA's partner in saving heritage turkeys, the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy. It promotes turkeys produced by natural mating, a long, productive outdoor lifespan and slow growth rates that preserve successful mating and production of fertile eggs without artificial insemination or other interventions.

Gravenstein Apple — Traditionally grown in California's Sonoma County, this apple species is known for its all-purpose versatility: for eating, sauces and apple pie. Slow Food USA is helping the few remaining Gravenstein growers with marketing in an effort to counter the species' quick perishability and the shrinking acreage dedicated to its production.

Navajo-Churro Sheep — Native American and Hispanic communities in the Southwest have long raised Churro sheep, which produce milk, low-fat meat, horns, pelts, two distinct kinds of fiber and manure that renews soil fertility. Slow Food activists partner with several organizations and sheep herders to develop a market for Churro meat.

exposed to different tastes at an early age to develop a taste for them. (In fact, by age 4 or 5, almost all children become "neophobic," developing an aversion to new foods — and to vegetables, in particular (perhaps an evolutionary protection against poisonous plants).¹⁵

More variety on the plate will lead to more variety in foods grown, advocates hope, as children grow up to be more discerning consumers who demand local produce. Cecily Upton, coordinator of the Slow Food in Schools program, which oversees about 30 school projects in the United States, suggests that educating kids about local foods may turn them into advocates for local farms as adults. Through visits to farms and other educational programs, children learn the carrot they eat "comes from Farmer Bob who owns the farm down the street," she says. "So when a big mega-development wants to kick

Farmer Bob out, the community has a much stronger tie to Farmer Bob."

Rising childhood obesity also has focused more concern on the amount of fat in many school lunches and the presence of junk-food vending machines in schools. The prevalence of overweight school-age children has almost tripled since the 1970s, according to the CDC, reaching 19 percent among children ages 6-11 and 17 percent among teens 12-19.¹⁶

"Rates of obesity are now so high among American children that many exhibit abnormalities formerly seen only in adults," according to New York University's Nestle. These include high blood sugar due to adult-onset diabetes, high blood cholesterol and high blood pressure in younger and younger children — a "national scandal" in Nestle's view because all of the conditions can be prevented by eating better diets.¹⁷

Chez Panisse founder Waters, who is also vice president of Slow Food International, contends that the growing obesity problem is evidence that current school lunches are unhealthy. "We have to do something radical — like we did when we brought physical education into the public school system," she argues. "We're in a much more serious crisis now."

Waters believes that like physical education, eco-gastronomy, as she calls it, should be part of children's education. "It's not just changing the food in the school," she insists. "We need a course of study that teaches children about the importance of food in their lives and helps them to make the right kinds of decisions once they understand what the consequences are."

Waters pioneered this concept with an "edible school yard" at the Martin Luther King, Jr. School in Berkeley, where middle-school children grow their

own vegetables and learn how to cook them. The kids happily eat unfamiliar foods like chick peas and chard after that hands-on experience, Waters boasts. Through her nonprofit Chez Panisse Foundation, Waters brought a well-respected chef, Ann Cooper, to make similar changes in the cafeterias of Berkeley's other 16 public schools.

But Cooper ran into major problems. After she introduced whole-wheat veggie pizza with sophisticated toppings like zucchini, blue cheese and walnuts, the trash cans overflowed with rejected slices. More than 200 students presented Cooper with a petition protesting the pizza and other new offerings.

In her first year, Cooper went tens of thousands of dollars over budget, lost many paying customers (students) and was stuck with surplus commodity foods provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), like processed cheese and canned fruit in heavy syrup. A year later, according to a detailed account in *The New Yorker*, Cooper shocked Waters by serving meat loaf. She had come to appreciate centralized kitchens, mainstream recipes and a large bakery that could produce 200,000 pastries a day.¹⁸

Asked about that outcome, Waters says, "We asked Ann to do what she could do" within the existing constraints of budget and USDA guidelines. But she adds, "That's not the goal. She's trying to work within the system, within the budget; I'm talking about doubling the budget."



Chef Alice Waters, founder of the famed Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley, Calif., and a founder of the Slow Food USA movement, discusses her "edible school yard" concept with Britain's Prince Charles — an avid organic gardener — during a visit to Berkeley's Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School on Nov. 7, 2005.

AP Photo/D. Ross Cameron

Janey Thornton, president of the School Nutrition Association, which represents both school cafeteria directors and major food corporations, counters that school meals have already grown much healthier in response to concerns about obesity. "Were seeing a tremendous increase in fresh fruits and vegetables being offered and a greater variety" in schools across the country, she says. "Where there used to be more whole milk, there are now fat-free or low-fat food products," including a lot more whole wheat and fiber.

And she cautions against too radical a change. In her Hardin County, Ky., school district, where she is nutrition director, soft drinks have been banned from vending machines but are still

served at athletic events after school. "If we say to students never ever drink a soda, I don't know that they'll listen to anything we say," she warns.

Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), says the USDA needs to make its guidelines more consistent with current knowledge about nutrition, such as reducing saturated fat, eliminating trans fats and switching to low-fat or fat-free milk. The USDA also needs to update its standards for vending machine sodas and snacks served outside of school meals, she says. USDA standards for snacks served outside lunch are "very weak and woefully out of date," she says. "They don't address saturated fat, trans fat, sodium, calories — the major nutritional concerns."

In England, controversy erupted after the government tried to make school meals healthier by requiring

more vegetables and fewer fried foods. "Meatpie mums" sneaked food to kids at school who claim they're going hungry without the usual French fries, and the number of kids taking school lunches dropped in some districts. Some critics say the program is demonizing kids for their eating habits, which are normally conservative. (See sidebar, p. 84.)

Slow Food's Upton suggests Britons may have made too radical a change too quickly. "Instead of telling kids they can't have pizza [with lots of sodium and processed cheese], we have a cheese maker come in and they make it with him; it's a treat." The goal, she says, is the "pleasures of the table; we're interested in changing eating habits but not necessarily because

of the obesity epidemic. Food tastes good when it's local, seasonal and fresh from the farm and prepared with friends and family. Understanding food is more than something you eat — it's a community activity as well."

Would reducing farm subsidies improve our food?

American obesity and concomitant diseases like type-2 diabetes are increasingly being blamed on U.S. farm policies. Farm subsidies and trade policy have given rise to a food system that supplies 3,900 calories for each person every day, roughly twice what we need and 700 calories more than was consumed in 1980, the dawning of the obesity epidemic, Nestle wrote recently. "In this overabundant food economy, companies must compete fiercely for sales," she observed, pushing the industry toward selling junk foods and super-sizing portions.¹⁹

Corn accounts for most of the surplus calories we grow and eat, and corn farmers receive about a quarter of the roughly \$20 billion in farm subsidies paid by U.S. taxpayers each year, Pollan writes in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*.²⁰

The mountain of cheap, surplus corn has encouraged the development of a wide variety of novel corn products like high-fructose corn syrup — largely responsible for the dense calories in processed foods. Pollan describes how family farms that once raised a variety of vegetables, fruits and pasture-grazed animals were ripped up to benefit from the government's corn payments, contributing to the development of a corn monoculture and the loss of crop diversity.

In a recent forum in *The Nation* magazine, Pollan argued, "Nothing could do more to reform America's food system — and by doing so improve the condition of America's environment and public health — than if the rest of us were suddenly to weigh in" on the upcoming farm bill.

The legislation is traditionally written largely by two agriculture committees and a small contingent of lobbyists for big commodity crops like corn and soybeans. The bill comes up for reauthorization later this year.²¹

Corn subsidies help explain why the Agriculture Department has traditionally dumped cheap, low-grade beef and dairy products — typically high in fat — on American schools for children's lunches, critics say. The subsidies are also one reason why processed foods — which usually contain some corn product — are the cheapest source of calories and a contributor to obesity among the poor. Anyone cruising the typical American supermarket on a budget will find that a dollar buys thousands more calories in the processed foods and soda aisles than in the produce section. "Why? Because the farm bill supports the growing of corn but not the growing of fresh carrots," Pollan writes.²²

By contrast, says Ronnie Cummins, national director of the Organic Consumers Association in Finland, Minn., organic produce is more expensive because farmers get minimal government help — less than \$2 million out of some \$20 billion yearly — to switch from conventional farming to organic farming. During the federally prescribed three-year transition to organic certification, farmers often lose money. They may suffer reduced yields because they're no longer relying on pesticides and artificial fertilizers. And they have to pay for inspection and other new costs but cannot yet certify their products organic to command a premium price.

"In the European Union, governments understand it's in your interest to help family farmers make the transition to organic," says Cummins. "We're saying in the U.S. we want a fair share of USDA subsidies and program moneys for organic and transition-to-organic farmers."

In 2003, the European Union (EU) de-linked farm subsidies from production in favor of payments that reward-

ed environmental stewardship. Under the new system, British farmers receive a per-acre payment for environmentally sound practices, even more for acreage that's organic and yet more for additional conservation, such as protecting moorland. It's too early to say whether the program has encouraged more farmers to go organic, because many only started getting their new payments last year, says Peter Melchett, policy director of the Soil Association, a leading organic advocacy group in England.

However, the government now has more than 28,000 environmental stewardship agreements with farmers on about 10 million acres, according to Matt Conway, a spokesman for the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Growing consumer demand for organics in Europe is probably the main factor driving the growth of organic farming, Melchett says.

Until the recent reform in EU subsidies, Scottish organic farmer Denise Walton says she and her husband were caught up on a production treadmill because subsidies were based on quantity. Now that they get a fixed payment for environmental management at the end of the year, they've been able to vary the mix of cropland and pasture for their organically raised hogs and put some arable land into rotation. "We've been able to adopt the Slow Food philosophy, and we're free to give the market what it needs," she said, as she passed out samples of her smoked pork at the United Kingdom booth in Turin.

The American Farmland Trust, which works to preserve farm and grazing land and protect rural communities, is mounting an aggressive attack on traditional farm programs. Instead of proposing a wholesale shift in subsidies along European lines — an uphill political battle — the trust proposes "green payments" to farmers who undertake environmentally sound practices, says Policy Director Jimmy Daukas. The existing subsidies, which go mainly to five commodity

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Chronology

1930s *During the Depression, government aids farmers struggling with surpluses and falling prices, sends surplus foods to hungry schoolchildren.*

1933

First farm bill passed to bolster prices of commodity crops like corn.

1940s-1950s

Fast-food empires and time-saving foods sprout, spurred by new highways and suburbs and working moms; cooking becomes a man's activity; free school lunches started.

1940

J. I. Rodale founds *Organic Gardening and Farming* magazine.

1948

McDonald brothers apply assembly-line technique to hamburger joint; donut shop opens that will become Dunkin Donuts.

1952

First Kentucky Fried Chicken opens near Salt Lake City. By the early 1960s, it is the largest restaurant chain in the United States.

1956

Congress passes the first Interstate Highway Act, which encourages car sales and suburban developments.

1960s-1970s

Organic foods enter the counter-culture; hippies start communal farming; gourmet cooking rises in popularity; Alice Waters starts fresh-food movement.

1963

"The French Chef" debuts on TV with Julia Child.

1966

Child Nutrition Act requires Department of Agriculture (USDA) to develop nutrition regulations for school meals.

1969

Activists seize People's Park in Berkeley, Calif., to build a model society and grow fresh food.

1971

Waters opens Chez Panisse in Berkeley, stressing fresh, local ingredients.

1973

President Richard M. Nixon's Agriculture secretary, Earl Butz, urges farmers to plant corn; government pays farmers for shortfalls in the price of corn.

1975

Gourmet cookware sales rise.

1980s *Opening of McDonald's in Rome is protested; Slow Food movement founded; prosperity of era makes gourmet items increasingly available and affordable; Reagan administration declares ketchup a vegetable.*

March 20, 1986

McDonald's opens in Rome's Piazza di Spagna, provoking protests.

Nov. 3, 1987

Carlo Petrini publishes manifesto arguing that "slow food" should replace fast food.

1989

Inaugural meeting of international Slow Food movement held in Paris.

1990s *Slow Food grows into international movement, adds mission of saving endangered foods.*

1995

Slow Food France is launched.

1997

Slow Food launches the Ark of Taste "to save the planet of taste" for endangered, delicious foods.

2000s *Slow Food movement adds the United States and Britain to its roster; Americans spend half their food dollar on restaurants, and one-quarter visit fast-food restaurants at least once a week; new interests jockey over federal farm subsidies.*

2000

Slow Food USA is founded in New York with 1,000 members.

2005

Slow Food United Kingdom is born. Slow Food has 83,000 members worldwide. U.S. government publishes new *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

October 2006

Terra Madre, Slow Food's international conference in Turin, draws 8,000 delegates and 100,000 visitors to tasting halls.

2007

Farm bill to come up for a vote in Congress with new pressures from health groups, organic and small-farm interests. . . . USDA is expected to issue new nutrition guidelines for school lunches.

British Schools Won't Serve French Fries

Celebrity chef's new lunch menu causes some indigestion

Celebrity Chef Jamie Oliver caused a sensation when his television exposé revealed that British schools were feeding children deep-fried foods shaped like smiley faces but filled with reconstituted meat of mysterious, repellant origin.

At Kidbrooke School in Greenwich, the students were subsisting largely on French fries, according to Oliver, and couldn't identify fresh vegetables like asparagus. After 5 million people watched the program "Jamie's School Dinners," Oliver collected more than 270,000 signatures on a petition to Prime Minister Tony Blair asking for improvements in school meals. Blair pledged £220 million (about \$434 million) and set up the independent School Food Trust, which issued new food standards.

Last September, potato chips, sugary drinks and candy were banished from British school cafeterias. They now must serve at least two portions of fruit and vegetables every day, limit deep-fried foods to no more than twice weekly, keep salt off lunch tables and serve fish at least once every three weeks.

The government cited statistics showing Britons are the fattest people in Europe and predictions that by 2020 about 30 percent of boys and 40 percent of girls will be clinically obese.¹

But the reforms quickly ran into problems. At Rawmarsh School in Northern England, several mothers caused a sensation passing forbidden fries and hamburgers to children through

school railings, complaining that they were going hungry. One mother said her children found the new low-fat pizza and tagliatelle with meatballs particularly unattractive. The mothers called a truce after the media dubbed them "meatpie mums."²

In November, a BBC survey found that 59 percent of local authorities had recorded a recent decline in the number of diners taken by children at secondary schools. Though the survey suggested a small overall drop of 5.8 percent, some schools reported 30 percent declines.³

Responding to the survey, School Food Trust spokesman Brian Dow says, "We were very clear in the first year you'd see a bit of a dip. It's very common that kids are initially a bit hostile. Some research shows it takes as much as 12 tastes of a food before children come round to enjoying it."

Oliver's show documented many of the obstacles he encountered when he first experimented in schools. Students led demonstrations against his new recipes with fresh vegetables and said they wanted their French fries back. His solution: grind up the vegetables in the tomato sauce. Many schools had abandoned kitchens altogether in years past and employed "dinner ladies" who simply reheated meals instead of cooking. Oliver's solution: boot camp cookery training and using the kitchens of local pubs, which proved to be a sanitation nightmare.

Nevertheless, a year after he began the experiment TV cameras captured kids eating his green salad and saying they actually liked his spaghetti Bolognese.

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crops — corn, wheat, cotton, soybeans and rice — primarily end up in the hands of larger farmers, he says, and can stimulate overproduction.

"It's costing a lot of taxpayer dollars and not getting a lot of public benefit," Daukas says. "If we want to support farmers, why not support them for their stewardship of the land?"

But it's not just big farmers who are likely to oppose any wholesale shift away from subsidizing commodities. "We feel the broad-brush elimination of commodity-crop subsidies would be very difficult for family-scale farmers that rely on commodity subsidies," says Thomas Forster, policy director at the Community Food Security Coalition, representing

300 groups from soup kitchens to farmers' cooperatives interested in connecting farm food to city-dwellers' needs.

Rep. Ron Kind, D-Wis., co-chairman of the congressional Organic Caucus, plans to introduce legislation proposing a boost in government payments — to about \$35 million over five years — to help farms make the transition to organic. He favors de-linking subsidies from production, noting that 70 percent of producers in this country "get virtually nothing under the farm bill. That shows how top-heavy these subsidy payments are and how they benefit so few of our producers."

Lyons, of *spiked* magazine, says some observers suspect the new EU reforms are just a way for governments to keep

the payments going to their nation's farmers. "You suspect it's driven by countries with a lot more farmers," he says. "There isn't demand for the food they produce," so countries keep on funding them "just to keep the countryside tidy." It would be more rational if farm produce from the developing world were given a market, he adds. ■

BACKGROUND

The Brothers McDonald

Only a generation ago, three-quarters of Americans' food ex-

Some advocacy groups say they've had much better success rates introducing fresh, organic food. One school even boosted the proportion of children eating hot meals by 40 percent. Why the difference?

Peter Melchett, policy director of the Soil Association, a British certifying and advocacy group for organic food, attributes such successes partly to educational components like having children grow their own vegetables in window boxes.

But Jane Sandeman, the London parent of two daughters, worries that children as young as 6 "are being told you mustn't eat fatty foods [in order to remain] thin. For young girls, this obsession about having too few calories isn't a good message."

Sandeman finds it "intrusive" that her 7-year-old daughter's lunchbox gets inspected at her school, which awards a prize for the healthiest lunchbox. "It is saying to parents, 'We don't trust you packing a lunchbox for your child,'" she objects. The practice of investigating lunchboxes isn't coming from the trust, says spokesman Dow. As for Sandeman's worries, he responds,



AFP/Getty Images/Greg Wood

Celebrity British chef Jamie Oliver revealed that British schools were feeding children unhealthy, deep-fried meals, prompting the government to ban potato chips, sugary drinks and candy and require more vegetables in school lunches.

"I don't think the culture we're promoting is about cutting calories — it's just types of food high in salt and sugar. We have an obesity crisis."

London University medical professor Stanley Feldman, coauthor of the 2006 book *Panic Nation*, which defends British school meals, questions the nutritional value of some of the changes — for example to use ciabatta rather than white bread, noting they both have the same carbohydrate value. The program has confused nutrition with "what we

adults consider palatable," he says. And children's palates are often very different from adults, he notes. "A lot of children have never eaten a green vegetable in their life and become perfectly normal adults."

¹ "Did You Know?" School Food Trust, www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk.

² Sarah Lyall, "Glorious Food? English Schoolchildren Think Not," *The New York Times*, Oct. 18, 2006, p. A1.

³ Mark Oliver, "Health Drive Puts Pupils Off School Meals," *Guardian Unlimited*, Nov. 6, 2006, <http://education.guardian.co.uk>.

penses went for meals prepared at home. Today, about half of food expenditures are in restaurants — mainly fast-food restaurants.²³

How did we become a nation where 75 percent of Americans eat fast food at least once a week?²⁴

The answer starts with brothers Richard and Maurice McDonald, who ran a hamburger drive-in in San Bernardino, Calif., in the late 1940s. Tired of constantly hiring new cooks and carhops and replacing broken dishes, they decided to try a radically new approach in 1948.²⁵

Applying assembly-line principles, they divided up cooking into small tasks for each kitchen worker, used paper plates and featured self-service. The faster and cheaper

operation resulted in lower prices and more customers.

"Working-class families could finally afford to feed their kids restaurant food," as a McDonald historian put it.²⁶

Dunkin' Donuts followed quickly in McDonald's footsteps, and in 1952 Kentucky Fried Chicken opened near Salt Lake City.

The 1956 Interstate Highway Act helped to catalyze the growth of chains by creating the nation's highway system, which encouraged car sales and suburban development. Other fundamental societal changes also contributed, notes Schlosser in *Fast Food Nation*. In 1975, one-third of American mothers with children worked outside the home. Today, about two-thirds are employed, creating the

need for the cooking services housewives once performed.²⁷

Today, with about 30,000 restaurants worldwide and almost 2,000 opening each year, McDonald's is the nation's largest purchaser of beef, pork and potatoes and the second-largest purchaser of chicken.²⁸ That kind of centralized purchasing power and demand for standardized products have given a few corporations an "unprecedented degree of power over the nation's food supply," writes Schlosser.²⁹

Meanwhile, government subsidies to farmers who raised commodity crops like corn and soybeans kept prices for those crops extremely low, further fueling the growth of cheap fast food. The first farm bill was passed during the farm depression in 1933

to keep commodities from falling below a government-set target price and to avoid surpluses.

But that system changed in 1973, when the inflation rate for groceries reached an all-time high, and grain-feed prices rose so much that middle-class families couldn't afford beef. In response, President Richard M. Nixon's Agriculture secretary, Earl Butz, urged farmers to plant corn from "fencerow to fencerow" and paid them directly for the shortfall in corn prices.

The new subsidies, writes Pollan, encouraged farmers to sell their corn at any price, even as the growing supplies of corn drove prices ever lower. Beginning in the 1980s, big grain buyers like Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland helped to write U.S. farm bills, favoring their interest in keeping corn prices low over the interest of the farmers, Pollan writes.³⁰ By October 2005, farmers were selling a bushel of corn for a dollar less than it cost to grow, thanks to subsidies.³¹

High-fructose corn syrup is one product of cheap corn, and in 1984 Coca Cola and Pepsi switched entirely from sugar to the cheaper corn syrup, which permitted them to super-size their sodas. McDonalds found that super-sizing portions got people to buy more food. Industrial livestock farms — so-called factory farms — also switched to feeding their animals grain instead of putting them out to pasture, and cheap grain kept the meat cheap.³²

Pollan argues that fast food has fooled our bodies — wired by evolution to seek out energy-dense foods — causing us to eat more than is good for us, since "we seldom encounter these nutrients in the concentrations we now find them in processed foods."³³

Rise of Slow Food

In 1986, a young Italian activist, Carlo Petrini, started the Slow Food move-

ment to protest the opening of a McDonald's in Rome's historic Piazza di Spagna. Fast food had arrived in one of Italy's most beautiful squares over the protests of artists, architects and other protectors of Italian culture, one of whom said the "nauseating smell of fried food" would contribute to "the ruin of Rome."³⁴ (Today there are more than 300 McDonald's in Italy.)

Petrini was then part of a group of young leftists who traveled around Italy attending fairs celebrating the food specialties and wines of its different regions. Petrini was sitting around with his buddies grumbling about the new McDonald's when he came up with the idea of writing a manifesto. "It was like a joke" — an ironic play on the phrase Fast Food, says Gigi Padovani, coauthor with Petrini of a history of the movement, *Slow Food Revolution*, published last year in this country.

The manifesto, published in 1987, argued that "slow food" should replace fast food and that the table should be "given back to taste and to the pleasure of the gourmand." The activists welcomed all those "who still love the enjoyment of easygoing, slow pleasures."³⁵

In 1989, at the inaugural meeting of the International Slow Food movement in Paris, representatives of 15 countries signed a manifesto declaring that the "Fast Life has changed our way of being and threatens our environment and our landscapes."³⁶

Initially, the focus was on appreciating fine food, but Slow Food quickly grew from an amusing pun to a political movement, as Petrini discovered that many Italian regional varieties of cheeses, sausages, fruits and vegetables were disappearing because they were not profitable enough to compete with intensive agriculture. He coined a slogan for restaurateurs: "Adopt Endangered Foods."

A decade later, there seemed to be a lot of supporters. In 1998, more than 80,000 visitors came to the move-

ment's second Salone del Gusto (Salon of Taste) to sample flavors from around the world in three huge tasting halls. "English people may kill to protect animals and the French become militant in defense of the purity of their language, but Italians get indignant only when food is concerned," *The New York Times* noted.³⁷

That indignation started to take a constructive form in the late 1990s, when Petrini visited the Fair of the Capon in Morozzo, a small Italian town known for its particularly tasty breed of chicken. Its capon had long been a traditional Christmas dish in the Piedmont region. Yet in Morozzo, the breed faced extinction because of declining demand.

Slow Food bought a large number of the birds and sold them by subscription to its members. That led to the idea of creating a "presidium" designation, from the Latin term for a garrison, identifying foods the Slow Food movement would aggressively defend.

One of the first steps taken to commercialize endangered foods was to cooperate in 2001 with a major supermarket distribution chain, Coop Italia. The sales, which soon reached 1.5 million euros (almost \$2 million), stunned the Coop managers, according to Padovani.³⁸

Today, when Slow Food singles out farmers or fishermen for assistance, it helps them to rescue their special products and sometimes to market them as well. In the United States, one of its most successful projects has been the preservation and marketing of heritage turkeys like those raised by Reese in Kansas.

The presidium designation also has been given to the Cape May salt oyster, endangered by overfishing, pollution and parasitic disease in Delaware Bay. The presidium helps oyster harvesters maintain a system of cultivation, previously tested in France, in which oysters are planted in the sea with minimum environmental impact.

Slow Food Advocates Question Misleading Food Labels

Do 'indoor' cows have pasture access?

Congress sparked an ongoing debate in 1990 when it ordered the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to establish national standards for organic food and farming. The basic questions: What constitutes organic food and *is* it truly “good, clean and fair?” — as Carlo Petrini, the Italian leftist who founded the Slow Food movement, would say.

“The biggest controversy right now is USDA’s allowing large organic dairy companies to violate the requirements for pasture access to animals,” according to Ronnie Cummins, national director of the Organic Consumers Association, in Finland, Minn.

Two of the country’s largest organic dairies, Horizon and Aurora, raise thousands of cows indoors, where they are fed organic grain rather than grazing in open pasture. The concept of the cows having “access to pasture” — a requirement under the law — is more theoretical than real in such operations, says Cummins, whose organization is leading a consumer boycott against the two companies. The USDA is clarifying its access-to-outdoors regulation, and many organic-food advocates, including Horizon, say it should be stricter.¹

Author Michael Pollan points out in his 2006 book *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* that when organic companies try to meet the demand of big chains like Whole Foods, they start looking a lot like conventional farms minus the herbicide and pesticide. At 2,000-acre Greenways Farms in California, he writes, the fields look as weed-free as those treated with herbicides. To achieve that look, organic farms must till the land more, which reduces the soil’s biological activity and releases so much nitrogen into the air that the fields require more nitrogen fertilizer than they otherwise would need.²

Slow Food advocates call such activities “industrial organic” farming and say it’s not much more environmentally friendly than conventional industrial farming. For instance, organic farmers often end up using more diesel fuel than conventional farmers to truck compost across the country and weed and cultivate their fields. If the compost is produced on the farm or nearby, however, growing food organically uses about one-third less fossil fuel than conventional methods.³

Crops do not have to be organic, however, to be recognized as worthy of safeguarding by Slow Food International. The question of whether to buy organic or local is further confused by the fact that most processed organic foods, including imported meat slaughtered or processed in the United States, are not labeled with their country of origin. Many countries

have dubious methods of organic certification — if they have them at all, according to Cummins.

“The organic consumer in Wal-Mart who sees a can of beans that says ‘USDA organic’ on the front has no way of knowing if it’s from China, where it’s against the law for a U.S. certifier to certify the product organic,” says Cummins. Although the 2002 farm bill included a country-of-origin labeling requirement, it has only been implemented on fish. Industry groups say expanded labeling would increase marketing costs by billions of dollars per year, but economists say the costs would be much lower.⁴

Adding to the confusion is the increasingly popular practice of “greenwashing” — such as putting a picture of a farm on a non-organic product, like “Natural” Cheetos. Manufacturers use the technique in hopes of tapping into the burgeoning market for natural and organic foods, which has been growing more than 20 percent a year since 2000 compared to about 4 percent for conventional groceries.⁵

Kansas heritage turkey grower Frank Reese is dismayed by another greenwashing tactic: He found a company selling a turkey to Whole Foods with an “heirloom” label carrying a picture of a Bourbon Red, one of the rare breeds he sells for a premium price. “But they don’t have a Bourbon Red on their farm,” says Reese. As a result, he has developed his own “Heritage” label, which the USDA allows him to attach to his turkeys specifying that they mate naturally, have a long life span and grow slowly.

A USDA rule proposed last year would have allowed factory farms to feed indoor cattle harvested forage and corn silage instead of grain and still label the beef “grass-fed,” according to Patricia Wisnet, president of the American Grass Fed Association. Her organization has developed its own logo that will “define clearly these are pasture-raised not confinement animals” and prohibit antibiotics and synthetic hormones, Wisnet says. The USDA is to issue a new rule shortly responding to criticism that the standard is too weak.

¹ For background, see Jennifer Weeks, “Factory Farms,” *CQ Researcher*, Jan. 12, 2007, pp. 25-48.

² Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006), p. 160.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁴ Weeks, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁵ Kim Severson, “Be It Ever So Hometown, There’s Nothing like Spin,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 3, 2007, p. D1.

Slow Food also promotes the labeling and consumption of manoomin, a wild rice native to Minnesota lakes, and helps to protect cheeses made from California to Connecticut.

From Organic to Gourmet

The word “organic” was first applied to food in the 1940s by

Organic Gardening and Farming magazine, founded by J. I. Rodale, a health enthusiast in Pennsylvania who advocated growing food without synthetic chemicals.

SLOW FOOD MOVEMENT

But the concept didn't really take off until 1969, when *The Whole Earth Catalog* brought it to the attention of hippies trying to grow vegetables away from the oppression of the "superindustrial state." Within two years, the circulation of Rodale's magazine surged from 400,000 to 700,000.³⁹

An earlier use of "organic" by 19th-century English social critics attacked the broken social connections wrought by the Industrial Revolution and recalled the lost ideal of an organic state where people were still connected by bonds of affection.

The 1960s counterculture quickly blended this earlier social meaning of organic with the newer agricultural one.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the fight to save People's Park in Berkeley, conceived on April 20, 1969, when young radicals seized a vacant lot owned by the University of California, planted vegetable gardens and announced plans to build a model cooperative society there with uncontaminated food. Gov. Ronald Reagan ordered the National Guard to evict the squatters, causing rioting and the death of a young man by sheriff's deputies.⁴⁰

By some accounts, People's Park marked the beginning of a pastoral turn for the counterculture toward communes. They offered idealistic young people a chance to subsist on the soil. Around the same time, food co-ops sprouted that sold brown rice and brown bread — rather than the industrial white product associated with all the evils of capitalism.

When Berkeley counterculturist Waters opened Chez Panisse in 1971,



Slow Food International president and founder Carlo Petrini, right, meets Fausto Bertinotti, president of the Italian Lower Chamber, left, at the Terra Madre Food Summit in Turin, Italy, last October. Petrini started the "slow" food movement to protest the opening of a McDonald's restaurant in Rome in 1986.

AP Photo/Massimo Pinca

it marked both an extension of the counterculture and a turning away from barricade-storming tactics. Untrained as a chef, Waters made fresh, local ingredients the centerpiece of unfussy cooking. Her revolutionary approach soon attracted the attention of foodies across the nation.⁴¹

Waters' efforts to seek out and provide a market for local growers gave rise to the formal position of "forager" at many restaurants that copied her successful model of establishing working relationships with local farmers. At the beginning, Waters' \$3.95 four-course meal was a political statement, food historian David Kamp notes, by showing what American food could be like if people didn't passively accept industrial TV dinners. The "fresh-food movement" that Chez Panisse started, he wrote, may be the counterculture's "most lasting triumph."⁴²

Criticisms today that the restaurant has moved away from its '60s countercultural ideals to serve a wealthy

elite were always present in Berkeley among countercultural bakers and others uncomfortable with capitalism.

As Kamp sees it, the fresh-food movement was only the latest in a series of cooking innovations that turned the United States into a "gourmet nation." His reprinted recipe from the 1937 *Chicago Tribune* for a "salad" of marshmallows and canned grapefruit suspended in gelatin suggests how far the nation has come. At the time, Americans viewed cooking as women's work.

James Beard's 1941 book *Cook it Outdoors* helped make cooking a man's activity. During the postwar years food conglomerates started advertising time-saving foods like Minute Rice. But in 1963

"The French Chef" television show, featuring Julia Child, soon introduced Americans to gourmet cooking.

The prosperity of the 1980s and '90s helped turn food into a cultural pastime, making culinary sophistication "no longer the province of a tiny gourmet elite," in Kamp's words.⁴³ ■

CURRENT SITUATION

Subsidy Reform

When the farm bill comes up for a vote later this year, many new voices are likely to be heard, including

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At Issue:

Is organic food better for you?



VICTORIA RECORD
*MEDIA COORDINATOR, SOIL ASSOCIATION**
WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, JANUARY 2007

People choose to eat organic food for many reasons. For some it's because of the nutritional benefits. In 2000, a review of more than 400 scientific papers by an independent nutritionist found evidence of higher levels of vitamin C, minerals and trace elements in organic foods. In 2006, the *Journal of Dairy Science* published results from a three-year study showing a direct link between the whole organic-farming system and higher levels of omega-3 fatty acids in organic milk.

In addition, there is evidence that organic food is less risky to your health, containing a tiny number of artificial additives compared to the hundreds allowed in non-organic food. Genetically modified food is banned in organic farming (including in animal feed) and antibiotics — routinely used in non-organic, intensive livestock farming — are only allowed as a last resort in organic farming.

The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution recently noted that it was concerned the Government's Advisory Committee on Pesticides gave "little recognition" to the fact that "there could be important differences in the susceptibility of individuals within the human population to novel chemicals." The commission concluded that "a more precautionary approach to regulating the use of pesticides is needed."

Organic farming severely restricts the use of pesticides and artificial chemical fertilizers compared to the hundreds of pesticides available to non-organic farmers. Parents are choosing organic baby food (currently 51 percent of the total market), partly due to their concerns about the risks from pesticide residues.

Many people buy organic food because organic farming is good for the environment. Organic farms have more wildlife and different species — such as bugs, beetles, butterflies and birds — than non-organic farms and use less energy and cause less pollution. Animals on organic farms are kept to the highest animal-welfare standards, and groups like Compassion in World Farming endorse organic systems as better for livestock.

More than half of those in lower-income groups are buying organic food, and if they buy direct from farmers via box schemes or farm shops, it need not be more expensive than non-organic food in supermarkets. The public is well aware of the human health, environmental and animal-welfare benefits of organic food and is making a well-informed decision. This is why the organic market in the United Kingdom increased by a staggering 30 percent in 2005 and is now worth £1.6 billion.

* An environmental charity in the United Kingdom promoting sustainable, organic farming and championing human health.



ROB LYONS
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WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, JANUARY 2007

Organic food is increasingly popular in the United Kingdom. Sales doubled between 2000 and 2005, to reach £1.2 billion. Almost every supermarket chain has made a major move into organic food. It is widely believed that organic food is healthier, more environmentally friendly and therefore more "ethical."

However, some perspective is required. Even with these increased sales figures, organic products account for little more than 1 percent of overall food and drink sales, according to Mintel, a market-analysis company. And the claims made about the benefits of organic food are largely illusory.

It is often claimed that organic food is more nutritious — that it contains a higher level of vitamins, minerals and other "trace elements." The best peer-reviewed work suggests that no such conclusion can be drawn because the findings of studies are contradictory. That is hardly a surprise: Crop variety, local growing conditions, cooking method and freshness are all likely to have a much greater effect on our food than whether man-made fertilizers or pesticides were applied to it. Even Britain's eco-friendly environment minister has suggested eating organic food is simply a "lifestyle choice" when it comes to health.

There is an assumption that food containing pesticide residues must be bad for us. But the old adage "the dose makes the poison" suggests that the tiny quantities involved are unlikely to cause harm. Even if there were a small risk from such chemicals, this should be compared to the much greater mass of natural pesticides we consume in our food. As the famous biochemist Bruce Ames has noted, there are more naturally occurring carcinogens in a cup of coffee than in a year's worth of pesticide residues.

The production of agricultural chemicals undoubtedly produces greenhouse gases, and some of these chemicals get released into the environment after use. But this represents only a small part of the overall environmental equation. What is commonly ignored is the much greater amount of land required by the organic system to feed the world. The solution, according to organic advocates, is substantially higher food prices and restrictions on the kinds of food — particularly meat — that we can consume.

Organic agriculture produces less food, more expensively, with no benefit to health or the environment. Its appeal has far less to do with any real advantages and more to do with a modern, and misplaced, rejection of anything "manmade." In truth, Mother Nature doesn't know best.

Slow Food Dining Sardinian-Style

To appreciate the intensely local nature of Italy and its cuisine, one must eat the food, and Italians understand this. At the Slow Food conference last fall, a lucky group of journalists was treated to a five-course dinner featuring specialties from a tiny mountainous region of Sardinia known as Montiferru-Barigadu-Sinis.

The fare included a dense bread bearing the smoky flavor of the wood-fired Sardinian oven in which it had been baked at 5 a.m. — and which had been flown to Turin with the young baker who learned the recipe from his mother. The bread bore a name so local that even a native of Turin at the dinner had never heard of it.

The sheep ricotta ravioli came from a local recipe dating from medieval times, and an antipasto meat pie reflected the influence of the Spaniards who once occupied Sardinia. The chewy beef from local grass-fed cattle had a flavor that bore little resemblance to the homogenous American steak.

Perhaps only in Italy would businessmen count on their mother's cooking to strengthen the local economy. The Sardinians who hosted the dinner hope that raising awareness of their local foods will attract newcomers — including tourists and second-home buyers — and help reverse the isolated island's population decline.

"Our goal is to repopulate the area by making it a hospitable territory with an ideal quality of life," one of the hosts said, raising a glass of Sardinian wine.

The memorable meal took on historic significance when the sommelier opened an 1896 bottle of Sardinian cognac. Everyone held their collective breaths, wondering if the 100-year-old cork would crumble. But not to worry. The successful uncorking led to the opening of another bottle for the diners to swirl in their brandy glasses, dreaming of sun-bleached fishing villages and perhaps a second home.

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consumers supporting local farm produce and the health and environmental communities.

In May 2006 the American Farmland Trust proposed shifting billions of dollars in existing subsidies for farmers into "green payments" for environmentally sound farming practices. "We think over time that would be a significant improvement in farm policy," says the Trust's Daukas.

But citing lawmakers' mounting concern about budget deficits and a smaller anticipated pot of money to play with, he adds, "That kind of dramatic shift is very unlikely in this budget climate right now." Nevertheless, Daukas is among those that expect more funding for conservation now that Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, a long-time supporter of conservation, has become Agriculture Committee chairman.

While Slow Food advocates say they support proposals like the Trust's, they aren't putting their energies into lobbying Congress. Instead, says Slow Food USA Executive Director Lesser, they're creating an alternative to the mainstream through a grass-roots move-

ment that includes chefs demanding more varied products, farmers who grow them, farmers' markets and consumers who demand fresh, local products. Their goal, she says, is to make alternative markets mainstream.

"If I buy from a farmer instead of the supermarket, I'm helping to change the system," says Lesser. "Food is one of the few areas where people can make a decision on an individual level."

Although the EU has started to move subsidies away from production toward sustainability, many say it hasn't gone far enough. "The EU is not going anywhere near what they can do as far as de-linking production payments and export subsidies to producers," says Rep. Kind, the Organic Caucus co-chair, citing France and Poland as the main obstacles to subsidy reform. He adds, "It's very difficult for us to do it, if EU countries don't."

Another reason Slow Food opposes agricultural subsidies is that they permit U.S. companies to dump cheap products in poor countries, says Petrini. That contributes to the loss of diversity in the plants we eat, according to scientist-activist Vandana

Shiva, founder of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, in India.

She notes that throughout history, humans have eaten more than 80,000 plant species — more than 3,000 of them used consistently. "However, we now rely on just eight crops to provide 75 percent of the world's food," she writes. "With genetic engineering, production has narrowed to three crops" — corn, soybeans and canola.⁴⁴

In 1998, India's indigenous edible oils from plants like mustard, coconut, sesame and linseed were banned by the government on grounds of food safety, and restrictions on imported soy-based oil were removed. Millions of tons of artificially cheap soy oil continue to be dumped on India, according to Shiva. The restrictions and the dumping have threatened the livelihoods of 10 million farmers, according to Shiva.⁴⁵

Junk Food in Schools

Fast food and junk food remain a looming presence in American

schools. And despite some improvements, activists say regular school meals need to be updated to reflect current nutritional standards and today's concerns — obesity rather than the malnutrition of the Depression-era school lunch program.

Later this year, new USDA nutrition guidelines for school meals are expected to reflect the revised *Dietary Guidelines* for all Americans issued in 2005 by the Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services. "Significant improvements" in the new guidelines have implications for school meals, including reducing saturated fat and limiting calories, says Wootan of the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI).

Although cheap USDA commodity foods sold to schools have long come under criticism for high fat content, Wootan says they've improved. For example, the ground beef is leaner than most supermarket meat, she says. Many of the nation's largest school districts recently banned soda, including Boston, Chicago, Washington, Los Angeles and New York City.⁴⁶

But two-thirds of the states have inadequate policies when it comes to food sold outside of school meals, including items sold in vending machines, snack shops and school cafeterias, according to CSPI. Only 10 states have school food or beverage nutrition standards applying to the whole campus and the whole school day at all grade levels.⁴⁷

In addition, about 20 percent of schools serve branded fast food, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.⁴⁸

Eighty-three percent of elementary schools, 97 percent of middle schools and 99 percent of high schools sell food and beverages from vending machines and school stores and as separately sold items like pizza and chips, according to a Government Accountability Office survey.⁴⁹ Thus children can build their own unhealthy meal

with à la carte items like potato chips and Gatorade instead of milk and vegetables, says Wootan.

Critics blame the weakness of USDA standards on the department's dual role of helping farmers and schools. "Because of internal conflicts of interest," New York University nutrition expert Nestle has written, the USDA "cannot protect the integrity of the school meals program on its own." She has recommended that USDA develop an alliance with the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services when it comes to prescribing a nutritious school lunch.⁵⁰

New Legislation

Nutrition advocates like CSPI support legislation mandating the USDA to issue updated nutritional standards for all foods sold in school, including in vending machines and school snack bars. Although Congress has repeatedly resisted such efforts, Wootan says the prospects look better this Congress for the proposed Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act. It was introduced last year by Sen. Harkin, who now chairs the Agriculture Committee, which is responsible for school lunch legislation. He is expected to reintroduce the bill.

Whether big food companies would fight the bill is another question. "We don't think it's needed," says Kevin Keane, senior vice president for communications at the American Beverage Association. He points to voluntary guidelines announced last May by his association, former President Bill Clinton and the American Heart Association to cap portion sizes and restrict soda sales in schools. But Wootan notes that it remains to be seen if schools will comply with the guidelines.

Activists have focused on soft drinks because they are more clearly linked to obesity than any other food. Researchers have found that for each additional soft drink a child consumes per day, the chance of becoming overweight increases by 60 percent.⁵¹

New federal requirements that every school district promulgate a "Wellness Policy" by the beginning of the 2007 school year have given Slow Food advocates a new platform for advocating better school meals. They've put a how-to guide on their Web site that tries to imbue pleasure and education into lunch. "It's not just about counting calories; it's a more holistic approach to how food and ecology can address the wellbeing of the child while in school," says Lesser of Slow Food USA.

A promising development has been the growth in school districts seeking out local farm produce — from a handful in 1996 to 1,000 school districts in 32 states today, according to Marion Kalb, director of the National Farm to School Program for the Community Food Security Coalition, in Santa Fe, N.M.

Increasingly, schools are responsive to pressure from parents and others to make meals healthier because of growing concern about obesity, Kalb says. But there are numerous hurdles. Some school kitchens, concerned about food safety, want mainly processed foods. "In large urban areas," Kalb says, "it's harder to try to team up with distributors and ask them to buy from farmers and deliver the produce to schools." And schools often expect to receive apples already washed and neatly sliced.

"Fresh vegetables and fruit are more expensive than what schools can get through the commodity program at a cheap rate," says Kalb, though commodity fruits and vegetables are generally processed, not fresh. If schools are serving anything extra, it's

more likely to be pizza, chips or boxed salads that schools sell to make additional funds, she says.

And then a lot of children are resistant to the very idea of eating a green vegetable, Kalb agrees. “The most successful schools are those that combine having kids taste in advance or when kids grow things in school gardens,” she says.

The Johnson City Central School District near Binghamton, N.Y., made the switch. Food Service Director Ray Denniston works directly with a local farmer to provide fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, broccoli, cauliflower, pears, apples and seedless grapes. Through taste-testing with a few students at a time, Denniston discovered that kids prefer broccoli in the form of raw florets — a big improvement over the mushy cooked variety. Among the more popular items are carrots cut in coins or sticks and individually bagged.

“We don’t use canned vegetables anymore,” Denniston says. “Our biggest problem is we live in New York state, so it’s a short growing season; it’s hard finding enough product and convincing the farmer it’s worth the risk to open the market to us.”

Cost is another problem. Once he subtracts fixed costs and entrees from the roughly \$2 he gets for a meal, he estimates only 10 cents is left for fresh fruit or vegetables.

In the last farm bill, Congress created a Farm to School program to provide fruit and vegetable snacks in schools but didn’t fund it. The American Farm-

land Trust is pushing for funding in the upcoming bill. ■

OUTLOOK

Scrapple Anyone?

Led by Chez Panisse’s Waters and journalist-turned activist Pollan, Slow Food USA hopes its first major national conference next year will raise awareness of American regional foods worth preserving.

But will the movement appeal only to the well-off? In his forthcoming book, *Slow Food Nation*, Petrini describes his discomfort upon visiting the San Francisco Farmers’ Market, where college-educated farmers sold vegetables to sleek customers who looked like movie stars. Having bought their peppers and apples at astronomical prices, these customers went home showing them off “like jewels, status symbols,” he writes. Driving past an endless chain of fast-food restaurants outside the city, he realized that’s where the “ordinary people” were eating.⁵²

Petrini is among those who would like to see the American Slow Food movement grow closer to Italy’s, where the best-selling Slow Food guide features the modestly priced family-owned restaurant known as the trattoria rather than pricey temples of haute cuisine. Slow Food should be

as much about appreciating humble traditional foods like scrapple — a mixture of pork offal and corn mush — as well as more expensive heritage turkeys, Lesser agrees. At next year’s conference, Waters says, “We’d like to have cooking demos on how to cook affordable food by well-known chefs — instead of the unaffordable food they usually cook.”

Many Slow Food advocates say the low price Americans pay for food is costing them in other ways. Food is a smaller part of the household budget than it was decades ago but doesn’t represent other costs — degradation to the environment and loss of diversity from centralized agriculture, they maintain. “You either pay now or you pay later in terms of our health, environment or culture,” says Waters. “We have to make a choice. Do you want two pairs of Nikes and a cell phone or food that’s nourishing and taking care of the environment?”

Will all Americans — even the poor — ever be willing to pay more for something that tastes better? Low-income mothers now receive vouchers that they can cash in for fresh produce at farmers’ markets through the Women’s, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program administered by USDA. Although the vouchers amount to only \$20 a season, WIC mothers have started coming back to spend their own money, according to Forster of the Community Food Security Coalition. In the course of shopping, “Relationships are hatched between farmers and WIC moms,” he says, and the farmers give the moms cooking tips, which keep them coming back.

In lower-income neighborhoods, farmers have tailored their crop selection and marketing to the traditional food preference of ethnic minorities and newly arrived immigrants, according to the coalition.

And food may have an even more profound way of bringing people together. At the international Slow Food conference last October, one of the most politically interesting workshops



About the Author

Sarah Glazer, a London-based freelancer, is a regular contributor to the *CQ Researcher*. Her articles on health, education and social-policy issues have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Public Interest* and *Gender and Work*, a book of essays. Her recent *CQ Researcher* reports include “Increase in Autism” and “Gender and Learning.” She graduated from the University of Chicago with a B.A. in American history.

involved Arabs and Israelis cooking together. They were eating together "because they all care about the land," says Waters. "We have a different way we communicate, and we need to learn that new language. This other language they're speaking is destroying them."

As Andrea Reusing, chef-owner of the Lantern Restaurant in Chapel Hill, N. C., told the U.S. delegation at the conference, "We have taste on our side." ■

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

American Beverage Association, 1101 16th St., N.W., Washington, DC 20036; (202) 463-6732; www.ameribev.org. Represents major soft-drink companies.

American Farmland Trust, 1200 18th St., N.W., Suite 800, Washington, DC 20036; (202) 331-7300; www.farmland.org. Founded by farmers and conservationists; leading a broad coalition seeking to reform agricultural subsidies under the farm bill.

Chez Panisse Foundation, 1517 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, CA 94709; (510) 843-3811; www.chezpanissefoundation.org. Started by chef and restaurateur Alice Waters; strives to improve food and food education in schools.

Organic Consumers Association, 6771 South Silver Hill Dr., Finland MN 55603; (218) 226-4164; www.organicconsumers.org. Advocates labeling of genetically modified foods and reduction of pesticide use.

Slow Food International, Via Mendicita Istruita 8, 12042 Bra (Cuneo), Italy; +39 0172 419611; www.slowfood.com. The international headquarters of the Slow Food movement.

Slow Food USA; (718) 260-8000; www.slowfoodusa.org. The American wing of the international movement.

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²⁴ Kamp, *op. cit.*, pp. 357-358.

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