

Food and Culture

From Local Relationality to Global Responsibility

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The author presents different ways that negligence with regard to one's diet wreaks havoc on other aspects of life. She demonstrates how the transition in food perspectives away from agricultural roots and the important interpersonal relationships that put food on the table creates physical and relational health problems for individuals as well as the communities in which they live. Farming methods focusing on monoculture and related practices can have devastating consequences that harm the environment, local economies, and individual communities. However, she demonstrates that when consumers are actively interested in what they are eating and are engaged with the process of buying and cooking food, they can be inspired to make healthier food choices. As a result, the community can become closer and more

economically viable. While the author notes that there may be some benefits to the specialization of agriculture, she concludes that these systems cannot sustain the ever-evolving needs of the world. Instead, she calls consumers to pay closer attention to the ramifications of their purchases to promote health, enhance relationships within cultures, and restore an understanding of the ways that nature sustains life.

Introduction

Consider an oak tree. It has a humble beginning as an acorn fortunate enough to take root and grow into a magnificent oak, reaching toward the sky, inspiring awe in creatures below. Then, one day, its reign comes to an end and it falls back to the ground where, in another season, the once righteous tree will again display its splendor through the providence of its successor. So it is with every being on the earth: We are born, we grow, we live off the land, and eventually we return to it. Contentedness with this understanding of existence comes with acknowledgement and acceptance of the role that one life plays in sustaining others. As humans, to eat and to live, a relationship develops with the land, and there comes a natural appreciation for the gifts given by agriculture. As described by Pauline Von Bonsdorff, a Finnish philosopher in contemporary aesthetics, “one consequence of agriculture as a long term activity is that such practice is likely to give rise to a sense of belonging of both farmer to land and of land.”¹ This sense of belonging is increasingly driving consumers toward a greater

1. Pauline Von Bonsdorff, “Agriculture, Aesthetic Appreciation and the Worlds of Nature,” *Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol. 3 (2005). <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=325>

interest in their food: where it comes from, who grew it.² But as the distance between farmers and consumers grows larger than ever, there is more incentive for individuals to fall back in love with the food they eat, for the sake of their health, their relationships, and even the planet. The process of buying, cooking, and eating food is fundamental to sustaining life; if done properly, it can draw deeper and richer relationships between the land and the people living from it.

Among human needs, eating is one of the most fundamental. Individuals need to eat in order to live and actively participate in their communities. As Richard Wilk has said:

Your first relationship as a human being is about food. The first social experience we have is being put to the breast or bottle. The social act of eating is part of how we become human, as much as speaking and taking care of ourselves. Learning to eat is learning to become human.³

As we eat, learn, and evolve into our humanness, our tastes follow suit. While our primary motivation for eating is hunger and satiety, our biological needs do not determine the entirety of our food choices.⁴ Our selections come to be motivated by senses, tastes, emotions, and exposures, many of which are shaped by our cul-

2. United States Department of Agriculture, *Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food*, 2015, 9. (Hereafter USDA.)

3. Amy S. Choi, "What Americans Can Learn from Other Food Cultures," *TedX*, December 18, 2014. <http://ideas.ted.com/what-americans-can-learn-from-other-food-cultures/>

4. European Food Information Council, "Why Do We Eat What We Eat: Food Choice; A Complex Behaviour," *Food Today* (May 2004). <http://www.eufic.org/article/en/artid/food-choice-complex-behaviour/>

ture. Indeed, food is fundamental to survival; but that is not necessarily why we eat it.

Food, Culture, and Reciprocity

As demonstrated by sheer human nature, dietary consumption is so much more than a physiological or nutritional requirement for life. Likewise, the process of intentionally nurturing, growing, harvesting, and celebrating food is not merely part of culture but a form of culture all its own. The word "culture" itself has its root in cultivation.⁵ Food has everything to do with a way of life. In the words of Amy Choi:

What you want to cook and eat is an accumulation, a function of your experiences—the people you've dated, what you've learned, where you've gone. There may be inbound elements from other cultures, but you'll always eat things that mean something to you.⁶

Consider a favorite food, for example. Why is that dish preferred? Is it because it is cheap, quick, and easy, or because it inspires memories of childhood, love, or other special times? Predicting food choice is a complex algorithm with personal, religious, economic, educational, and ethnic factors, all of which ultimately reflect a person's cultural upbringing. Food becomes a medium through which we interact with other people in our culture as well as with cultures in other parts of the world and their associated values and customs. When traveling, food can be a means of

5. Von Bonsdorff, "Agriculture, Aesthetic Appreciation and the Worlds of Nature."

6. Choi, "What Americans Can Learn from Other Food Cultures."

encountering the surroundings, literally internalizing the experience. That said, like any other aspect of culture, it is subject to distortion with time. As *New York Times* journalist Jennifer Lee points out, the infamous Chinese beef with broccoli is not Chinese at all. Broccoli, she says, is an Italian vegetable; “It came to the US in the 1800’s.” And General Tso? “[He is] kind of a lot like Colonel Sanders in America, in that he’s known for chicken and not war. But in China, this guy’s actually known for war, and not chicken”⁷—certainly a humorous example. Lee successfully outlines the ways even minute aspects of culture influence the food we eat with vigor, sometimes in the name of a forgotten war hero.

Beyond the influence culture has on the foods we eat, it is enlightening to examine the reciprocity in the relationship as well, because our food choices also influence our culture. One of the first celebrations on record in America was that of the harvest: Thanksgiving. With the welfare of immigrants largely dependent on agricultural success, it was certainly reason to rejoice when rains rejuvenated the wasting fields to yield a bumper crop. As Choi notes, “The celebratory nature of food is universal. Every season, every harvest, and every holiday has its own food, and this is true in America as well. It helps define us.”⁸ Thanksgiving as a national holiday stems from that first feast of the new world, when the pilgrims celebrated the land that would sustain them. The securing of food was not a struggle that was unique to the new Americans, either. With food as life’s first necessity, the pervasive pattern across the world is that selecting crops for achieving a successful harvest translates into the well-being of a nation. As Lindy Miller

7. Jennifer Lee, “The Hunt for General Tso,” *TedX*, July 2008. http://www.ted.com/talks/jennifer_8_lee_looks_for_general_tso?language=en

8. Choi, “What Americans Can Learn from Other Food Cultures.”

writes, “The fact remains that safe, high quality food supplies are the foundation for advanced civilization.”⁹ Beyond Westernized status, food continues to shape American culture. Lee states, “McDonald’s has garnered a lot of attention, a lot of respect, for basically standardizing the menu, décor and dining experience in post–World War II America.”¹⁰ Today, evidence from around the globe speaks to the restaurant’s cultural influence. Despite humble beginnings in California in 1954, McDonald’s now has more than thirty-six thousand restaurants located in more than one hundred countries, and it continues to shape the relationships that people around the world have with food.¹¹

Another example of this reciprocity between food and culture can be found in Italy. In Italian culture, food is not viewed as a means to an end but rather as an enjoyable process with the goal of nurturing family and community connections. As California psychologist Talia Wagner writes, “For Italians, food isn’t just nourishment, it is life. Family gatherings are frequent, and often centered around food and the extended networks of families.”¹² Food is viewed as a form of art, so Italians also do not eat quickly or on-the-run, as many Americans, with our fast-food, high-stress lifestyles, do. Marco Bolasco, the director of Slow Food publishing and an Italian food expert says, “Eating fast is not at all part of our culture. Our meals are relaxed, even during lunch break.”¹³ This explains why full plates of pasta, wine, and plenty of olive oil

9. Lindy Miller, Personal Communication, October 8, 2015.

10. Lee, “The Hunt for General Tso.”

11. McDonald’s, *Our Story*, 2015. http://www.mcdonalds.com/us/en/our_story.html

12. Kim Ann Zimmermann, “Italian Culture: Facts, Customs & Traditions,” *LiveScience*, January 19, 2015. <http://www.livescience.com/44376-italian-culture.html>

13. Choi, “What Americans Can Learn from Other Food Cultures.”

make appearances during the daily “siesta,” which can last three hours or more—dramatically different from the American version of lunch. Even grocery buying habits differ. Italians shop much more frequently, sometimes even daily, and spend considerable amounts of time examining and selecting produce, meat, cheese, and bread. There is a much greater sense of pride in a dish as well, with regional cuisine somewhat of a trophy for residents. Whether twirling Pesto alla Genovese on the coast of Liguria or sipping Montepulciano d’Abruzzo in its namesake city, Italians abundantly share their convictions with regard to food.

Americans, however, suffer from an increasing disconnect in the relationship between food and the land, and this disconnection is impacting our daily lives in a negative way. Yes, urbanization has created opportunities for technological and economic growth that were never before possible. An unfortunate side effect of this, however, is a loss of appreciation for rural settings. Despite any associated romanticism, agriculture is the primary driving force behind any kind of societal success, because of humans’ inherent need to eat. As stated by the Food for Life organization, “As a society we are increasingly distanced from our food—how it’s grown, how it’s produced and what’s in it.”¹⁴ This reality is illustrated in American behavior patterns. As reported by Mark Bittman in his book *How Cooking Solves Everything*, Americans spend less time than any other nation in the kitchen. Statistically, 7 percent of Americans self-report never cooking, and 30 percent admit to cooking only three to four times per week. Compared to the two hours and forty-five minutes of average daily TV time, Americans

clock only thirty-two minutes preparing food *and* cleaning it up.¹⁵ Given these facts, the current health crisis in America should not be surprising. People are not taking the time to slow down and invest in food and cooking, at the expense of their health and relationships. Bittman describes the situation perfectly: “Most of the time, we cook the way we walk: to get somewhere. To get food on the table. That’s the goal.”¹⁶

Ironically, sometimes the goal that Bittman describes can even be motivated by the pursuit of better health. The results of a study about consumer behavior with regard to food showed that individuals tend to purchase ready-made meals in lieu of homemade ones because of perceived sensory, convenience, and even health-related benefits.¹⁷ These “convenience” or “health” foods, however, do not require psychological presence during consumption. While “on the go,” a person is not considering the process required to grow the food he or she is eating, the time and effort needed to prepare it, and especially not the integrity of its journey to the fast-food bag. This state of disconnect reflects the breakdown occurring in the agricultural system:

We all eat, and ultimately the agricultural landscape . . . concerns all of us. It is a loss both collectively and individually if the drama of this landscape becomes invisible, a loss that seems already to have taken place in many urban and

15. Mark Bittman, *Cooking Solves Everything: How Time in the Kitchen Can Save Your Health, Your Budget, and Even the Planet* (San Francisco: Byliner, Inc., 2011), 7.

16. Ibid.

17. Anna I. de A. Costa, “To Cook or Not to Cook: A Means-End Study of Motives for Choice of Meal Solutions,” *Elsevier ScienceDirect: Food Quality and Preference* 18 (2007): 77. http://icm.clsbe.lisboa.ucp.pt/docentes/url/anacosta/artigo/Costaetal_FQP2007_MECEmpirical_Paper.pdf

14. Food for Life, “Transforming Food Culture,” 2015. <http://www.foodforlife.org.uk/what-is-food-for-life/transforming-food-culture>

semi-urban communities. Such invisibility in turn allows the real shrinking of agricultural land: the meaningless ends quickly in the cultural dumping ground.¹⁸

Food, Reciprocity, and Health

Fortunately, rekindling the fire of intimacy between people and their food is as simple as the process that smothers it. Renewing interest in food reconnects people to the land, to farmers, to the culture, and to each other. The simple act of cooking has implications that are dramatically impactful, far more than the minimal time investment required. Cooking at home fosters family and community relationships, encourages healthful eating habits, and saves money. The process of developing a love for food and cooking can then encourage interest in local, fresher food, which treats the environment more gently and can even boost the regional economy.¹⁹ Cooking opens the door to a new understanding of the world and may even “provide insights into existentially important questions.”²⁰

As members of both a national and a global society, people also have a social responsibility to take an interest in food, and this is recognized at a federal level in the United States. According to the vision statement of the United States Department of Agriculture, the department aims:

18. Von Bonsdorff, “Agriculture, Aesthetic Appreciation and the Worlds of Nature.”

19. Marc Gunther, “Mark Bittman: Why Cooking Solves Everything,” *GreenBiz*, October 7, 2011. <http://www.greenbiz.com/blog/2011/10/07/mark-bittman-cooking-solves-everything>

20. Von Bonsdorff, “Agriculture, Aesthetic Appreciation and the Worlds of Nature.”

to provide economic opportunity through innovation, helping rural America to thrive; to promote agriculture promotion that better nourishes Americans while also helping feed others throughout the world; and to preserve our nation’s natural resources through conservation, restored forests, improved watersheds and healthy private working lands.

Similarly, Pamela Peeke writes, “This deeper sense of responsibility for where your food comes from can only increase your appreciation for your surrounding community and enhance your connections—not to mention get you much fresher, tastier food!”²¹ Overall there is a vast array of personally, socially, and environmentally motivated reasons to invest in and develop a richer appreciation for agriculture.

One of the simplest reasons to pursue home cooking, as Dr. Peeke alludes to, is that homemade food often tastes better. Whether for reasons of nostalgia, spices, or the sweet, slowly simmering aroma of grandma’s minestrone, cooking is a truly delicious hobby. It is not hard to learn, either. Peeke suggests taking a gourmet cooking class: “Not only will you learn how to make food taste amazing without adding [unhealthy ingredients], you’ll engage your brain in an intellectual and creative pursuit that has no limits.”²² As exposure and experience grow, a person’s flavor profile expands, which boosts motivation to further explore exotic tastes or ethnic dishes. These carefully prepared foods often end up being healthier because they are freshly prepared and do

21. Pamela Peeke, *The Hunger Fix: The Three-Stage Detox and Recovery Plan for Overeating and Food Addiction* (New York: Rodale Inc., 2012), 189.

22. *Ibid.*

not contain the preservatives and cheap additives present in many fast foods. Cooks have far more control over specific attributes of food, including ingredients, location, and integrity. As Samantha Olson states, “[This] ultimately lays grounds for greater respect for the food preparation process itself.”²³ Preparing food at home is also substantially less expensive, because money is not spent on packaging, processing and advertising, as it is in the case of ready-to-eat foods purchased at the grocery store.²⁴ Buying locally saves money on transportation and fuel costs. Similarly, money is saved when cooking at home versus eating out at a restaurant, where a majority of the bill goes toward operation costs and profits.

Perhaps the most important reason for someone to further his or her appreciation for food is the benefit to health. The infamous French paradox is a classic example of the correlation between a cultural embrace of dining and national health statistics. Observational studies conducted in the 1990s regarding consumption habits and culinary attitudes in Westernized nations showed that “on average, the French were more likely to think of food in terms of cuisine and pleasure, and Americans to think of food in terms of nutritional values and health risks. Food had more positive associations for the French, and was more central to their life.”²⁵ The irony, however, was that the prevalence of cardiovascular disease was dramatically lower among the French than among Americans,

23. Samantha Olson, “Foodies and Food Lovers are Typically Healthier, Engage in More Physical Activity and Adventure,” *Medical Daily*, July 7, 2015. <http://www.medicaldaily.com/foodies-and-food-lovers-are-typically-healthier-engage-more-physical-activity-and-341610>

24. GRACE Communications Program, “Why Home Cooking is Important,” *Food Program*, 2015. <http://www.sustainabletable.org/132/why-home-cooking-is-important>

25. Halliday Macfie and Herbert L. Meiselman, *Food Choice, Acceptance and Consumption* (London: Blackie Academic & Professional, 1996), 88.

who were considerably fatter despite their leaner diets. Even today, the obesity rate in America is twice that of France: a staggering 33.9 percent compared to just 16.9 percent. Italy, a nation also known for holding cuisine in high regard, boasts an obesity rate as low as 9.8 percent.²⁶

One explanation for this difference could be the mindfulness that accompanies food appreciation. A study of 1,700 women found that when participants ate slowly and deliberately, enjoying their meal, they consumed fewer calories than when eating quickly, which often overshadows signs of satiety.²⁷ Fast eating is often accompanied by the consumption of fast food, a process engineered to fit perfectly into America’s fast-paced culture. Mindfulness can help combat the negative effects of habitual consumption. In addition to helping slow the pace of eating, cooking can help individuals pay more attention to the actual food they are eating. Interest in food and cooking draws attention to the ingredients used: the inputs into the body. Cliché as the colloquialism “You are what you eat” is, there is truth behind the statement. Cooking, however, empowers the eater to take ownership of what he or she is consuming.

It may seem contradictory to suggest taking up food as a hobby to solve an obesity problem, but there is merit to it. Olson writes, “Foodies acquire their recreational appreciation for eating through a wide variety of foods, and a new study reveals it doesn’t necessarily make them fat.”²⁸ In a Cornell study, 502 American women

26. ProCon, “US and Global Obesity Levels: The Fat Chart,” August 11, 2011. <http://obesity.procon.org/view.resource.php?resourceID=004371>

27. Kathleen M. Zelman, “Slow Down, You Eat Too Fast,” *WebMD*, 2004. <http://www.webmd.com/diet/obesity/slow-down-you-eat-too-fast>

28. Olson, “Foodies and Food Lovers are Typically Healthier, Engage in More Physical Activity and Adventure.”

were surveyed about their interests, eating habits, activity levels, and BMIs. The study found that the individuals who were most interested in food were within a healthy weight range.²⁹ This could be because the vested interest of the “foodies” increased their awareness of what and how much they were eating. This ultimately suggests that if people, particularly those suffering the ill effects of obesity, take a greater interest in food, their health could improve. Another study found that participants who, despite time constraints, sat down to a meal with others showed a strong association with higher quality diet, such as greater intakes of fresh fruits and vegetables. On-the-go eating, however, correlated with higher consumption of sodas, fast food, and total fat.³⁰ There are similar associations between dietary habits and stress levels. A study published in the *British Journal of Health Psychology* showed that individuals under high levels of stress suffered more from anxiety and depression, and consequently consumed more alcohol and fast food.³¹ While these studies do not suggest that fast food consumption causes higher stress levels, it can be concluded that if an individual suffering from high levels of stress mindfully sits down to a meal, the slow and intentional pace of consumption might help mediate the natural tendency to engage in detrimental eating behavior.

There is an even a stronger correlation between anxiety and diet in cases of eating disorders. Anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa

29. Ibid.

30. Nicole I. Larson, “Making Time for Meals: Meal Structure and Associations with Dietary Intake in Young Adults,” *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* 109, no. 1 (2009): 72.

31. Andrew Steptoe, Zara Lipsey, and Jane Wardle, “Stress, Hassles and Variations in Alcohol Consumption, Food Choice and Physical Exercise: A Diary Study,” *British Journal of Health Psychology* 1, no. 1 (1998): 51.

are potentially fatal psychiatric illnesses in which the afflicted suffers a debilitating sense of fear and anxiety around food items. This anxiety leads to either a dangerously restricted dietary intake or uncontrolled, excessive consumption (bingeing). “Researchers have known for many years that to successfully treat intense anxiety, it is necessary to use a type of intervention called exposure therapy,” writes Cheri Levinson. “Exposure therapy is a behavioral intervention that teaches an individual to systematically and gradually face their fears.”³² In treatment facilities, aside from restoring body weight, one of the main goals is to facilitate patients’ development of healthy eating behavior. To accomplish this, meal plans are created for each individual consisting of prescribed portions of a variety of foods. These intentional mealtime exposures have proven to be extremely effective at buffering the attitudes of fear and anxiety surrounding food. For anorexics and bulimics, food is a literal form of medicine.

The personal benefits that result from engagement in the agriculture process are enhanced when they are shared with others. A dining experience holds value beyond the quality of nutrition: relationality. The kitchen is a perfect environment to foster the development of interpersonal relationships. Not only are family ties strengthened around the table, but involving children in the food preparation process is a great way to teach life skills or open the door to mentorship opportunities. Similarly, cooking can draw deeper relationships between the individual and the larger community. Local farmers are an important piece of the

32. Cheri Levinson, “How to Face Your Eating Disorder Fears: Exposure Therapy,” *University of North Carolina Center of Excellence for Eating Disorders: Exchanges*, August 24, 2015. <http://uncexchanges.org/2015/08/24/how-to-face-your-eating-disorder-fears-exposure-therapy/>

economy, fostering an industry that gives immediately back to society. Supporting farmers and engaging with them holistically integrates farm labor with consumer forks—a relationship too often overlooked. The USDA’s “Know Your Farmer” campaign has drawn attention to the importance of cultivating this interest in agriculture: “Growing and selling food, educating students, or training aspiring farmers helps producers feel a connection with the broader community.”³³ That is, the cohesive social function of an agricultural community is dependent on the degree to which members actively engage with the local farms.

Food, Ethics, and Global Responsibility

As we shift our perspective from the personal to the global, the evidence continues to support consumer interest in food and cooking. Along with their civic and ethical responsibilities when making food purchases, consumers are enjoying a growing range of access to different foods, and the sociological footprint increases accordingly. When cooks navigate the grocery store, their methodologies are often different from those of convenience shoppers. Heightened interest in food quality is often accompanied by an increased interest in the stories behind the pork loin, cheese, or tomatoes. A cook might look into the history of the beef, perhaps inquiring about the animal’s access to the pasture or other conditions under which it was raised and slaughtered. Someone who has this sort of social motivation might also investigate working conditions for farm employees. On the romanticizing of food, Tom Philpott writes:

33. USDA, 63.

Yes, meat once enjoyed “only on rare occasions” by working people is now within easy reach of most Americans, but [maybe one should] pause to ponder what it means for the people who work for poverty wages in factory-scale slaughterhouses. . . . The year-round availability of fruits and vegetables [is celebrated, but without mention of] the army of ruthlessly exploited workers required to plant, tend and harvest it.³⁴

To investigate like this, a person needs to become acquainted with his or her farmer. While this may sound unrealistic and inconvenient for the average consumer, it is not quite as time consuming as it seems.

Shopping at a local farmers’ market is an option for nearly everyone in America, and for millions of others around the world. In the United States, more than 8,268 farmer markets operated in 2014.³⁵ At these markets, farmers sell goods directly to the public—a perfect opportunity for people to engage with and learn from the individuals who provide food for their communities. Similarly, in the United States, there are a number of regulated labeling services for different food items, including USDA Organic, Certified Humane Raised and Handled, American Grassfed, Food Alliance Certified, and Fair Trade Certified, all of which speak to

34. Tom Philpott, “Stop Romanticizing Your Grandparents’ Food,” *Mother Jones*, May 27, 2015. <http://www.motherjones.com/tom-philpott/2015/05/romanticizing-grandparents-food>

35. Luk Runyon, “Are Farmers Market Sales Peaking? That Might Be Good For Farmers,” *National Public Radio: The Salt*, February 6, 2015. <http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/02/05/384058943/are-farmer-market-sales-peaking-that-might-be-good-for-farmers>

the ethical practices of the food producers. The label Fair Trade Certified is particularly important for high-value trade foods imported from regions where farm labor is extremely inexpensive. For example, Ghana and other western African countries produce more than 70 percent of the world's cocoa, most of which is sold to large chocolate companies. But despite the high price of chocolate, the average cocoa farmer earns less than \$2/day, substantially less than the poverty standard for the United States. These low wages often lead to child labor and other forms of worker exploitation. As stated on the Food Empowerment Project website, "Rather than raise the standards of the industry, many employers have sought to recruit workers who will simply accept less."³⁶ Consumers, however, have the power to support ethical food production by voting with their purchases. Every purchase of fairly traded and/or humanely raised foods increases the global demand for better food production conditions. People with the inclination to take interest in their food choose to educate themselves about the impact of their purchases, which leads them to become more conscientious consumers.

This sort of conscientiousness is important for local economies as well. The USDA reports: "Since 1980, our nation has lost over 200,000 farms due to retirement, low market prices and other factors. The exodus has left many rural communities with dwindling populations and fragile economies."³⁷ Americans collectively have reason to invest directly in their communities because of the reciprocal benefits that result. The money that conscientious consumers spend on food can be one such form of investment. Because fresh,

36. Food Empowerment Project (FEP), "Child Labor and Slavery in the Chocolate Industry," 2015. <http://www.foodispower.org/slavery-chocolate/>

37. USDA, 63.

quality ingredients are a necessity in delicious home cooking, a self-declared foodie would require more from the surrounding community and therefore invest directly back into it. As Bittman notes, "A nation of cooks would not adequately support a nation of monoculture."³⁸ The ultimate result is that the circulation of currency stays local, particularly in the pockets of farmers. This does not require substantial afterthought either, because the aforementioned sort of mindful purchasing comes naturally for individuals who are passionate about food.

This observation about local retention of the dollar is not merely speculation. A Vermont study found that locally sold beef cattle resulted in a greater degree of control for the farmer over marketing decisions. This ultimately created a higher net profit for them, as compared to those selling in other regions.³⁹ Similarly, a 2010 study conducted by the Economic Research Service "found that compared to mainstream counterparts, revenue per unit for producers selling locally ranged from fifty percent greater for apples to 649 percent greater for salad mix."⁴⁰ Beyond these dramatic profit gains, buying locally also increases job opportunities, such as in marketing, food processing, and even distribution. These local opportunities can also provide more inclusive benefits, such as economic allowances for supplemental nutrition and programs in the United States and elsewhere, providing people in need with access to fresh food. President Barack Obama noted, "Local food systems work for America: when we create opportunities for farmers and ranchers, our entire nation reaps the benefit."⁴¹

38. Bittman, *Cooking Solves Everything*, 13.

39. USDA, 13.

40. *Ibid.*, 13.

41. *Ibid.*, 4.

These benefits extend not only to individual nations but to the entire world. Every food production process around the globe has stark ecological implications. However, as Bittman notes, conscientiousness with regard to food purchases can help mitigate the environmental impacts: “When people make food a priority in their lives, they actively contribute to society. Cooking can change our collective lives for the better. It can even change the planet for the better. And this is not a hyperbole.”⁴² Every farm plays a role in the cumulative “green” effect of agriculture. Consumers can help provide accountability in these areas. There are delicate interactions between human action and all levels of life, be it microbes, plants, or animals. Each agricultural practice affects the ecological landscape in a unique way, and farmers and consumers are all responsible for selective usage. Farmer-shopper relationships can foster mutual support for conscientiousness in the food industry.

Passionate consumer Alycia Scheidel shared her experience learning about rice farming from her father’s colleagues, which strengthened her appreciation for farmers:

It was very inspiring and more than a little humbling to be in the presence of so many wise and hardworking men and women. These are individuals who have, from the ground, etched a living for themselves and their families, and who continue to feed not only our country, but many countries on an international level.⁴³

42. Gunther, “Mark Bittman.”

43. Alycia Scheidel, “Appreciating the American Farmer,” *Rice Farming*, 2015. <http://www.ricefarming.com/departments/feature/california-bloggin-thoughts-on-farmer-appreciation-and-the-return-of-rain/>

Scheidel notes that with her own parents as rice farmers, she owes the entirety of her childhood and educational opportunities to the economics of growing grain. Connecting these relationships and interests can also help create a sense of acquaintance with and acceptance of the natural life and death processes that are required for food production. Lindy Miller puts this in perspective:

Food animals literally give the highest sacrifice in [their] service [to] humankind, providing the highest quality protein source for human sustenance short of humans themselves. Thus, they should be cared for to the greatest ability, and treated with the utmost respect available, [both] emotionally and economically.⁴⁴

Whether considering animal- or plant-based sources of food, the processes of agriculture deserve respect and appreciation for their role in sustaining human life. The ethics and beauty of food production should therefore appeal to everybody, because everybody eats.

Launched in 2009, President Barack Obama’s Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food (KYF) campaign sought to promote this very sort of appreciation and awareness: “Through KYF, USDA has stepped up its role in fostering a national conversation about where our food comes from, encouraging consumers to learn more about the people behind the products and the role of agriculture in our economy and communities.”⁴⁵ Farmers provide food for the world, and again, this is an important role that cannot

44. Lindy Miller, Personal Communication, October 8, 2015.

45. USDA, 19.

be overlooked. Engaging with this system not only benefits the individual's health and livelihood but also encourages a richer experience of life. Education is an important piece of this process and can be vastly beneficial to both adults and children. The mission of KYF promotes this actively reciprocal relationship through education and participation. Interested individuals can easily involve friends and family by mere invitation. Children are often eager to participate, and parents can bring kids to markets and farms to teach them about where food comes from. Likewise, community can be built around the dinner table, and precious bonds can be formed where bread is broken. When food is appreciated for the full magnitude of its role in life, its benefits are multiplied.

Ultimately, cultivating a greater appreciation for agriculture draws the individual back toward the roots of humanity that reside in nature. Human sustenance comes from the earth, where seeds are planted, where flowers bloom, and where the tree of life has its home. Per Von Bonsdorff's artistic expression, "To know nature in a practically useful way includes knowing how it behaves, grows and ripens, and this knowledge can only be had if it is based at least in part on personal experience."⁴⁶ The process of engaging with agriculture—with food, the world, and nature—uncovers a new way of experiencing life. The insight that can be drawn from this relationship trickles down into every aspect of a person's sentience, but this of course can only be accomplished when he or she makes the decision to engage. The decision to take an interest in food benefits not only an individual but also the broader scope of humanity, by directing the patterns of this world toward positive change for the good of all living beings.

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46. Von Bonsdorff, "Agriculture, Aesthetic Appreciation and the Worlds of Nature."