

The National Agricultural
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University of Arkansas
System Division of Agriculture

NatAgLaw@uark.edu | (479) 575-7646

An Agricultural Law Research Article

**Essay—Food Democracy and the
Future of American Values**

by

Neil D. Hamilton

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ESSAY—FOOD DEMOCRACY AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN VALUES

*Neil Hamilton**

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I. INTRODUCTION—THINKING ABOUT FOOD AND DEMOCRACY

“It was there all the time,” are the first words Grant Wood speaks in the one-man play based on his life. He is speaking of the rural scenes that surrounded him as a child. His recognition of the beauty in the common, every-day world became the focal point of his widely popular and then revolutionary art form we know as Regionalism. We were sitting in the newly restored Temple for the Performing Arts watching a special performance of the play as guests of Christie Vilsack, Iowa’s first lady. The Temple illustrates Wood’s simple observation – this architectural gem has been here for almost 100 years, slowly falling into dereliction as thousands pass by everyday blind to either its beauty or potential. Only the inspired vision – and funds – of our friends, Pam and Harry Bookey, saved it from a scheduled appointment with the city’s wrecking ball, a

* Dwight D. Opperman Chair of Law and Professor of Law and Director of the Agricultural Law Center, Drake University Law School, Des Moines, Iowa. This essay is taken from the book *FOOD DEMOCRACY* to be published in 2005.

fate it earned for being in the way of progress and an ill-planned urban renewal scheme. But historic preservation wasn't what made the words "it was there all the time" ring in my head. As the awareness flashed, I realized this is true about the passions now defining my life – local foods, small farms, gardening, sustainable agriculture, farmers' markets, food policy – all the ways America is creating a food system connecting consumers with farmers and communities with the land.

It is as true about food as about the scenes that inspired Grant Wood's art – and about the qualities now revealed in the Temple. Food is always there, it is part of our lives – it influences how we live, it helps determine the friends we keep and the lives we share with them; ultimately, it shapes our health and our fates. Few things in life are as important and none more so, yet our relation to food is a mix of conflicting emotions. We realize food is essential to our health but we know so little about it. The truth is, for most of us, food is an afterthought. It wasn't always so easy to be cavalier in our attitude, to take food for granted. In a nation with agrarian roots like ours, until recent decades, growing food was part of the productive lives of many citizens. The story of human history is written in our agricultural past and for most of that history, humans have been intimately connected with food – gathering it, growing it, and cooking it. But human progress has changed this relation freeing us from the toil and the worry about whether our next meal will appear. For most Americans food today is just a product of the grocery store and farmers are an image in news about drought or disease – or television characters hocking cereals and orange juice. How far we have come in separating people from their food and from the land on which it is produced. Progress has reduced our food knowledge and eroded our appreciation for its tastes and differences and for its value in our lives and society. We have substituted the fast foods and cheap foods manufactured by a food industry that deems efficiency and low prices as more important than quality or consumer satisfaction. Worse yet, most people still involved in agriculture do not see themselves as farmers growing food but instead as growers producing commodities, the raw materials food manufacturers process into the convenience foods we consume.

The true costs to society of these changes, not just in food, but in health and obesity, satisfaction and confidence, and understanding and appreciation, are just now beginning to be weighed. Separating us from our food has had many affects – not the least of which are how it is cheapening both our food and ourselves. The changes in America's food system have left many farmers with little hope, made more consumers less confident, and assigned most rural communities little future. But food is still there – it has to be if we are to thrive. And the con-

nections food offers – between farmers and the land, between the land and consumers, and between consumers and farmers, are still there as well. All across the nation people are questioning the direction our food system is headed and are asking if there is a different path, if a healthier food future is possible, one that builds on these connections and uses them to create stronger, more satisfying relations involving food. They see a food future where informed consumers understand the role of food in health, where farmers produce and sell fresh food in communities, and where public policy supports efforts to strengthen local food systems. Like Grant Wood, another son of the Iowa soil, I am an optimist by birth and nature. Where he found beauty, I see hope, and where he painted harmony, I envision strength and opportunity. Food is too important for us to accept a diminished role for it in our lives or for us to leave the future of America’s food system for others to determine.

In his essay the *Land Ethic*, Aldo Leopold wrote, “when the logic of history hungers for bread and we hand out a stone, we are at pains to explain how much the stone resembles bread.”¹ Is this where we are today in America’s food system? The signs are clear; an increasing number of Americans are seeking bread – in the form of more fulfilling and more satisfying food – and are seeking connections with healthy food, with local farmers and with the land. The bread they seek is food that will sustain and satisfy, but the stones they are given are the food products of an increasingly industrialized, impersonal and unsatisfying – although possibly “efficient” – global food system. When the people and times hunger for safe, high quality food, we are at pains to describe how our increasingly concentrated food sector can provide it. Is it possible a food system so dependent on technologies like feeding growth hormones, on faster processing speeds that increase the risk of contamination, and on poorly paid workers can really provide what we so frequently describe as “the safest and cheapest food supply in the world?” Agricultural and political leaders make this claim so often it has become their mantra, but the questions it begs about food quality, social costs and environmental impacts – the type of questions illuminated on a regular basis by incidents like the recent mad cow episode – reveal the claim to be more cheerleading by those who benefit from the status quo than an accurate description of America’s food system.

Now as the public clamors for a healthier environment with clean water, fertile soils and lands stewarded by farm families, the chemical companies and industrial meat processors who dominate American agriculture must explain how

1. ALDO LEOPOLD, *Land Ethic*, in *A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC, AND SKETCHES HERE AND THERE* (1949).

their products and processes meet all current regulations and are the efficient production practices our nation needs. In their view, a little environmental “impact” and social dislocation in rural America is the small price to pay for our bountiful supply of food. When consumers question our dependence on farm chemicals, feeding antibiotics to animals to promote growth, and using genetically modified seeds – because they know intuitively even the ‘soundest science’ can never know all the risks – the food industry responds that no alternative system of production, whether it be called organic farming, sustainable agriculture or anything else, can provide the cheap food consumers demand let alone produce enough to feed a hungry world. But do we ever stop to consider whether cheap food is all consumers really want? And when it comes to “feeding the world,” agriculture’s favorite self-delusion, do we ever stop to ask when the world decided the U.S. should feed it, let alone acknowledge we never could or should accept this responsibility, even if it had?

These are some of the stones we pretend resemble bread and there are many more. But the truth is, stones don’t taste like bread no matter how they are described or how powerful the politics and economics behind them. It has taken time for our nation to realize this truth, but the time of recognition is upon us. All across this nation, questions are being asked and alternatives for producing and marketing foods are being developed. I am convinced a powerful transformation, a food revival, is underway in our nation, one that promises to create new opportunities for anyone taking part in it. This essay is an attempt to understand the forces reshaping America’s food future – to find the new approaches and the people and organizations striving to create new opportunities in America. The goal is to examine what is happening across the nation, on our farms, in our kitchens, and at our markets, wherever food is raised and hands are in the soil, to see if these changes may offer us hope for more satisfying and sustaining food.

But this essay is really about more than just food, as important as food is. It is really about democracy and its relation to food – it is about a food democracy. It is about the individuals and organizations building a more satisfying food system by offering alternatives to the “cheap” foods that have come to define our diet. It is about the values that motivate them and how they are reflected in the farming practices they employ and the foods they produce. It is also about the opposition they face from the businesses and organizations straining to retain control and domination over America’s food system. The issues implicated in the debate over a food democracy are truly monumental: our rights as consumers to be informed and to have more satisfying food choices and alternatives in the market; the rights of farmers, chefs and marketers to produce and market foods reflecting their diversity and creative potential; and our nation’s ability to have a

food system that promotes good health, confidence, understanding, and enjoyment as well as economic opportunity. The outcome of this struggle is unknown but the stakes are clear. Clear also are the responsibilities of people who care about what they eat, who want food they believe is more satisfying and not just less expensive, who want to have confidence in the foods they buy and to know and trust the farmers and businesses who produce it. If you want the right to make choices in the market, in your community, and in your kitchen about the food you buy and eat, if you want to be informed and know more about how your food is raised, or want to support the farmers and companies producing food in ways you trust, then you are involved in the fight to build a food democracy in America. You deserve to know more about our food system and to be challenged to make it better.

II. FOOD DEMOCRACY—SEARCHING FOR THE NAME

The story of the movement for a food democracy in America is a tale that has been unfolding for almost a generation. I began writing on this topic eight years ago. It started with a sabbatical and plans to write about what was happening in our food system, about the exciting progressive efforts of people to farm better and to eat more thoughtfully. I traveled throughout the nation talking to interesting people working on their farms and in their communities to create more opportunities around food. I learned first hand about the array of citizen organizations working to change our food system. Many of their issues became the focus of my research and writing and life – small farmers, community gardens, heirloom seeds, eco-labels, community food security, and food policy. In the late 1990's, I wrote a series of articles on the theme "Tending the Seeds of the New Agriculture," something I could see so clearly emerging in our land.² But the planned book, Feeding America's Future, didn't materialize, although many lessons were learned about the vagaries of publishing. Instead I ended up with a USDA grant to write a different book, The Legal Guide for Direct Farm Marketing.³ Researching that issue helped me appreciate many of the fundamental changes sweeping America's food culture. It also led to my involvement with organizations helping transform America's food system, from the Seed Savers

2. See Neil D. Hamilton, *Tending the Seeds: The Emergence of a New Agriculture in the United States*, 1 *DRAKE J. AGRIC. L.* 7 (1996); see also Neil D. Hamilton, *Greening Our Garden: Public to Support the New Agriculture*, 2 *DRAKE J. AGRIC. L.* 357 (1997).

3. See generally NEIL HAMILTON, *THE LEGAL GUIDE FOR DIRECT FARM MARKETING* (1999).

Exchange to Slow Food, from the National Gardening Association to the Practical Farmers of Iowa, and from Niman Ranch to the American Farmland Trust.

Writing about direct farm marketing gave me the opportunity to talk to farmers all across the country and meet many of the people working for what I see now as a food democracy. When I started this journey I didn't know exactly what to expect but did have a good idea what I was looking for. When it started I didn't realize I was a food democrat but now it is clear to me there are millions of citizens in our nation who are food democrats. If you ask them if they are food democrats, some might answer with a puzzled grin, "No, I am just trying to farm and produce (or cook or sell) good food for people to enjoy." That may be your answer. But the reality is, these people are food democrats, and you may be too and not even realize it. That is part of the beauty of this story and this movement. No one wakes up one morning and says, "Today I am going to change America's food system," one of the most powerful economic and political sectors in our nation. But we all know that changes, important changes, are underway. All we have to do is read the paper or go to the store to see them. The movement for a food democracy is a collective tale, the story of Americans from all walks of life who care about what they eat and how they farm, and who reflect these shared values in their actions. These food democrats are creating a movement that promises to change not just how we think about food and what we know about it in our nation, but how we enjoy it as well. Enjoyment is key to this story. Food is about sustenance, but it is also about pleasure and fulfillment. One goal of a food democracy, and one common trait of the food democrats, is to restore the joy and pursuit of happiness in our relation with food.

I know the joy and passion motivating the food democrats because we live it on our farm every day. For eight years my professional and personal work has led me from one end of the country to the other, meeting hundreds of people working to create more sustainable and fulfilling futures, all in some way involving food. As a law professor, I study many of the legal and policy challenges they face and know how government actions can create new opportunities or place obstacles in the way of change. Teaching my legal courses, one class in particular, Food and the Law, has given me new understanding of the power of our food manufacturing and retailing industry and what is at stake in America's food future. The Agricultural Law Center I head at Drake University has a research and education program on state and local food policy working with citizens in dozens of states. For 17 years, I have served on the advisory board of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University, helping guide its emphasis on community food systems and marketing as important research topics for assisting farmers. Personally, my wife Khanh and I have be-

come deeply involved in producing and marketing food, with a weekly farmers' market and selling vegetables and flowers to our favorite restaurants. What started as a large garden is now a small farm, as last year we raised over 110 varieties of heirloom tomatoes, planted 350 pounds of potatoes and grew over 3000 leeks. Two years ago, I started a Slow Food chapter in Des Moines; and Sunstead Farm has become our own local food education and promotion program, hosting a range of activities from a Slow Food cookout and pie making contest attended by hundreds, to a Good Friday potato planting, and frequent dinner parties featuring foods raised right outside the door. The deepening connection with our farm, and with our food system, has helped us form lasting friendships with others who share our love for food, gardening, and the land. My most important insight gained over these years of teaching, writing, lecturing and travels, of serving on non-profit boards, and working our own farm is a sharper impression and clearer vision of what is really emerging in our nation's food system.

For years I searched for the right term to describe what is growing in our land. The question was how best to describe this movement so others can appreciate what is happening and look for ways to become part of it. At first I thought "the New Agriculture" described it because so many of the progressive movements in food and farming are just now emerging in the greater public awareness. But while that label worked for me, others use the term just as easily to describe the high input agriculture dependent on new technologies and "efficiency," not the human value oriented version of food production I have in mind. But without an accurate name to describe them the connections between these related movements will remain elusive, both to description and to unification. So is there a term that works to label this movement? Is it sustainable agriculture, organic farming, beyond organic or just local food? All these labels work well to describe a portion of what is happening, with local food having perhaps the most potential to capture many of the values involved. But each label has its limitations as it really only describes part of the much larger movement. Yes, some of the food might be organic, but it doesn't have to be, and yes, buying local food is a powerful message but not all food can or should be raised locally. There had to be a better way to describe what is happening, a label that doesn't focus just on the food but instead on the process and the people, a label that reflects the values driving these forces.

It wasn't until last fall, when "serious" research and writing on a new sabbatical was underway, that I had my Grant Wood moment and could see clearly what this movement was all about. The issues being woven together to strengthen the fabric of America's food system have a common theme, even a common purpose. The medium is food, but the theme is democracy. The pur-

pose is to empower citizens to have choices and find greater satisfaction in a food system reflecting the democratic values we share and that underpin our society and economy. These democratic values and movements reject the industrialized and degraded values of cheap food and replace them with concern for the needs of the people and the land, with human focused values that weigh satisfaction and sustainability, information and involvement as equally as efficiency and price and profits and productivity. For me, the lens of democracy brings into view and into focus the real values driving the progressive changes in America's food system. When viewed through the lens of democracy much of what is happening, from the growth in farmers' markets, to the emergence of CSA subscription farms, from the empowerment of chefs as social leaders, to the use of eco-labels, and from the proliferation of buy local campaigns to the increasing numbers of farmers and consumers making direct connections and building community around food is collectively an effort to promote democratic values in society. The real measure of this movement is people wanting more: consumers wanting more information about their food and more food choices; farmers wanting more for the futures of their children than being refugees from the land or workers on industrial farms; chefs and eaters wanting better tasting, fresher, more wholesome and more nutritious food. Our commitment to democracy as a people and as a nation is an enduring feature of America. It is why I am optimistic the movement now underway in American food will lead to real change for the better. That is why I chose the title Food Democracy – because that is what this is about.

III. THE QUESTIONS WE DON'T ASK ABOUT OUR FOOD

An essay on food and democracy. Don't be surprised if your reaction is "what do those two issues have in common?" Food and democracy aren't concepts we generally consider together. We can touch and eat food, but how do we feel and experience democracy? But, if you think for a moment how they relate, the parallels between food and democracy become more apparent. One common trait is how important they are to us as individuals and as a nation. We can't live without food and our nation and lives are defined by the freedoms made possible by democracy. But could we live without democracy or want to, and aren't our lives also defined by what we eat? A second fate shared by food and democracy is how in so many ways we take each for granted. Don't we assume there will always be food on the shelves and farmers in the fields to produce it? Don't we believe our nation will always reflect the democratic values it was built upon? But how often do we stop and consider either the health of our democracy or of

our food? Your answer is as good as mine, but of the two, we may think about democracy more often, at least if we mean thinking in a reflective sense and exercising our democratic rights, such as when we vote in elections, speak our opinions, or respond to America's efforts to promote democracy in other nations. Undoubtedly we think about food quite often, perhaps even as often as we think about sex. Food is on our minds much of the day, when we are hungry or go to the store or decide where to eat. We are bombarded with food images from morning to night in advertisements and commercials, billboards and broadcasts. Increasingly, it seems that no matter where we are – the gas station, the book store, the gym – it has become another place to buy food. This no doubt contributes to the other reason food is on our mind; our expanding national girth means it is also on our hips, triggering a new wave of diet mania and low carb cravings.

But beyond these fairly surface considerations of what to eat next or how not to eat more, don't most of us give little real thought to our food or at least to how our food system works? If we did think more critically about food or cared to understand more about how the food system works, isn't there a great deal more we might learn? Wouldn't we benefit if we spent more time considering questions about our food, such as: is the food we eat raised nearby or half-way across the globe, who produces the food we eat and is the price farmers receive fair, what practices are used to grow it and are they safe for us or the environment, are the animals which become our meals and provide our milk and eggs treated humanely, and are the workers who pick and process our food paid justly? Admit it. Are these questions you think about very often let alone know or even care much about? If you are honest, the answer is probably no, you have better things to worry about. But shouldn't we at least be curious about questions like these, especially if the answers reflect the critical steps in getting food from the field to our plates? If the answers to the questions influence the safety of our food, the health of our environment, and the future of our dietary health, aren't they as important as whether the salad dressing is low-carb or "new and improved" and if the store's "every day low price" will save us a dime? If we do not at least acknowledge questions like these, doesn't it mean we are taking our food for granted?

Well perhaps this is true, but there are many reasons we don't want to or even need to question how well our food system serves us. First, we may not really care, either about who grew the tomato on our salad or the steak on our plate, or about how these foods were produced. As long as food is available, it is safe, and we can afford it, isn't that enough? Second, even if we ask these questions would we be able to get many answers? Can the check-out clerk at your store answer them, or even the store manager? Third, even if we ask and get

answers, will what we learn bring us much comfort or peace of mind? Don't recent news stories about modern agriculture demonstrate that learning too much about our food or trying to eat with a conscience may be a recipe for indigestion? Did you know what a "downer" cow was before the recent mad cow scare? Remember, downers are the animals unable to walk on their own, yet to its surprise, the nation learned USDA rules allowed them to be slaughtered and sold for human consumption. At least were until public outrage finally led USDA to ban the practice over the objections of the meat industry. Does knowing what a downer is make us feel better about the meat we eat, assuming we still eat meat? Perhaps, but there are many reasons why our collective decision about food and agriculture appears to be that it is better to remain in the dark and have faith the issues are being addressed – hopefully by someone who shares our concerns.

Faith can be a valuable trait, especially if it is rewarded. But is our faith rewarded when it comes to food? Do the stories about food safety raise doubts in your mind? Do you ever wonder about the safety or quality of the imported produce you see in the store and wonder how we can produce so much food for the relatively low prices we pay? Perhaps you do, but most people don't ask these questions, because our food system is designed to help make sure we don't, because to question is to doubt and doubt corrodes faith. If you own a food company or manage a grocery store, do you want customers to know all the information about how you produce the food or where it comes from, especially if the answers might make them think twice about buying what you have to sell? Worse yet, what if you tell them you don't know the answers either! If your customers have questions, can't you assume they have concerns? There must be a reason for asking. Isn't there a chance the answers you provide may lead them to act differently? Would you eat as much chicken if the label said it had been fed antibiotics to make it grow faster? Did you think twice about buying beef after learning about mad cows and downers? If you own the company or the store, why provide this information, especially if you can instead just run a funny TV ad or offer a special low price? The same is true if you represent the farmers or companies who produce and market a type of food, beef for instance, or if you are the government agencies responsible, the USDA and the Food and Drug Administration. Do you really want consumers asking a lot of questions about your practices or the quality of your product? Of course not, you want them quiet and content. They have better things to worry about than what they feed themselves, important things like who is going to be the survivor or our new idol. One way to achieve this peaceful state of contented consumers is to create a food marketing and regulatory system where you don't have to provide any information other than what you decide people need to know. You may not realize it but this is

largely how America's food system works today. It is based on faith, trust, reassurance, and unfortunately, ignorance. This is why the businesses and institutions who dominate the food sector, what I will call Big Food, are worried more eaters will start asking questions and looking more critically at whether the food system satisfies their desires. Their fear is if consumers conclude our current food isn't what they want or need, they may look for something different.

There are many other questions we might ask about our food. Is it safe to eat? Is it nutritious? Is it healthy? In fact, these are questions more people have begun asking as concerns and awareness about food safety and the relation between diet and health grow in the U.S. In recent months, the nation's attention has become increasingly focused on obesity, nutrition and dieting and on the challenges food poses to individuals and the nation. Two separate but related trends are sweeping American culture. The first is concern over fast food and the impact junk food is having on our health, especially that of children. The second is a new flurry of diet mania, beyond using the oddly named "dietary supplements" to the latest craze, our fascination with all things low-carb. But even on these crucial questions with such direct relation to our personal and national health, how little we truly know and how much we take on faith is apparent. We have faith the nutritional labels and allergy warnings are accurate, faith all the information we need or would like is available, and faith the food safety and inspection system, the food labels, and the dietary recommendations are designed to protect us and not just the profits and interests of food processors and marketers. Are our faith and assumptions and our purchases justified? The answer is largely a function of how much we know and understand about our food system and how it works. In other words, do we believe it serves us or just the businesses and institutions that control it?

How do we learn more about our food system and have confidence it serves our values? The most direct path to answers is more knowledge and information. Information is the root of the movement for a food democracy as people look for ways we can do better and our food can be more. Food democracy is about knowledge and understanding, about asking questions and getting answers. If, after reflecting on what they learn, consumers conclude they are not being served by the current food system, then the challenge is to join with other Americans – eaters, farmers, marketers, chefs, and all the other food democrats who want to improve the food system – in order to make changes happen. This is where the democracy part comes in.

IV. DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND FOOD

America is a democracy, the world's leader in promoting democratic values, or at least this is what we are taught and what we like to believe. If we value democracy as we claim to, then shouldn't our food system reflect the same democratic values that shape our other institutions and activities? The answer must be yes – how could it be any other way? But to really understand what is at stake in a food democracy and to decide whether the food system we have now meets the test, we must first consider what it is that makes something democratic. Looking for guidance to understand the idea of “democracy” I turned to an old family friend, one I often turned to growing up on our Iowa farm. Shortly after I dropped in, my parents invested what for then and them must have been a grand sum, buying a 1955 set of Encyclopedias Britannica. Could they have known how much those books would shape our lives? Many a childhood evening was spent curled on the floor reading about the newest passion occupying my hyper-active mind – Lapland, falconry, the cotton gin, fencing (with swords not barbed wire). We can never know what influences help choose our paths in life, if in fact, choices they are. Did the big leather volumes and my father's favorite nickname for me, “Professor,” contribute to my life's path? Certainly, growing up connected to the land influenced the decision to become a food farmer, so it must be safe to assume those books so full of knowledge helped lead me to teaching and scholarship, at least I like to think they did. After my parents died, my brother and I moved, or tried to, the lifetime assemblage of a house full of savers. Box after box of pictures, books and papers, including all my elementary school work, were hauled downstairs for decisions about dispersal and disposal. As we worked, the Encyclopedias stood silently in the corner next to father's chair. I knew they had to come home to an honored place in my office. They may be dated but much of what lives on their pages, the ideas and principles, rivers and people, have not changed.

In Volume Eight, on page 182, begins an eight-page essay on democracy, explaining in succinct but studied tones its origins and history.⁴ The roots of the term are the Greek words for “people” and “rule.” The stories of the people I have met bear out this origin, as the hope and promise of a food democracy resides in the people who are its citizens and, who through action and desire, are building a more satisfying food system for themselves, their neighbors, and our nation. The passage ends with the following:

4. 8 ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA 182 *Democracy* (1955).

In a sense, therefore, democracy professes a philosophy of life in somewhat the same way that the totalitarian systems of modern days profess one. Implicit, however, in this philosophy is a personal freedom exempt from the dictatorship of intellect by which the total systems maintain themselves. In other words, freedom of conscience and freedom of expression are its necessary components. Along with these freedoms, is also included economic freedom, at least if by that term is understood freedom from dictation to the political process by purely economic forces, and a more nearly equal opportunity to the members of the community to acquire the goods of the earth.⁵

I confess to not reading this passage until almost done writing, but now from the perspective of a job completed, the passage offers the opportunity to compare the idea of food democracy with the classic description of democracy. How does the idea of a food democracy stand up? A philosophy of life, personal freedom, freedom of conscience, freedom of expression and economic freedom are not just the central ideas in defining democracy they are the common features in the stories and initiatives giving life to food democracy. To answer the questions we need to ask about our food, or even to have the information necessary to choose the questions to ask, certain conditions are necessary and certain democratic expectations must be in place. Both the conditions and the expectations help us understand how democracy applies to food.

First, democracy rests on citizen participation, on people being included and represented in making the decisions that shape our lives. This means in a food democracy the interests of all segments: consumers as well as food processors, farmers as well as marketers, workers as well as regulators, will be acknowledged and reflected. Only by having all the components of the food system involved and their interests – such as the economic returns for small farmers or the wages of workers or the hopes of consumers – valued can it be said the food system reflects the democratic values of inclusion, participation and representation. This means a food democracy seeks ways to broaden the involvement and representation of all segments of the food system in decisions. In such a system we might actually know a farmer and be able to visit a local farm rather than just pretend there really is such a place as Pepperidge Farm where someone is looking out for our nutritional interests.

Second, democracy thrives on information and our ability to make informed choices, a value grounded in the First Amendment of our Constitution, and in exercising our right to vote, the essential democratic act. Deciding which candidate to vote for is not that different than choosing which bacon to buy – in fact, some times which bacon we buy might have more influence on society than

5. *Id.* at 189.

our choice of candidates. But if being able to make informed choices is so critical in a democracy, it means having the information and knowledge with which to make those choices is equally fundamental. This means a food democracy encourages asking questions, and more importantly, a primary goal is providing the information to support our ability to answer them. In a food democracy, each trip to buy food is really a visit to the polling place, and everyday we each have dozens of votes to cast for the foods we buy and dozens of polling places where we can vote, from grocery stores to farmers' markets. A food democracy places the highest value on providing information and education to the voters involved, the consumers whose purchases drive the system, and whose satisfaction reflect its performance.

A third critical component of democracy in action is citizens exercising their freedom to choose and decide between different opportunities. If we are to make informed choices we need alternatives from which to choose. We all know how voter turnout, and our satisfaction, is affected if only one candidate's name is on the ballot. Isn't the food shopping experience diminished and less satisfying if there is only one choice on the shelf? True, you say, but this is never the case in America! The shelves are filled with too many choices! This may appear to be the case, but can an ice cream cooler full of 31 flavors offer much in the way of choice if all the flavors are vanilla? If all the food in the store is produced using the same methods or if the food isn't labeled with meaningful information about how or where it is produced, isn't this similar to having 31 flavors of vanilla? Can a food system stocked with only the standardized products of a faceless industrialized farming and marketing system, one not able or willing to answer the most basic of our questions, provide us with effective choices? Can it provide the same effective choices as a food system offering an array of shopping options, from farmers' markets to natural food stores as well as grocers and big box mega-stores? One offering a selection of foods richly labeled with information about how and where the food was produced, labels that answer many of our questions. A food democracy promotes not just a proliferation of foods, but of markets, farms, and food processors, as well as opportunities for consumer satisfaction and education. In a food democracy, creating new opportunities for farmers, consumers and food marketers is a priority and diversity of foods and experiences is a goal.

Fourth, a key value of democracy is how it thrives through citizen participation in local as well as national institutions. Democracy isn't something out there others do for us; it is something close by that we are part of and share with others. It is something we have a responsibility to, something we experience with the people who share our lives, hopes and expectations. The institutions of

democracy begin at home in our families and communities. One important democratic value is our orientation to the local, our preference for having decisions made closest to the people affected. It is why local referenda are used to build our schools and local juries decide our fate. Democracy is ultimately about making connections and building community, about sharing our hopes for the future with others who share our civic life. It leads us to take responsibility for building society's institutions today. It is why we vote, why we pay taxes, why we participate in civic affairs, and why we are proud to live in a country rich with democratic values. Participation is the key to a food democracy as well. It is also why more Americans are shopping at the farmers' market as well as the grocery store, and why we may eat at the local bistro as well as the chain restaurant. In a food democracy local alternatives and opportunities are considered and expected, and each citizen has a responsibility and role to play. A democratic food system has room for local farms, supports markets that feature a wide range of foods, and nurtures an appreciation for the role food plays in culture and tradition. In a food democracy, people take responsibility for thinking about important questions such as what our kids eat in the school cafeteria, whether local farmland is being preserved, and whether labels such as "all-natural" really mean anything. Collectively, the democratic values of inclusion and participation, information and choice, responsibility and community, make us who we are as a society. These are the values we use, and the laws and the institutions of government we promote. We reflect these democratic values in the proliferation of products, careers, and companies in our economy, itself an important democratic institution, especially if it functions as a true marketplace not just of products, but of ideas and information.

So how do we stack up? Does saying we must consider the idea of building a food democracy mean what we have now is undemocratic? Certainly our current food system performs adequately in some fashion; it must be doing something right if we can take food for granted. Food is abundant, relatively inexpensive, reasonably safe and nutritious if we are wise enough to eat a healthy diet. The food system we have is the one we created, and perhaps deserve, and by these measures our food system is a success. But that does not mean we have a food democracy. What you see depends on where you sit, so the question of whether we have a food democracy is one each reader and each eater has to answer. For many people, especially those who own and manage food processing and marketing businesses, the current system works just fine. They have freedom to operate, markets are open and available, and the government's role is more protective than regulatory. For most consumers, the present food system functions pretty well. In fact, given the national epidemic of obesity, perhaps it

works too well. The issue isn't that America's food system is a failure – how could it be with the bounty, the efficiency, the technology and everything else that we employ to make it so successful. No, the question is can America's food and farm system be better? Can it offer more opportunity, more satisfaction, and more enjoyment? Can it be more democratic? The answer to all these questions is yes it can, and the goal of the food democrats is to make this possible.

V. DEMOCRACY AND OUR FOOD SYSTEM—WHY NOW AND WHAT IS AT STAKE?

You might be thinking – so what, who cares if we have a food democracy, if food is safe, cheap and plentiful. What makes *food democracy* important at this time in the U.S., and not just an interesting, though rather unusual, academic theory? There are many reasons food democracy is critical to the health and future of our nation, but two key ideas provide the rationale. First, it is undeniable a major social transformation is underway in our nation's food, one that has the potential to reshape our food system, creating one more reflective of democratic values. The signs of this are all around us. You can see it in the foods we eat (Have you purchased anything organic lately?), in the issues being debated (Was obesity such a concern five years ago?), and in the discussions in farms and kitchens, boardrooms and dining rooms, in every corner of the land. You may be part of the social movement yearning for a food democracy, perhaps without realizing it. If you shop at the farmers' market, buy organic food, tend a garden, or eat at restaurants serving fresh local foods, then you are part of the food democracy movement. If you are a food democrat, or want to be, in reality you are joining a larger social movement, one resting on community involvement and personal creativity, in which our identity and values are reflected through the lives we lead. The growth in farmers markets, the demand for high quality, more satisfying foods, the influence of chefs in shaping our views of food, our passion for gardening, even our worries about food safety, nutrition, and health, all these key forces are driving changes in our food system. These developments are about more than just food. They are the visible expression of democratic tendencies in society and they are the evidence and the confirmation of an emerging food democracy.

The second reason to consider the importance of food democracy is because it will not happen unless the public realizes what is at stake and becomes engaged in the struggle. The growing consumer interest in buying and eating better food, such as locally grown, and about making connections between farmers and consumers is not without resistance. The companies and institutions who shape and control America's food system are threatened by this movement, in

part because they cannot understand the values it reflects, and are fighting to block the spread of food democracy. To thrive, these interests, what I will call Big Food, must retain control over both the design and values of our food system. That is why Big Food is fighting the use of eco-labels on natural foods to inform consumers how the products are grown and why it resists calls for more useful information on food labels, such as added sugars or the country of origin. It is why Big Food has organized a campaign to blunt the growth in demand for organic foods and why it resists efforts to expand opportunities for farmers to market food directly to consumers. Although they will reject the label, the forces that make up Big Food are in many ways anti-democratic. Much of the economic and political agenda of Big Food is designed to limit the information and choices available to consumers, to restrict the availability of alternative products and markets, and to assure consumers there is no reason for concern about our food. “Just be quiet and eat what we sell” is Big Food’s message. But the message “trust us, shut up and eat” is being questioned by growing numbers of consumers and eaters. Everyday it seems there is a new episode, a new concern that makes people less confident in the promises and reassurances of Big Food and the federal agencies supporting it. The “mad cow” crisis that unfolded at the end of 2003 is just the latest example of a food scare to open a window into the largely secret world of food processing and marketing. Even though it only opened the window a crack, the episode raised many questions about the goal of government regulations and created new consumer demand for meat produced in ways consumers could have more confidence in, opening new markets for farmers selling these products.

Big Food is not the enemy of the American eater or even of good food, but it is threatened by many of the values underpinning the food democracy movement. Providing consumers with more information is costly, and answering the questions we asked about food can lead people to seek alternatives. This explains part of the resistance Big Food and others may have to the notion of a food democracy. It is why they fight to deny any problems exist with our food. Consider the standard argument used by the food industry, such as the Grocery Manufacturers of America, to combat efforts to restrict the marketing of fat laden and highly sugared foods to children – “there is no such thing as a bad food, just bad food choices.”⁶ But this simplistic formulation masks the food industry’s heavy investment in producing and marketing the foods that make our “bad

6. News Release, Grocery Manufacturers of America, *GMA Reminds CSPI, Lawmakers that There are “No Bad Foods, Just Bad Diets”* (May 7, 1999) available at <http://www.gmabrands.org/news/docs/NewsRelease.cfm?DocID=248>.

choices” possible. By focusing on the responsibility of consumers, Big Food is able to avoid discussion of any responsibility it has. The desire to remain in control of the market for food explains the efforts, such as those to derail the growth of alternatives like organic foods and to seek legislation shielding the food industry from litigation.

Fortunately, America’s food system is not monolithic and not all companies producing and marketing food adhere to the resistance mentality of Big Food. In fact, the growth in the production and market of natural foods and organics is one of the brightest economic stories in America’s food system. The actions by major food companies, like Kraft and McDonald’s, to adjust production and marketing practices in the face of national concerns about diet and obesity or food safety, show that Big Food can in fact be sensitive to the concerns of the people who are their customers. The recognition and adoption of democratic values by parts of the food industry provides a hopeful path for our food future. But even companies seeking new opportunities to serve consumers wanting more from their food are not immune from the forces of standardization and resistance exercised by Big Food. For each company that breaks from the orthodoxy of the Grocery Manufacturers of America and the National Food Processors Association, dozens more reject, as without merit, any criticism of their products or practices. They portray criticisms of modern high tech farming, such as feeding antibiotics to livestock to promote growth, as the unscientific claims of “wacko” environmentalists whose goal is to starve the world’s poor. They paint the messages of nutritionists and health experts urging more restraint on the marketing of fatty foods as the long arm of the food police who want to control what Americans eat and limit our freedom to choose. The irony is that continued consolidation and concentration of the businesses that make up Big Food and their resistance to effective food labeling is doing more to limit the freedom of consumers to choose than all the consumer and health movements combined. By limiting the ability of alternative food producers to provide truthful labels and by resisting calls for more information on food labels, Big Food may be unintentionally nurturing a culture in which food fears and fads, as well as suspicions, take root.

How will the growing conflict between the values of food democracy movement and those of Big Food be resolved? Ultimately the answer will depend in large part on how citizens respond to the issues at stake and whether they take active roles in the debate. Your reaction may be, “But I don’t want to be in a political fight! I just want to eat lunch!” But this is what makes the issue of food democracy so important, we are all affected and involved in the food system everyday, whether we want to be or not. Nature provides us all with the same starting point. We may be able to choose what to eat but we can’t choose not to

eat, at least for very long! So the truth is, we can't avoid taking sides, we do it every time we eat or buy food. The movement for a food democracy isn't a political campaign where you attend rallies, join a party, write a check or carry a sign, although those options are available. Instead, this is a social and economic debate where the winners are decided everyday by what you eat, by the food you buy and where you buy it, by the questions you ask about what you feed your family, and by the other food actions you take. The future of food democracy is important because it shapes not just what we eat, but how our economy functions, the opportunities for farmers and rural communities, and ultimately, the safety and satisfaction of our food.

VI. THE ROLE OF CITIZENS IN A FOOD DEMOCRACY

So what exactly does food democracy mean for people? To live in a democracy means we each have responsibilities. As Wendell Berry says, eating is a political act.⁷ For most of us, our responsibility in a food democracy is how we exercise our political rights as consumers or eaters. We can perform this responsibility by recognizing what we choose to eat shapes the food system we have. While we are all consumers, in a food democracy some people have additional roles to play. Farmers grow the foods that satisfy our varying desires, chefs express the creativity that turns food into experience, and educators transmit not just information but the values and traditions that define our culture. If it is true we don't ask many questions about our food and know even less, does this mean as consumers we are not living up to our responsibilities? It could mean this, but that assumes our choices have been conscious. Most of us would not knowingly choose to eat foods produced in an unsafe manner or inhumane conditions any more than we would choose to abuse farm animals or workers ourselves. Most of us believe the farmers we depend on to raise our food are adequately paid so they will continue to sustain our land and safeguard our interests. We would be surprised to learn many farmers sell food for less than it costs to grow. We wouldn't buy products if we knew their production damaged the environment or leave untold costs for rural communities and future generations. But this is where our lack of knowledge and curiosity, as well as the assurances of Big Food, can be so dangerous, because unfortunately for some of the food we eat, our assumptions are not justified. In some cases farm animals are mistreated, workers are underpaid, unsafe processing practices are used and farmers are not

7. See generally WENDELL BERRY, *The Pleasures of Eating*, in *WHAT ARE PEOPLE FOR?* (1990).

paid fair prices. This is not true with all food or at all times but it is true nonetheless. As the recent book, *Fatal Harvest*, so vividly shows, the true impacts of our industrialized food system are being hidden from view – physically by laws and regulations that make food labels and markets oblique at best, and intellectually through the powerful myths Big Food uses to justify and rationalize its actions.⁸

Your response might be, well if there are problems then the market place or the regulatory system must be at fault. This might be true in some instances, but sometimes the marketplace or the regulatory system supports or even encourages these realities. Remember how it took the discovery of mad cow to get the USDA to finally adopt common sense regulations on feeding downer cows to humans, something the beef industry resisted for years. What may really be at fault is that our food system is based on production and marketing practices designed to deliver the “cheap food” we are assumed to desire. If our food system is based on the assumption we are not interested in knowing more about food or are concerned about the impact of our food choices, then should we be surprised to learn food is produced with little regard for either the impacts or our concerns? Our food system is premised on the idea consumers can’t be trusted with information about how food is produced for fear we might come to question not just the quality or safety of the food, but also the values being served. That is why the food questions poised above most often go unasked and unanswered. As consumers and as citizens, we deserve our share of blame as well, for letting the market assume all we want is cheap food, when the truth is, many people want food that is more satisfying. Food satisfaction can come in many ways: through fresher, better tasting food; through food raised in ways to reflect care for the land, the animals and the workers; and through food produced nearby and marketed in ways that allow the economic benefits to circulate in local communities. There are many ways our foods can be produced and marketed to be more satisfying. This, too, is a goal of a food democracy because reflecting our personal satisfaction and fulfillment is something the freedom of democracy should offer.

VII. SUMMARY—WHAT QUESTIONS MUST WE CONSIDER TO PROMOTE A FOOD DEMOCRACY?

We cannot expect to fulfill our role as consumers and eaters in a food democracy without information, without alternatives and choices, and without local opportunities to express our values. This is why it is important to consider

8. See generally *FATAL HARVEST: THE TRAGEDY OF INDUSTRIAL AGRICULTURE* (Andrew Kimbrell ed., 2002).

how democratic values relate to the way our food system functions. In a food democracy we all have a role to play, and different parts of society and the food system provide the critical elements for building a food democracy. From my travels across our nation, it is clear millions of people are taking it upon themselves to build a more satisfying food system, one that reflects our democratic values. The promise of a food democracy can be seen in the thousands of farmers' markets, adding vibrancy to cities and towns in every state and giving eaters who want better, more satisfying foods the chance to exercise that right. It can be found in the community gardens brightening inner city neighborhoods and building stronger social bonds, and it can be seen in the millions of home gardens where citizens go to touch the soul of nature and feel the power of the soil. Our food democracy can be seen on the thousands of farms where families are producing food and marketing it to their friends and neighbors, and it is there in the kitchens and on the menus of innovative chefs using creativity and consciousness to connect eaters with local foods. By their actions, these citizens are helping create a food democracy in our land. In many ways, the answers to questions about America's food future are found in the stories of these people, these food democrats, the farmers, chefs, teachers, eaters, gardeners, food marketers, and public officials working to create a brighter, more satisfying food system for themselves, their customers, their families and friends. And ultimately and collectively, as democracies work, for all of us. The most important questions we face are, where is our food system headed, how can we feed America's future, and will current food trends, the clash between local food and Big Food, lead to food democracy?

The food democracy movement underway in America raises many significant political, economic, legal, and social questions. The questions and the search for answers illustrate the importance and potential of food democracy and the role citizens will play in it.

- Can promoting local foods help drive rural economic development to rebuild the countryside and give identity to regional cuisines?
- Is producing healthier food the missing link in the national debate about obesity and nutrition policy, and if so, how can we engage farmers in the fight?
- What is the relation of chefs, quality local food, and gardening, to the emerging importance of creativity some feel is leading and shaping society?

- Can entrepreneurial agriculture, focused on marketing food and rural experiences, be an effective way to preserve farmland and find profitability on the land?
- Do sustainable farming organizations, like the Practical Farmers of Iowa and the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture, mean a new generation of farmers is emerging to serve the goals and values of a food democracy?
- Can eco-labels and brands like Niman Ranch meats inform consumers about where and how food is raised, helping them make informed choices about food, and still deliver the taste and quality they will pay more for?
- Will public organizations like the Consumer Federation of America and the Sierra Club recognize their ability to promote environmental and food safety goals by linking with farmers and the local food democracy movement?
- Will the opposition of Big Food be successful in limiting the growth in demand for local food and organics, and will its influence over government policy slow or stifle the trend toward food democracy?
- Can the nation find effective methods to address not just hunger, but food insecurity for individuals and communities, so the bounty of America's farms can be shared equitably with those in need?
- Can fair trade initiatives be effective at increasing the wages and conditions for farm workers and family farmers and serve the needs of consumers?
- Can we harness the power of gardening and the people-soil connection to educate children, feed communities, heal souls and cities, and incubate new farms?
- What can we do as citizens to promote food democracy in our communities and nation, so the food system we have serves our needs and feeds our future?

These questions will shape our food future. People and the power of good ideas pursued with passion provide the basis for my optimism about the future of our food democracy. It was there all the time, all we have to do is look up and find it.