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**Food, foodshed, soil, and place**

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“Civilizations have destroyed themselves by destroying their farmland”  
Wes Jackson and Wendell Berry<sup>1</sup>

Food has the potential to strengthen our sense of place, intertwining meaning and identity. Eating locally, learning about traditional foods, and attending to the seasons are ways to become more conscious of food choices and their implications for the planet. Food invites other languages of attachment, restoring our lived relationships with place. Tastes of fresh, local food, together with traditional varieties of plants and animals that are well adapted to each locale, call forth an appealing vision of people living well and also responsibly with one another and with the land.

A revolution in transportation and communication since World War II, coupled with agricultural research and abundant cheap oil, has allowed us to develop a global food system that is detached in many ways from the soil.<sup>2</sup> Industrial food processing allowed new forms of food storage, long-distance travel, and extended shelf life.<sup>3</sup> The average person has little appreciation of the land or the farming practices suited to each locale.<sup>4</sup> Stories and memories are lost as well—and sometimes, even the seeds and plant varieties eaten by our great-grandparents.<sup>5</sup> Lack of public concern about farmland loss to urban sprawl, eroding topsoil, and declining rural communities reveals a general disconnection from the land. Social indifference to the farmers and farm workers who grow food echoes our disconnectedness to nature and season.<sup>6</sup>

An alternative to the industrial, global food system is a locally or regionally based system, made up of diversified farms using sustainable practices to supply fresher, more nutritious foodstuffs to small-scale processors and consumers, to whom producers are linked by bonds of community as well as economy.<sup>7,8</sup> Landscape is part of that community.

Consumer expectations are shifting towards such a system. In addition to acquiring healthy food, many consumers want to know where their food comes from, how it is grown, and who are the farmers.<sup>9</sup> They want to know if their own values, such as fair working conditions and humane treatment of animals, have been upheld all along the food chain. And more consumers are returning to seasonal food purchases, finding it tastier and cheaper to eat fruits and vegetables in season.

**Foodshed**

The concept of foodshed echoes the image of water flowing downhill and draws our attention to where our food comes from. What is Emory’s foodshed? If we buy bananas from Costa Rica and coffee from Kenya, our foodshed is international. Foodshed activists seek to re-focus on the origins of our food, and to encourage purchases within a bioregion and with attention to impacts on the lands and cultures. Steps to help re-build an alternative food future are to:

- Strengthen decisions that include non-economic values, such as pleasure, loyalty, justice, friendship, and affection. Such decisions are made by individuals and institutions, such as Emory.

- Rebuild habits of eating together and fostering a relationship with the land that supports us. Celebrations can attend to seasons of strawberries, peaches, cantaloupes, tomatoes, corn, and other crops.
- Carve out “insulated spaces” where alternatives to conventional food can thrive, such as Emory’s campus farmers market and new dining service commitments to sustainable food purchases.

Emory’s efforts to increase sustainably-grown regional and Georgia-grown foods in dining halls and hospitals are one way that we seek to strengthen our local food system.

### **Grassroots efforts lead the way**

Local food efforts often highlight direct marketing, ways of building stronger ties between consumers and farmers. Farmers markets, community-supported agriculture (CSAs or food shares), roadside stands, and farm-to-school programs all put “the farmer’s face” on the food. Local food systems can build trust in fresher food, grown with methods that support an ethic of care for the land. Food cooperatives, restaurants that feature local produce and meats, and food businesses such as bakeries provide another way to eat local food. Community gardens and urban farming are important as well, building new, more intimate relationships with plants and strengthening the social fabric.

Organizations that have promoted such food alternatives are the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC), a broad grassroots gathering of local food advocates who work for a revitalized local food system. CFSC works not only on local issues such as community gardens and farm-to-school programs, but also on farm bill legislation and reform of federal subsidies to conventional agriculture. Improving access to high-quality, fresh food in underserved neighborhoods—so-called “food deserts”—is central to food security work.<sup>10</sup> Where families are constrained by poor transportation, stocking even a small grocery store with fresh vegetables can increase dietary consumption of healthier foods.<sup>11</sup>

Other groups seek to rebuild their local foodsheds. In the 1990s, Hartford, Connecticut followed Toronto’s lead in creating a Local Food Project. *Growing Power* in Milwaukee and Chicago and organizations such as the *Practical Farmers of Iowa* and the *Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture* (PASA) have led the way. The *Food Routes* coalition developed over a dozen “Buy Fresh/Buy Local” campaigns around the country, supported by the Kellogg Foundation. On-line directories that guide consumers to local farmers, chefs, stores, and pick-your-own operations have been important information resources.<sup>12</sup>

Here in Atlanta, *Georgia Organics* has been active in maintaining a Local Food Guide ([www.georgiaorganics.org](http://www.georgiaorganics.org)) and has supported a range of activities to build a more sustainable food system. The *Atlanta Local Food Initiative* ([www.atlantafood.org](http://www.atlantafood.org)) has created a “Plan for Atlanta’s Food Future” endorsed by the Centers for Disease Control and President Jimmy Carter. The plan calls for actions to redress Atlanta’s food deserts, support farm-to-school programs and community gardens, increase commitments to buy local, and support other ways to rebuild connections to place around food. *Southern Seed Legacy* (<http://www.uga.edu/eb/ssl/>) and the Georgia chapters of *Slow Food* (<http://www.slowfoodusa.org/>) highlight biodiversity in agriculture and preservation of traditional varieties (often hardy and disease resistant).

### **Terroir and regional cuisine**

Regions are often known for distinctive food products, and labeling systems can help consumers identify foods that support traditional foodways and growing practices. European labels-of-origin are well known in wine and cheese and are based on a sense of “terroir” or the special soils that produce tastes unique to a particular region. In the U.S., regional specialties are less likely to emphasize uniformity of a particular taste and more likely to highlight individual excellence of particular craft products. Faculty at the University of Missouri, together with many partners, launched a *Regional Cuisines Project* in 2002.<sup>13</sup> Missouri is famous for its cured hams and a particular pecan native to the state, and labeling these products allows them to gain value. Ecoregions have been delineated and as farmers become organized and standards are set, certification processes will highlight local products, allowing greater transparency for the consumer. These kinds of efforts call attention to local producers, soils, and the importance of preserving cultural traditions.

Sustainability calls for attention to how our food provisioning works with nature. The connection between humans, land, and food is scientific, but also philosophical and spiritual. “If a system of production has negative side-effects, and cares not about the resources on which it relies, then we have taken a path leading ultimately to disaster,” says agricultural development leader, Jules Pretty.<sup>14</sup> As we seek to live up to Emory’s sustainability vision (“Healthy Emory, Healthy Planet”), a revitalized relationship with soils, climate, seeds, farmers, and foodways is a deeply appealing vision, one that can guide us forward to honor the places we call home.

*Peggy Barlett for the Sustainable Food Committee at Emory University*

<sup>1</sup> Jackson, Wes and Wendell Berry. 2008. “A 50-Year Farm Bill” *New York Times*, January 5.

<sup>2</sup> Kirschenmann, Frederick L. 2008. Food as Relationship. *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition* 3(2-3):106-121.

<sup>3</sup> Friedmann, Harriet 1993. After Midas’s Feast: Alternative Food Regimes for the Future. In, *Food for the Future*. Patricia Allen, ed. Pp. 213-33. NY: Wiley.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, Wes. 1994. “Becoming Native to this Place.” *The Earthscan Reader in Sustainable Agriculture*. London: Earthscan.

<sup>5</sup> Berry, Wendell. 1990. “The Pleasures of Eating” from *What are People For?* NY: North Point Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux. <http://www.ecoliteracy.org/publications/rsl/wendell-berry.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Hinrichs, C. Clare and Thomas A Lyson. 2007. *Remaking the North American Food System: Strategies for Sustainability*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

<sup>7</sup> Hamm, Michael W. 2008. Linking Sustainable Agriculture and Public Health: Opportunities for Realizing Multiple Goals. *J. of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition* 3(2-3):169-185.

<sup>8</sup> Kloppenburg, Jack, Jr., John Hendrickson, and G.W. Stephenson. 1996. Coming in to the Foodshed. In, *Rooted in the Land*. William Vitek and Wes Jackson, eds. Pp. 113-123. New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Barham, Elizabeth 2002. Toward a Theory of Values-Based Labeling. *Agriculture and Human Values* 19(4):349-360.

<sup>10</sup> Gottlieb, Robert 2001. *Environmentalism Unbound: Exploring New Pathways for Change*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

<sup>11</sup> National Research Council 2009. *The Public Health Effects of Food Deserts*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

<sup>12</sup> Bedford, Christopher B. 2006. Meeting the Challenge of Local Food. *Business* 28(1):17.

<sup>13</sup> Barham, Elizabeth, David Lind, and Lewis Jett 2006 “The Missouri Regional Cuisines Project.” In *Urban Place: Reconnecting with the Natural World*. Peggy F. Barlett, ed. Pp.141-72. Cambridge: MIT Press.

<sup>14</sup> Pretty, Jules 2002. *Agri-Culture: Reconnecting People, Land, and Nature*. London: Earthscan