

# Food for Thought

Renewing the culinary culture should be a conservative cause.

By John Schwenkler

ALICE WATERS might not seem like a conservative. A veteran of Berkeley's Free Speech Movement, who once cooked a \$25,000-a-seat fundraising dinner for Bill Clinton, she eagerly compares her campaign for "edible schoolyards"—where children work with instructors to grow, prepare, and eat fresh produce—to John F. Kennedy's attempt to improve physical fitness through mandatory exercise. Her dream of organic, locally and sustainably produced food in every school cafeteria, class credit for lunch hour, and required gardening time and cooking classes is as utopian as they come. The name she has given her gastronomic movement, the "Delicious Revolution," strikes the ear as one part fuzzy-headed Marxism, the other Brooksonian bobo-speak. This woman is not, as they say, one of us.

But a closer look tells a different story. In a 1997 talk, Waters quoted from an essay by Francine du Plessix Grey about the film "Kids," which portrays the sex-, drug-, and violence-crazed lives of a circle of New York teenagers. Du Plessix Grey writes of being haunted by the adolescents' "feral" and "boorishly gulped" fast-food diet: "we may," she suggests, "be witnessing the first generation in history that has not been required to participate in that primal rite of socialization, the family meal." Such an activity "is not only the core curriculum in the school of civilizing discourse; it is also a set of protocols that curb our natural savagery and our animal greed, and cultivate a capacity for sharing and thoughtfulness." These teenagers "are

deprived of the main course of civilized life—the practice of sitting down at the dinner table and observing the attendant conventions."

Today's children, Waters goes on to say, "are bombarded with a pop culture which teaches redemption through buying things." But schoolyard gardens, like the one she helped create at the middle school a few blocks from my home in Berkeley, "turn pop culture upside-down: they teach redemption through a deep appreciation for the real, the authentic, and the lasting—for the things that money can't buy: the very things that matter most of all if we are going to lead sane, healthy, and sustainable lives. Kids who learn environmental and nutritional lessons through school gardening—and school cooking and eating—learn ethics." Good cooking, she writes in the introduction to her 2007 cookbook, *The Art of Simple Food*, "can reconnect our families and communities with the most basic human values, provide the deepest delight for all our senses, and assure our well-being for a lifetime."

The proposal, put slightly differently, is that our attitudes toward food—which nourishes and sustains us, which binds us most fundamentally to place, family, market, and community—provide a measure of our respect for what Russell Kirk called the "Permanent Things." We are not just what we eat but how we eat. The cultivation and consumption of our meals are activities as distinctively human as walking, talking, loving, and praying. Learning to regard

the meal not merely as something that fills our bellies and helps us grow, but as the consummate exercise of beings carnal and earthbound yet upwardly and outwardly drawn, is a crucial step in the restoration of culture. The suggestion that the inculcation of such values might be an essential part of an adequate education ought to resonate beyond the confines of the doctrinaire Left.

Adopting an alternative view of food does not require rejecting the possibility of a free and prosperous market economy. Indeed, the rise of the New American Diet—meals eaten in a rush and very often alone, made from processed and prepackaged ingredients—was not solely or even primarily the product of Adam Smith's invisible hand. Historian Harvey Levenstein has argued that the spate of government regulations in the wake of early 20th-century food-safety scares played a crucial role in the rise of industrialized agriculture and centralized food processors. Early nutritionists and home economists, many distinctly of the quack variety, found a key ally in their attempts to reform American cuisine in Herbert Hoover's Food Administration. The goal of reducing consumption of scarce foods and eating in accordance with "scientific" principles was tied to the cause of Allied victory in the First World War.

Official dietary guidelines inevitably became the product of collaboration between government agencies and representatives of the industries that stand to benefit. The substitution of state-

ple, has a puzzling line in which he condemns as “shameful” the fact that not all Americans “can afford to eat high-quality food.” It is sad, to be sure, and we should strive to remedy it, but life’s inevitabilities do not warrant our shame. And while Bill McKibben, in his brilliant communitarian manifesto, *Deep Economy*, takes care to insist that his program is not one that can be driven by top-down governance, Petrini very often rails against free markets, suggesting at one point in his *Slow Food Nation* that contemporary China’s “political homogeneity” and exploitation of labor and the environment are “the embodiment of perfect capitalism.” (The Chinese economic system, he says, is only “nominally communist.” One wonders what he made of the agricultural policies of the Soviet Union.) But that doesn’t alter the value of the Slow Food vision of a world of “gastronomes,” attentive to taste and cognizant of the sources of their food, and of thriving local markets driven by “economies of place.”

Proponents of a new way of eating are on shakier ground when they claim that a widespread turn toward small-scale and deindustrialized agriculture would not affect crop yields. McKibben proudly cites a study in which sustainable farming methods were found to lead, on average, to a near doubling of food production per hectare. He does not mention the many cases in which results have been less impressive. A much discussed study published in the journal *Science* in 2002 found that switching to organic farming reduced yields by 20 percent, though the possibility of lessening our reliance on petroleum may be worth the investment of some extra land. Reincorporating into the human food chain some of the millions of acres where corn and sorghum are now grown for ethanol production would also make a great difference.

But no reasonable person wants to remake the world or do away with modern agricultural technologies all together. The best solutions will come through honest, case-by-case engagement with the subtle demands of specific situations. As the UC Berkeley agroecologist Miguel Altieri puts it, a sound approach to agriculture “does not seek to formulate solutions that will be valid for everyone but encourages people to choose the technologies best suited to the requirements of each particular situation, without imposing them.” (That this could just as well be the summary of the ideal domestic or foreign policy ought to argue in its favor.) Respect for tradition and social and ecological responsibility can work together with technological innovation and capitalist resourcefulness to respect the ridges and valleys of regionalism in an increasingly flattened world.

Efforts to realize this vision ought to figure centrally in the projects of social and cultural renewal that traditional conservatives see as essential precedents to meaningful political reform. Neighborhood gardens, cooking classes in schools and church basements, and the promotion of local and co-operative markets are the kinds of projects that will build community; revitalize regional economies; encourage stable, healthy families; and instill the kinds of civic attitudes that make centralized government appear burdensome. These are not merely aesthetic or gustatory concerns, nor are they essentially private or familial ones: eating is part of our politics, too.

But things will have to take root in our kitchens first. It is here that Waters’s cookbook, which begins with the basics and consistently encourages the reader to modify recipes and vary ingredients with the seasons, provides as good an introduction as one could hope for. Each Friday, my wife and I walk with our 1-year-old son to a house down the

street where we pick up a box of just picked produce and pastured eggs from a nearby farm. Nigel Walker, who runs the farm and also has a stand at San Francisco’s Ferry Plaza Farmers Market, was involved in a nasty public spat with Carlo Petrini after an essay in *Slow Food Nation* called the prices at the Ferry Plaza Market “astronomical” and “boutique-y” and its clientele “extremely exclusive.” But at \$24.50, my family’s haul this week—lettuce, mixed leafy greens, arugula, potatoes, beets or summer squash, lemon verbena, cherries, peaches, carrots, strawberries, and chard—will cost us about \$8.50 less than similar (but non-organic, less fresh, and markedly lower-quality) produce from the local Safeway.

As with many CSA’s, our farm box comes with a newsletter that suggests recipes for some of its more exotic contents. But of late we’ve been making a point to turn to *The Art of Simple Food* whenever possible. So carrot soup, summer squash gratin with homegrown herbs, marinated beet salad, and wilted chard with onions are likely candidates for the days ahead. Obviously this is especially easy to pull off in the hometown of Alice Waters and Michael Pollan, the birthplace of Chez Panisse and California cuisine. It is, however, increasingly within the reach of anyone who wants to try.

Renewing the culinary culture, and restoring the kinds of values that are necessary for the proper functioning of a healthy republic, is not the sort of thing that can be left to activists, environmentalists, and government bureaucrats. This is a conservative cause if ever there was one, and it is going to have to begin at home. The revolution is coming. And it’s sure to be delicious. ■

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