

# Food First BACKGROUNDER

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Photo: James Besser

## Beyond Voting with your Fork: From Enlightened Eating to Movement Building

By Josh Viertel, Slow Food USA

When I talk to a crowd of people who are new to the food movement, I often begin by asking them, “How many of you have committed an agricultural act in the last 24 hours? Please raise your hand.” In crowds of over 200 people, I usually see about six hands go up. I call on them: “What did you do?” “I watered my tomatoes.” “I mowed my lawn.” Occasionally, I’m surprised to hear that someone collected eggs from a backyard chicken coop, but most of the time, there are a few home gardeners in the audience, and that’s it.

I then ask the question, “Well, how many of you have eaten in the last 24 hours? Please raise your hand.” All hands go up. The message I’m trying to get across is simple: If you eat, you are involved in agriculture. “Eating,” as Wendell Berry writes so eloquently in his essay “The Pleasures of Eating,” “is an agricultural act.”

There is a story behind our food. And we believe it ought to be a story that makes us proud. Sadly, most of the food we eat has a story behind it that we would be ashamed to tell... Our food consistently makes us sick, causing foodborne illnesses like salmonella and E. coli, and diet-related diseases like diabetes and hypertension. But even just *hearing the story behind it* can make us sick too—sick with images of manure lagoons, sick with the sight of tortured animals, sick with the smell of thousands of miles of polluted waterways,

and sick with accounts of labor abuses so severe, and working and living conditions so dire, that they are sometimes hard to believe.

But that isn't the only story. There is a different kind of food out there. It is good for the people who eat it. It is good for the people who grow it. And it is good for the planet. It has a story behind it that would make us proud. At Slow Food, we call it good, clean, and fair food.

More and more people feel that we should apply our values to the choices we make about food. Sure, everyone's values are different but, the truth is, *anyone's* values will do. The problems with food and farming don't come from people holding the *wrong* values; they come from people not applying the values they hold. If most people ate according to their values, most of the problems caused by food and farming would go away because no one's values can accommodate the status quo.

That notion, that we should eat food that reflects our values, has been at the forefront of Slow Food's thinking about how we should go about changing the food system. "Vote with your fork!" has become a battle cry of the food movement.

I'm struck by the uncomfortable fact that not everyone can vote with his or her fork.

If dinner is a democratic election, and we seek to change our food system via our votes, we need to look squarely at the fact that in many electoral districts and for too many people there are no polling stations because there is only one candidate, the incumbent: fast food. And even

if there were other candidates, it wouldn't matter, because many people can't afford to cast a vote for anyone but the incumbent.

Many people cannot eat according to their values. They have little money, they have little time, they may not know how to cook, and they have no access to ingredients, let alone ingredients whose story could make them proud. What they have access to is food that makes them sick, food that hurts the environment, and food that is grown and picked by people whose time and labor is undervalued.

Lots of people *can* vote with their fork. And they should. If all who could did so, then things would get better. But I don't want to pretend that, if everyone who *could* vote with their fork *did*, problems that stem from food and farming would be resolved. Too many people cannot, and it is neither productive nor fair to pretend otherwise.

People who *can* vote with their fork should, and we should work to convince them of the value in doing so. At the same time, we need to right the structural injustice that prohibits many people from accessing or affording the food they need to keep themselves, their children, farmers, workers, and the environment all in good health.

This food we believe in—good, clean, fair food—can no longer be seen as a privilege. It must be seen as a universal right. Our mission as a movement is to create a world where everyone can exercise that right. We need to roll up our sleeves and work to ensure that the world we live in is one in which all people have the opportunity to cast a meaningful vote for a different food system.

We need to help create a world where *everyone* can eat food that is good, clean, and fair.

All successful social movements have, at their core, the people who are the most hurt by the current systems and will have the most to gain from making change happen. There are always others who are driven by their values, by a sense of moral obligation, or by solidarity. But the beating heart of a movement will be the people who have something real to gain.

The food movement will be shallow if it does not have at its core the people who are most hurt by food and farming problems. For organizations that have power, that means sharing and redirecting power. It means making certain our work is first relevant to those who have the most to gain.

There is incredible beauty and opportunity in that shift. Imagine what the food movement would look like if its strength were *derived* from bridging divides in race and class—if shared food and shared work were a way of manifesting solidarity. Imagine what our cities and communities would look like if farmers' market organizations were always an integral part of the food-assistance program; if every public school had a garden; if growing and cooking food from scratch was an everyday practice that helped people save money, helped people make money, and helped people be healthy and happy. Imagine a world in which we can no longer point to the paradox of skyrocketing obesity and skyrocketing hunger as a symptom of injustice, and can instead point to the disappearance of both as a symptom of justice flourishing.





Photo: Slow Food USA

I believe the best way to begin is through building meaningful human relationships, through linking people and communities together around a sense of common purpose. Groups of people become communities by sharing work, sharing struggles, and sharing food. This leads to real, personal relationships; a sense of co-dependence and co-commitment. Once you've shared a meal with someone, or worked on a project together, you view each other differently. You're more likely to take care of each other, and, I believe, you're more likely to stand together and work for change together.

When it comes to changing the world, a big mailing list helps. But it isn't much good unless it is a list of people who care about the issues... and are willing to do something about it. People in a network need to be *engaged* for that network to have power. I've come to believe that a sense of spiritual uplifting and connectivity—the sort of connection you get from regularly sharing a meal together, working on a project together, or hauling in hay together—is a prerequisite for that engagement.

That connection can begin at a potluck, a volunteer workday, a canning workshop; while setting

up a new farmers' market in a low-income neighborhood, or breaking ground on a new garden for a public school. It may directly better the world; it may not. Either way, it links people together, makes them feel part of something bigger than themselves and leaves them connected to a group of people who share a common purpose. Ultimately, that engagement is what allows us to change the world. Make no mistake; changing the world takes much more than getting people to attend potlucks. But human relationships are the foundation for social movements, and they are built out of shared experience, shared food, shared work, and shared struggle—breaking a sweat together and breaking bread together.

I want to be a part of a community as well as a movement and, because of the nature of food and the food movement, I believe it is possible—necessary, even—to be part of both. It is vital to remember that pleasure and the table are not just ends in themselves, but organizing principles. We need to use what we know—the shared meal, the garden planted together—to drive social change. When the United Farm Workers were banned from picketing, in their effort to gain farmworkers' rights in California, they worked with their Catholic constituents and the churches to hold Mass services for the public at the entrance to big farms. They used the traditions, methods, and rituals familiar to them (and conveniently, the police would not shut down the services).

They knew how to hold Mass; we know how to have dinner. We can use the power of the table to bring people together, to learn from each other, to express our shared values, and to build love and power between us that ultimately leaves us positioned to change the world.

Pleasure can be a radical force for good. Reaching beyond voting with our forks doesn't mean abandoning the farmers' market or the table, but seeing them as a source of strength in the context of a broader struggle in which we are all engaged.

Emma Goldman said, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." The need for change is urgent, but we ought not repress pleasure and celebration in the name of that urgency. Pleasure and celebration are a source of strength. Through dancing, or in our case, through sharing food and sharing work, we can make a better movement.

Share food and build the movement with Slow Food and Food First in Italy this October: More info at [www.foodsovereignty.org](http://www.foodsovereignty.org)



ITALY: Slow Food and Food Sovereignty in Piedmont, Oct. 16 – 24, 2012

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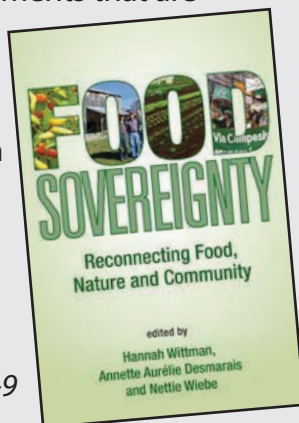
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