How Shall We Eat Tomorrow? The Practices of Aspirational Food Projects

Caitlin Bradley Morgan

How to disrupt a system that is itself disruptive? In an unsustainable and often impersonal food system ripe for change, we can see pockets of disruption in the aspirational projects people undertake: values-based, goal-oriented endeavours that work against the dominant system in small but meaningful ways. These efforts reveal what people see as problematic in how and what we eat today, from modes of production that undermine environmental sustainability, to eating practices that undermine human wellbeing.

This paper connects two disparate aspirational food projects. The first is a small-scale 'full-diet' community-supported farm in a rural part of New York State. Using ecological practices, the farm provides enough volume and diversity for all its members' essential food needs, conceptually connecting its work across scales of health, from soil to individual to community to earth. The second project is a taste-based education and research centre in Denmark called Taste for Life. A social network of researchers, chefs, and educators, the group promotes deep sensory engagement with food and counters national narratives that promote foods choice through cultureless, contextless nutritional mandates.

Although different in practice, scope, geography, and culture, these two projects show surprising overlaps. They both work to disrupt the status quo in their fields – whether impersonal, mono-cropped, commodity food production or societal narratives that detach people's sensory experiences from their food choices. They do so through connection to food systems rooted in regional culture, agriculture, and personal experience. They reveal a shared vision: an international aesthetic for regional food.

Methods

This paper is based on qualitative fieldwork data from two comprehensive case studies (Yin, 2013), which sought to understand the changes people undertake in their own food systems, the problems they try to address, and the relative success of their endeavors within the broader food system. Data for the farm case study, collected between May 2018 and May 2019, includes participant observations (farm work), interviews with farmers (n=20) and share members (n=15), document analysis of published texts and internal farm communications, and a visual PhotoVoice participatory project. Data for the Taste for Life case study, collected in autumn 2018, includes observations of the organization's events and related food events around Denmark and interviews with members of the organization (n=15), complemented by relevant literature about Danish food movements. Analysis was conducted through qualitative coding and subsequent interpretation, relying on both theoretically informed coding and emergent grounded theory (Dowding, 2013; Bowen, 2006).

Results & discussion

These two projects have two different immediate purposes, but their underlying expressions of what is good or desirable food are remarkably similar. In both cases, people focus on:

- the physical pleasure of eating (and growing) food
- the need for ecological integrity in food systems, and worries about climate and other environmental problems driven by food
- ideas of holistic health, both in individuals' bodies and in connecting healthy foods to soil health, community health, and global environmental health
- connection to landscape, community, and particular ways of life
- the need to evangelize their approach to food to others.

There have, of course, been scholarly critiques of putting too much faith in local or regional food to automatically achieve a range of food systems goals. Born and Purcell (2006) warned over a decade ago that we should avoid the 'trap' of thinking local food is preferable in all cases. Likewise, DuPuis and Goodman (2005) warned us about a (perhaps ironic) global notion of local food being a resistance point against globalism; 'unreflexive' localism runs the risk of recreating injustices in our own back yards. As one informant in Denmark put it, the Danish food scene has been 'glocalized'.

And yet, ideas of local and regional food persist, especially in community-oriented businesses and projects. Locally grounded concepts of relationship to the wider food system appear in both the full-diet farm and the Taste for Life Program. People still feel motivated to act, and it is easier – unavoidable, even – to make change in one's own community, being embodied actors rooted in place. This is true even in addressing large-scale problems, like agricultural methods or disconnections between culture, food, and wellbeing. While many modern food concerns tend to be de-personalized, the original founders of the western organic movement emphasized relationships of people to each other, to nature, and to the wider universe (Robbins, 2019); participants reflect this sense of connection to systemic problems, which they address directly or indirectly through their on-the-ground efforts. Their work in the food world also parallel some of the personal theories of change practiced by environmental and social justice activists in Canada: to change the system we need to think in systems; there are many kinds of change; and relationships are at the heart of social change (Gobby, 2019). Participants *think* in systems, but they *work* through personal relationships.

Joy and pleasure are often overlooked as primary drivers in how people choose to eat (Starr, 2010), as can be we see in this data. Members of the farm hold a range of values, from ecological stewardship to fair labour practices, but they engage with those values through embodied pleasure of raising, cooking, sharing, and eating farm products. Members of Taste for Life promote engagement with the personal experience of taste, but hint that such engagement may result in other benefits, including physical health, connection to regional Nordic culture and landscape, and ultimately a kind of 'hedonistic sustainability' through pleasurable, ecological food choices. Enacting a joyful embodied relationship to the larger global community, regionally, may be a fertile area for wider disruption.

Conclusion

For the people involved in both these projects, questions of *what* we eat are subsumed by questions of *how* we eat. They seek to disrupt the business-as-usual of depersonalized food systems, interrogating the status quo through action. What is the system doing (agriculturally, gastronomically), and what is missing? How are we growing food—what agricultural practices make it our meals possible? How connected or disconnected are we to the landscapes and farmers that sustain us? How connected are we to our own experiences of eating and the food choices we make, either consciously or unconsciously? This work suggests that how we shall eat tomorrow could be guided by inter-scalar commitments to global sustainability and wellbeing, through personal pleasure and regional relationships.

Acknowledgements

These projects were supported by Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program and the United States Department of Agriculture Hatch grant program (VT-H02109).

Reference list

Born, B., and Purcell, M. (2006). 'Avoiding the Local Trap: Scale and Food Systems in Planning Research', *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 26(2), pp.195–207.

Bowen, G. A. (2006). 'Grounded Theory and Sensitizing Concept', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(3), pp.12-23.

Dowding, D. (2013). 'Best Practices for Mixed Methods Research in the Health Sciences', *Qualitative Social Work*, 12(4), pp.541–545.

DuPuis, E. M., & Goodman, D. (2005). 'Should we go 'home' to eat? Toward a reflexive politics of localism', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 21(3), pp.359–71.

Gobby, J. (2019). *More powerful together: Collaborative theorizing with social movements about decolonizing and decarbonizing Canada*. Ph.D. McGill University.

Robbins, R. (2019). 'The Transcendental Meanings of Organic Food'. In: Chrazan, J & Ricotta, J., ed. *Organic Food, Farming, and Culture: An Introduction*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, pp.227-39.

Starr, A. (2010). 'Local Food: A Social Movement?' *Cultural Studies ↔Critical Methodologies*, 10(6), pp.479–90.

Yin, R. K. (2013). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.