

"Dreaming Up a New Food System"

By Billie Best

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In my dreams our communities—rural, urban and suburban—experience a cultural renaissance with the actualization of regional programs to re-localize the food system. I'm imagining a food-and-agriculture-based community development program that encourages the production of local food products for local markets, reduces regulatory barriers for small food producers, builds regional food processing infrastructure, addresses issues of food security and self-reliance, and encourages economic growth. Benefits of the program would be greater social cohesion, an invigorated school system, a cleaner environment and improved human health.

A food system organized to improve human health is very different from a food system organized to increase corporate profits. Today many of our most popular food items travel thousands of "food miles" to get to our dinner table. It may be in our best interest to have our consumer electronics come from across the ocean, but it is not in our best interest to have our main food supply thousands of miles away. The demand for food is decentralized, pervasive, perpetual and consistent. To support optimum human health, the food supply would likewise be decentralized, pervasive, perpetual and consistent. In other words, a community-based food system, not an industry-based food system.

Our current food system is designed to encourage the largest corporate food producers and discourage the smaller farm and food enterprises. The largest food producers are global multi-national corporations, the beneficiaries of the majority of commodity crop subsidies and WTO programs intended to eliminate trade barriers. Their success depends on global transportation systems that enable their strategy of growing food where it is costs the least to produce and shipping it to the markets that pay the highest prices. The culmination of this strategy is the consolidation of food production into monopolistic empires, and the elimination of food production in many parts of the world. For those of us who like to eat, losing control of our food supply to food monopolies is a little scary.

To have a community-based food system, communities need to produce food. A community-based food system becomes established as more food is produced and consumed with fewer businesses and less distance between the food producer and the food consumer. Most of our farms sell their goods into the industrial food system where they are commoditized, packaged, branded and sold in a form unrecognizable to us as a local product. Most of our food dollar goes to manufacturing, distribution and retail shelf-space—not to the farmer, not to the farmer's local economy. The price we pay for those layers of business between our farms and our dinner table is reduced economic vitality, a loss of cultural identity, environmental degradation and an increase in diet-related diseases.

Any community—urban, rural or suburban—can develop a community-based food system. Farmers' markets can provide an opportunity to purchase farm-fresh food directly from those who grow it. Neighborhoods can grow food for themselves in

community gardens. Schools can use edible schoolyards as teaching tools and inspiration to improve children's eating habits. Roadside farmstands can provide a retail venue for farmers to sell seasonal goods directly to consumers. Local grocers may carry farm-fresh goods, or consumers may travel to their local farm to shop at the farm store or pick their own produce. In any community, restaurants that wish to distinguish themselves as good food citizens can feature farm-fresh foods on their menus, and promote the products of local farms.

Community supported agriculture farms, or CSAs, help the farmer manage the supply/demand relationship. Community members buy shares in a local farmer's harvest—produce, meat, dairy, flowers—at the beginning of the growing season, for a flat fee. As seasonal goods are harvested, they are distributed in lots among the CSA shareholders. Gathering the household's share can be a family activity, an outdoor adventure, and an ideal way to teach children about food and the earth. A CSA may be open to public membership. It may be associated with a school, or a church, or it may serve a particular neighborhood. CSAs create intimate connections between consumers and a living working landscape, building their appreciation for farming, fresh food, nature and the seasons.

A community-based food system is a continuum that begins with soils and farming, and ends with cooking, eating, and composting the remains of the meal back into soil. The energy, the effort, the by-products and the waste products are all cycled back into the system. Productivity is encouraged. Resources are conserved. Wasteful consumption is shunned. Community members experience the ideals of craftsmanship, the sacredness of work, and the bond of sharing good food together.

A community-based food system initiative can be compatible with other community goals for environmental protection, open space preservation, heritage appreciation, family recreation, healthcare, child welfare, education, the arts, and economic development. Schools, businesses, government; civic, social, cultural, faith-based and philanthropic organizations; healthcare institutions, and food service enterprises all have a stake in community-based food systems. After all, a community-based food system is really about people—the people who produce the food working in close collaboration with the people who enjoy the food. In my dreams, community-based food systems save the planet.

Billie Best Biography

Billie Best is a community activist living in Alford, Massachusetts. Her expertise is in marketing, development and advocacy for individuals and organizations. Her background includes many years in corporate marketing for global multinationals. After a stint as marketing VP for a dotcom in Manhattan, she turned her attention to earthier matters and discovered a passion for farming. Currently she is enrolled in a two-year professional certification course at Cornell University called "Growing Home: Food & Agriculture Based Community Development." She is a member of the University of New Hampshire Office of Sustainability "Citizen Panel on the Future of Food in New England." She is on the Alford Planning Board, she is on the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, and she is leading Alford's Community Development Plan. She is an active volunteer at the E. F. Schumacher Society and Berkshire Grown, and on the board of directors of the Regional Farm & Food Project. The 4th Thursday of every month she can be heard from 8:00-9:00am on the Food & Farm Project radio show, on WRPI 91.5fm, Troy, NY. Email her at billie@billiebest.com.