



## METRICS FROM THE FIELD

*Blending insights from research with insights from practice*

**KEN METER**

## Allowing ethnic heritage to emerge in farm and food policy

Submitted July 27, 2015 / Published online September 21, 2015

*Citation:* Meter, K. (2015). Allowing ethnic heritage to emerge in farm and food policy. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 5(4), 11–13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2015.054.032>

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Many people who work at the grassroots building community-based food systems aim to create local food networks that build health, wealth, connection, and capacity (Meter, 2010). This vision implies that stronger cultural connections, including vibrant ethnic identity and heritage,

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must be among the outcomes of food policy.

Yet our policy discourse frequently suggests that economic efficiency constitutes the primary measure of success. This is clearly a narrow view. As long as one's viewpoint is limited to ways of squeezing production costs to the lowest possible levels, or raising prices as high as the market will bear, the basic humanity of food will dissipate and the transformative potential of local foods will be lost. From a systems perspective, measuring success solely using any one indicator, such as efficiency, amidst a complex and rapidly changing system will distort one's understanding of that system, leading to skewed outcomes.

The economics-centered view is also debilitating because it suggests that the only role consumers should play is to passively accept options that are defined by others and to remain content to accept a limited voice—to decide whether they are willing to pay for a certain good or service. This view suggests that consumers should let go of the

notion that they can help create the menu of options available to them.

Yet culture is something that is *produced*, not the outcome of *consumption*. I claim a certain privilege when I purchase produce that was harvested 1,800 miles distant by farmworkers bending to sun-scalded fields for minimum wage. I advance a heritage if I put up food following my ancestors' recipes.

The fabric of my life is thin when compared to what my ancestors enjoyed. Poor people who worked the land, my forebears would have rejected as inferior many foods now prized as fresh at the grocery, because they knew tastier, more nutritionally dense foods, harvested with their own labor. Though many were challenged in their attitudes about race, they did recognize that food is an essential foundation of culture. They understood that all cultures need access to the resources that allow them to determine food choices for themselves.

As one example, my father's ancestors dwelled in Alsace (currently eastern France) for over a century. As Alsace constructed a regional identity, it elevated specific costumes, lace designs, wines, and foods. One such food was sauerkraut. This was not selected because of its status or gourmet appeal; it was chosen because cabbage grew easily in the temperate climate of Alsace with few energy inputs, and stored well as sauerkraut. Almost any farmer could grow cabbage and then ferment it for safekeeping. So you could count on sauerkraut being available to everyone year-round.

Moreover, the dish could be adapted to serve as a vehicle for very local identity: perhaps imbued with juniper berries in one village, fortified with Riesling wine in another, or accompanied by the special sausages or pork cures that local butchers created. Certain cooks preferred goose or chicken preparations. Various dumplings or shredded potatoes added flavor and body. The dish might be slanted toward either French or German preparation in a region with mixed heritage. Preparing and serving this dish was to express an identity: "We belong to this particular place, where our people

have built a heritage."

Unfortunately, it appears that the health insight that also made sauerkraut attractive as a cultural icon became lost in the commercialization of place and identity. Fermented cabbage provides essential bacteria, folklore says, which ease digestion of meat and outcompete undesirable biota. Now I am rediscovering these insights.

A century after my great-grandfather abandoned Alsace, I grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Cabbages had become a commodity. Though easy to grow in this climate, cabbages were primarily shipped in from California, or shredded and salt-packed into a tin can. Many of the distinctive tangy flavors, and likely many of the health benefits, were now tempered by commercial convenience.

My family ate sauerkraut almost as a covert gesture, mindful of neighbors who pursued an American identity that aspired to whiteness that was correlated with leaving the land. Similarly, my mother Margaret, an exceptional cook, was bound strictly to her German-Bohemian roots. She invented a new tradition that would express her family's new life in America. To do so, significantly, she had to look back to her own childhood, rather than integrating her current life. Her decision was to create a deeply ritualized Christmas Eve meal, centered around oxtail soup. By so doing, she gave herself a vehicle for reminding her sons of a critical juncture in her past.

When she was 16, Margaret's father had died suddenly after a massive heart attack. Her Uncle Louis, who ran a butcher shop in her Michigan hometown, would swing by her house late on a typical Saturday afternoon, bringing the meats that had not sold at his shop that day. He did this to lift the family's spirits, and also to make sure they had enough protein. Among the items that his customers often overlooked were oxtails. Though unpopular, they made exceptional soup stock.

Thus my mother created a holiday meal that conveyed a cultural reminder: "We did not always have it this easy; we had considerable help." Although I did not grasp this as a youth, it was a

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message that also suggested considerable equality with other cultures. The foods themselves were cultural outcasts.

My mother was simultaneously asserting her right to make cultural choices, for reasons that might change over time. This choice was possible only because the family was connected to the production of the foods it ate. After all, to claim a culture solely on the basis of foods that must be imported holds little integrity and is expensive. In both the maternal and paternal two branches of my family, despite being poor people created healthy meals unique to place, using whatever was readily available.

In my column, I often ponder what we actually mean when we strive for “local” foods. The weight of the evidence is that locality involves connection to people and place, not simply the raw cost nor the number of miles food travels. Local food, in a very deep sense, is food we grow, purchase, and eat because it helps us understand that we belong, and how to welcome others into our circle. These transactions build social connectivity, and also stronger local economies.

Yet in a society where computers are easier to come by than farm fields, many policy-makers assert that locality must be measured using a standard national definition, in the hope that economic factors can be compared across places. In reality, the definition of “local” is also inherently a local one, implicitly taking heritage and place into account. Clever public policy will collect and use insights from multiple cultural perspectives, avoiding the reductionism of solely quantitative approaches.

One quick example might be drawn from local foods activity in South Carolina, amid cultures quite different from those in which I grew up.

When the state government asked me to prepare an investment plan for local foods two years ago, several aspects of life struck me as curious. First, several housing developments in the Lowcountry were named, with no apparent sense of irony, as “plantations.” Second, the contemporary discussion of farm labor had been largely distilled to asking how to find immigrants to move to the state; few had considered that there might be something amiss when youth (of all colors) who grow up on farms know little about either food preparation or farming. The two food crops that are most closely identified with the state, tomatoes and peaches, are largely exported to eastern seaboard metro areas, which may help explain the persistence of the plantation mentality.

Projecting future sales for South Carolina foods to South Carolina consumers was deeply interesting, but had it been performed in isolation from these qualitative cultural insights, several central issues would have been overlooked.

Building food systems that foster racial and ethnic pride, a strong sense of self-determination, and lasting heritage requires that policy embrace potent ethnicity as both an important core of discovery and a desired outcome. Yet we are allowing, perhaps for the first time in history, farm and food policy to be set by those who understand neither the heritage of farming nor, on a deep level, the culture of food, and many are asking the wrong questions.

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