



VIEWS FROM THE FOOD SYSTEM FRONTIER

Emerging trends, dilemmas, and opportunities in the changing global food system

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The signs of a new mainstream

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A few weeks ago, I got an invitation that made me stop and take note. Our local Chamber of Commerce — long an advocate for traditional economic development —

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Disclosures: Mr. McIntyre has served as a paid facilitator for the Making Good Food Work Conference and received honoraria for moderating at both the Take Action Impact Investing and Social Capital Markets conferences.

This is part of an **ongoing series** of columns by Mr. McIntyre on emerging trends, dilemmas, and opportunities in the changing global food system. He can be reached at joseph@aginnovations.org.

was wondering if their efforts to develop new entrepreneurs and businesses should consider focusing on small agriculture and value-added food products. They asked a number of people, including representatives from the Farm Bureau, the Wine Commission, and the local chapter of the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies,¹ to talk about trends in agriculture into the future.

Over the course of several meetings, the stories and perspectives presented by participants began to merge into a description of a “New Mainstream” food system, a term popularized by the California NGO Roots of Change in their Vivid Picture project² and that has been developing largely under the radar over the past 20 years.

The “New Mainstream” food system is a system based first on a thriving demand for local produc-

¹ <http://www.livingeconomies.org/>

² <http://rootsofchange.org/content/activities-2/vivid-picture-project>

tion (or regional production, depending on your definition of local). As an example of this interest, a soon-to-be-released feasibility study conducted by Community Alliance with Family Farmers³ for a regional aggregation and marketing center demonstrated that in one northern California county, fully 49% of grocers were already purchasing some local fruits, vegetables, meats, and value-added goods — and 95% were interested in doing so. The LOHAS (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability) consumer market segment (estimated by the Natural Marketing Institute to be US\$300 billion annually and growing at 16% annually, French & Rogers, 2010) is driving demand for local and healthy foods toward a critical tipping point where every retail outlet will feel it must have at least some products aimed at these buyers.

This increase in demand is being mirrored by an increase in supply from both long-time producers, who are flexing to meet new market demands, and new entrepreneurial producers, who see an opportunity to marry their values with new products and approaches to food and farming. Both trends were discussed at the Chamber meetings. Our local dairy industry, long a mainstay of both agriculture and agriculture leadership, has, like most of the American dairy industry, been under tremendous price pressure. One of the most successful responses has been to convert to organic production and to artisan cheese production aimed at the regional market. Meanwhile, the number of community supported agriculture (CSA) farms, ranches producing locally raised meat, and specialty foods operations has been growing steadily.

I walked away from the last meeting at the Chamber realizing that we are close to turning an important corner in our thinking about food systems. The idea that building robust local food

³ <http://caff.org>

economies is a way to satisfy consumer demand, preserve culture, land, and environmental values, and generate sustainable economic development is getting traction in places where we might least expect it. Driven both by increased awareness of food issues as described by chefs (Bittman, Oliver, Waters, and others), commentators (Berry, Pollan, Roberts), and health leaders (Nestle, Michelle Obama), and the undeniable growth of local/regional food economies, it is clear that what was just a niche is becoming something else.

This shift is being accelerated by an evolving approach to creating regional food systems. Where in the past we have had philosophical discussions of how such a system might look and how to accomplish it, increasingly the focus is on operationalizing new business models and new efforts. The recent Making Good Food Work Conference⁴ in Detroit is a great data point on this shift. The conference brought

together, by application, on-the-ground alternative food system project teams who wanted to participate in a three-day intensive planning and collaboration effort designed to refine their business models, create effective marketing plans, identify funding sources, and give them new business management skills. This was strictly a work session where the projects were competing for cash prizes awarded based on merit and intended to be capital to fuel implementation. This action focus is new and drew significantly from the work of Start-Up Weekend,⁵ a model for launching new start-up businesses through a balance of competition and cooperation in a highly focused three-day event.

Connecting the good food community with the entrepreneurial start-up world is an important

⁴ <http://www.makinggoodfoodwork.com/>

⁵ <http://startupweekend.org/>

signal. This marriage promises to bring new tools and efficiencies into food systems based on integration of Internet-based information sharing. We are seeing this on two fronts. On the supply side, one of the most interesting projects that was developed at the Making Good Food Work Conference was the “Coordinated Production Planning Tools for Wholesale & Institutional Buyer,” an extensible database-driven tool with a web interface to better match local production with the needs of buyers. This is just one of many efforts to make it easier for buyers and sellers to reconnect in local

markets using both simple tools like Google Maps overlays or more complex software services. On the demand side, the development of the boutique mobile restaurant is just one example of a New Mainstream business model. Across the United States we are seeing mobile noodle businesses, mini-cupcake purveyors, and specialty ethnic food providers, who are combining the restless creativity of a new generation of entrepreneurs, savvy marketing using social media, and strong demand for unique hand-crafted foods.

Investor interest in these new food and farming businesses is strong; indeed, it may be a case of too

much money chasing too few good ideas. At the 2010 Social Capital Markets⁶ conference, an entire track was devoted to food system investment opportunities. Both the Take Action Impact Investing⁷ and the Agriculture 2.0 conferences⁸ are focused on connecting investors with new food system opportunities.

So perhaps after all it was not so surprising to get a call from the Chamber of Commerce. The drumbeat of real change in the way we grow, distribute, and consume food is all around us. In fact it has

gone from being a distant beat, easy to ignore, to a persistent and compelling rhythm that reaches even the distant corners of food system discourse. A New Mainstream is coming and the signs are all around us.

Reference

French, S., & Rogers, G. (2010, Spring). Understanding the LOHAS consumer: The rise of ethical consumerism. *LOHAS Journal*, 11(1). Available at <http://www.lohas.com/Lohas-Consumer>

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⁶ <http://socialcapitalmarkets.net/>

⁷ <http://impactinvestingconference.com/>

⁸ <http://www.iirusa.com/agriculture20/agriculture20.xml>

