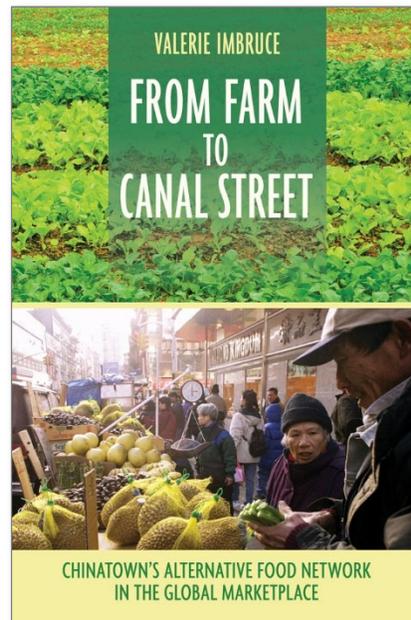


Hidden in plain sight: Learning from Chinatown's produce distribution system

Review by Nevin Cohen *

Review of *From Farm to Canal Street: Chinatown's Alternative Food Network in the Global Marketplace*, by Valerie Imbruce. (2016). Published by Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. Publisher's website: <http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/?GCOI=80140100191750>



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New York's Chinatown has a century-old produce distribution system that supplies the city with more than 200 types of extremely low-cost fresh fruits and vegetables that are sourced from hundreds of small- and midsize biodiverse farms and distributed to a network of vendors and restaurants. Yet this remarkable supply chain has been overshadowed by the gigantic Hunts Point terminal market and the distribution channels operated by the major supermarket chains. It is also overlooked by advocates of direct farm-to-consumer food retail. Valerie Imbruce's *From Farm to Canal Street* unmask this "alternative" food

network, offering important lessons for policy-makers interested in increasing access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate food.

Imbruce shows that decentralization is a key characteristic of Chinatown's produce supply chain. At its heart is a cluster of very small and competitive wholesalers. Most of these businesses are individually owned and operated, virtually all with fewer than 20 employees and the majority with four or fewer staff. This wholesale network sources from a distributed set of farms, warehouses its produce in and around Chinatown, and supplies some 88 produce retailers, many of them "micro-enterprises," on a frequent basis. The entire system is neither vertically nor horizontally integrated, nor dominated by large retailers or distributors.

This distribution system is composed of highly networked small businesses, with relationships between wholesalers and farmers that are often

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based on ethnic and familial ties and longstanding personal connections. Wholesalers deal directly with farmers, negotiating what to grow to meet shifting consumer demand—a lean supply chain that helps to keep prices low. In these relationships, trust between wholesaler and farmer is critical, as farmers sell on consignment to wholesalers who have the power to set prices and pay only after delivery. Trust between wholesaler and retailer is also crucial, as deliveries to the many vendors who operate small sidewalk stands must be timely and frequent.

Another critical characteristic is spatial clustering. The close physical proximity among wholesalers and retailers in the Chinatown area allows for what Imbruce describes as “dynamic and flexible” restocking by wholesalers throughout the day, with small, frequent deliveries that keep the produce fresh without refrigeration. Vendors selling from bare-bones pushcarts or storefront stands and unrefrigerated delivery vehicles keeps prices low, but the system depends on having warehouses close by—not in the Hunts Point neighborhood of the Bronx where much of the food distribution infrastructure is clustered. Yet residential real estate pressure in lower Manhattan makes sustaining warehouse space in this neighborhood a challenge.

Chinatown’s distribution system might easily be dismissed as anachronistic, a vestigial remnant of an increasingly consolidated global food supply chain. Yet, Imbruce explains that it is both rooted in place and connected to global producers, relying on conventional distribution infrastructures, like the Port of Miami and integrated trucking companies, to move product from farm to market. For example, the smallest growers who supply Chinatown are able to do so only because they have a symbiotic relationship with major food distributors, transporting their comparatively tiny shipments of specialty vegetables by literally piggy-backing on and filling the spaces of refrigerated trucks that move commodities from Florida to New York. These small-scale suppliers remain in business because of global supply chains, not in spite of them.

The most interesting parts of the book include chapters 3 to 5, which detail the operations of

farms in Florida and Honduras that supply Chinatown. Vegetables sold at rock-bottom prices, without the accompanying information about their provenance that you might see at a farmers market or Whole Foods, typically signify the products of unsustainable industrial agriculture. Imbruce, who has a Ph.D. in Economic Botany, conducted field research on the varieties grown and the farming practices used by Chinatown’s growers, and what she observed was a network of highly biodiverse farms with sound horticultural practices. On the several-acre “homegardens” in Miami-Dade County, for example, farmers grow wide varieties of fruits, herbs, and vegetables by using frequent crop rotation and intercropping. Most of the more than 400 Honduran farms that supply Chinatown have transitioned from growing via ecologically unsustainable and financially precarious monocultures to growing more than a dozen varieties of Asian vegetables using sound farm management practices.

Though based on research conducted in 2006, *From Farm to Canal Street* offers several valuable lessons for food systems planning today. Sustaining alternative food supply chains that support biodiverse farms requires attention to zoning policy in cities, specifically the need to preserve mixed industrial and commercial land uses on which distributed supply chains depend. As neighborhoods gentrify and affluent residents seek to remove messy mobile food vendors, protections from displacement are important to sustain the supply of affordable fresh food. Including small-scale food retail networks in government incentive programs now directed at conventional supermarkets could help to finance infrastructure that would make distributed food supply chains possible, like neighborhood-based food distribution hubs. Measuring and communicating the ecological and economic impacts of ethnic food supply chains can raise their visibility and build political support for them. Finally, and this is a point Imbruce stresses throughout her book, Chinatown shows us that the binary notions of local/global, sustainable/industrial, or niche/conventional may not be useful in building food networks that are vibrant, affordable, healthy, and resilient. 