

Homeland Food Insecurity **and** ***Down to the Ground Food Activism***

By Gigi Stafne

Food Insecurity. Maybe I should call it *Homeland Food Insecurity*. This is the precarious state of disrepair that occurs decades after voracious corporate agriculture has taken big bites out of local communities, leaving behind a trail of economic fallout, poor nutrition and *food deserts* in urban and rural areas alike. Plus sundry other problems. Food deserts are vacant spaces, felt like hunger pangs in industrialized countries where affordable, nutritious food becomes difficult to obtain, yet should be abundant and bio-secure. The availability of quality healthful local foods, botanicals and value-added products diminishes or dries up totally. Small locally-owned grocery store shelves eventually start looking as sparse as Mother Hubbard's Cupboard until that fateful day when a *Closed for Business* sign is sadly stuck in the storefront window. Even mid-size markets are susceptible to this desert disease.

The migration continues: gigantic chain supermarkets encroach rural fringes, moving to outskirts of towns, urban sprawl seeping to ever-morphing edges. When small locally-owned markets disappear, residents are forced to follow, foraging their foods from mega aisles and miles of cereal box choices in the land of plenty. Mass transit is limited, sometimes nomads in food deserts can't even afford to get to that asphalt parking lot. On the average, townsfolk must travel at least 10-12 miles to get to one of the mega-marts. Seems like everybody loses out--except for the corporations. When mom and pop stores die out, so do other life-blood small businesses, drained into the not so sweet hereafter. That's what trends indicate. And so it goes. Local economic vitality spoiled, tossed into the dumpster.

Time to face the facts. We spend mega-money importing food from the *outside*--multinationals that some economists say have actually been a drag on the U.S. economy since 2000. It seems like an irrational road map when you trace the maze of complex food routes. An average meal purchased from a large supermarket gobbles 4 to 17 times more fossil fuel than a

locavore meal. Industrial eaters indirectly eat a lot of petroleum. A contributing factor to global warming. *Long distance food* actually puts a dent in rural economies and the environment. This global interdependence of our complex food system has created unintended losses rather than generating new wealth and security for families, farmers and communities across *America the beautiful*. Small-scale agriculture and locavore food businesses still remain marginal links in this sprawling food chain.

Ok, this might be a green-rant, but...

Food is important to me. Deep at heart, I'm a locavore. Passionate about the unfurling foodie movement. I just moved back to northern Wisconsin last year after teaching and traveling, from Canada to Mexico, an herbalista borderlands woman. I've been settling back into a new routine of cooking and eating in the north woods. Right now, I live with a hunter; I'm a gatherer. Have been for years. I believe in eating attuned with nature's cycles, plus teach and write about these pure wild ways in radical herbalism. *Eat local, eat seasonal, eat healthful*. We're just coming out of what some indigenous northern ones call, Hungry Moon, the cycle of late winter when food preserves and stocks have dwindled. We know how to survive. This time of the year usually scares the heck out of a lot of people, makes them anxious, cooped up with cabin fever, feeling like they have little margin. Especially when they are desperately dependent upon outer world food and economic systems.

I understand. I mediate between those worlds, too. People do feel insecure about survival during times like these. Yet, I imagine a time with no mega-marts, living *down to the ground*, creative and resilient, thriving in the wintery northwoods. Every step we take toward independence, whether that is living off-grid or working harmoniously within a truly interdependent sustainable community, we are closer to *arriving*. As one of the Greenhorns said, *I am hellbent on recovering from the age of convenience*.

Wisconsin is propagating more CSA's, farmers markets and small organic farms than ever. That feels good. Yet, upon returning to the Great Lakes region, I witness disturbing signs of rural and small town economies decaying. One of those moments happened the other day at noon when I drove by a busy 4-corner intersection in the seat of Rusk County, population 3577, with several new gas stations and a fast food joint buzzing with cars at each quadrant. There, flapping in the breeze and exhaust of a steady stream

of Dodge trucks and sturdy sedans was a whole platoon of signs spiked in curbside, like little political campaign signs. Only this propaganda was enticing busy workers inside for cheap convenience store lunch-on-the-run: *79 cent cheeseburgers, 99 cent Big Gulps*. Gassing up, I felt like a food hussy spying on those harried folks dashing in and out with their cheap, crinkly-wrapper sandwiches of mystery meat and sloshy big red Gulps. One by one, they disappeared, driving off in a rush. From a cultural anthropologist's eye, it looks like we have a nationalized eating disorder.

How sad. Part of the attraction is the affordable price of a quick meal, no doubt. After all, we're in recovery from a recession. So, folks need to eat cheap crap, *right*? Not necessarily so.

Back to foraging in the food deserts across America, from small towns to inner city neighborhoods of the urban landscape. Where are people actually buying their food in those gap zones? *Gas stations, convenience stores and liquor marts*. That's where. Like the one I drove by with the Burma Shave series of cheapo food signs. What's on the menu, America? Bags of Cheetos, overcooked nitrate-laden hotdogs from the rotating rotisserie and high octane Rock Star energy drinks boasting Green Tea, Ginseng and Guarana. Food stuffs high in fat, sugar, salt, calories and weird artificial ingredients. Strange ingredients, is right. New York Times journalist, Mark Bittman just wrote about McDonald's *FMO* (sounds too much like GMO to me) a new menu item, Fruit-Maple-Oatmeal that busy-bee morning workers can buy at ten times the price of normal oatmeal with its "concoction of 21 ingredients".

Consumers get kicked in the teeth by fringe food retailers who jack-up the price of processed foods, as much as 30-60% more than grocery stores in such urban and small town deserts. This hits hard in the pocketbooks of the poor--especially during times of economic struggle. In fact, food desert consumers ultimately end up spending an average of 37% more on their food purchases. *And* they are left feeling empty--nutritionally and spiritually.

Humans suffer from poor nutrition--right here in the Heartland. Land of plenty. Research reveals a psychological factor related to one's proximity to food; a connection between easy access to processed junk and diseases of obesity, diabetes and heart disease. So, I imagine the opposite is true when people grow gardens. I see radical changes when my botanical medicine students take classes learning how to care deeply for self and family--from herb and food gardens to homegrown apothecaries--they begin to feel very

secure and healthful. This green-loving circle spends less money on medicine and junk food. Dirt farmers, wilders and greenhorns seem to be a happy, soul-nourished lot of folks.

If we step back, viewing the community as a whole organism, much as we do in natural medicine with the human body, then we see there is nothing truly affordable about these 'cheap meals'. Not with the escalating rates of disease and obesity stemming from poor nutrition in the United States. Multinationals have exported this sickly western processed fast food model and other nations are catching up fast with similar preventable diseases. We not only need better nutrition and botanical medicines, we crave spiritual nourishment from our food cosmos.

What really happens when our food is grown regionally, then whisked away, exported via national and international routes into the global food commodity market, rather than staying within our communities? *We lose community food security.* Our townspeople end up buying food back locally anyway from the international network of giant food intermediaries such as Kraft, ConAgra, Nestle, PepsiCo. Essentially, money spent on importing food takes from the fertility of the local economy. It weakens our economic capacity, just as the mono-cropped landscape loses its rich biodiversity. There's multifarious fallout: overpriced goods, overprocessed foods, drain on freshness and nutritive value, excess chemicals and preservatives, exorbitant fuel costs for transport, and increases in food-borne diseases.

The landscape of the Heartland has been altered with expanses of corporate owned farms. Monoculture wildfire rages across the plains and prairies. Surviving farmers receive their subsidies for corn, soy, wheat, cotton and rice. *King Corn rules. Agribiz is big business.* Common folk dredge on, like indentured modern serfs. Remember that farmers really only receive about 20 cents on every food dollar for their hard work. However, what if U.S. farmers were offered subsidies and incentives to diversify, to grow healthful whole foods, cultivating a wide range of organic produce and alternative crops instead? We know small farmers are losing out. So are food consumers. Plenty of money streams out of local farmers' bank accounts and local community coffers when growers have to pay distant suppliers and creditors that are non-local.

"In short, despite having invested heavily in (farm) technology that enables them to reap immense harvests, and despite spending nearly a billion dollars a year to raise crops and animals to sell to some of the wealthiest

corporations in the world, many of the region's farm families live dangerously close to poverty levels." (Meter-Rosales report, MN)

One economic analysis indicates that if regional families and communities begin with the small step of purchasing even 5% of their foods locally, that would in turn create an average stream of \$5 million in farm income for that region.

Midwest small dairy farms are vanishing and we must support their survival. Their disappearances create more ecological problems. Corporate farms infiltrate and the negative cycle perpetuates: few small independent dairy farms, poor crop rotation, less animal manure, sub-standard soil conditions, more mono-crops, proliferation of GMO's, chemical-intense use, groundwater contamination, high fuel consumption...on and on it goes.

Recently I conversed with a U.S.D.A. contract grain inspector in the Midwest and he admitted that most farmers feel 'locked in' by the contracts they have signed. Another cycle of economic entrapment. He also blew apart another myth when he discussed mono-crops, "There is a misconception that we are feeding the world's people...but we really are not. We're feeding the world's animals...mainly it is feedstock...feed for cattle and dogs."

True, don't forget the corn. *We're the corn people of America*, Michael Pollen and Aaron Wolf declare in their expose books and films on the truth about ag politics and food in America.

"With an oink-oink here, and a ton of campaign cash there, agribusiness giants are able to dictate America's food and farm policies in both Republican and Democratic administrations," chides Jim Hightower.

So, what's required of us now? A new food literacy campaign. A cultural conversation about food. And it has begun. Because we hunger for healthful foods. We must shift the very way we think and behave, instead of eating what's shoved on our plates served in *Cafeteria America*. Food production and distribution must increasingly include regional, ecological and economic sustainability efforts. This new foodie movement will create stronger bonds, trust, security, a sense of community, plus stronger families, communities and business connections.

U.S. citizens are cultivating their own *down to the ground* food movement. An agro-ecological cultural renaissance is happening. From a spade in the community garden to food co-op aisles, and over tasty organic meals served up at the tables of family and friends. It will take passion, courage, creativity

to shift and transform our current cultural food landscape. A true green revival is happening close to home...and there's room at the table for you!

Here are 30 ways that people can get involved in the down to the ground foodie movement. The author encourages and inspires you to take action. Do it for the health of the planet, the health of your family...for yourself:

- Buy from organic farms
- Purchase food shares, join a CSA*
- Get active with a local food co-op
- Visit & support Farmer's Markets
- Eat whole foods & local produce
- Shop for value-added products
- Donate healthy food to the Food Pantry
- Serve up meals at Community Kitchens
- Transform the menu to include local food & organics:
 - Schools, colleges, nursing homes, employer food services
- Eat out at locavore food establishments
- Host events with local organic caterers
- Read what food bloggers are saying
- Transform your backyard: *food not lawns*
- Grow anarchist plots: *guerilla garden*
- Restore native plants
- Grow a medicinal herb garden
- Take a wild edibles or weed walk with the local herbalist
- Volunteer to co-create gardens with kids
- Shop local, grow community economy
- Save seeds (heirloom, non-GMO, native)
- Preserve culturally diverse heritages & traditions
- Be active in the small farm revival
- Support biodiversity, organics, permaculture, biomimicry projects
- Support urban agriculture
- Volunteer at a prison garden
- Build raised beds for elderly neighbors
- Become a wilder, forager!
- Ensure egalitarian access to whole foods:
 - Join a food justice organization

*there's a trend to rename CSA's Community *Sustaining* Agriculture

About the Author...

Gigi Stafne is an educator, writer and activist of 20 years within the

realms of natural & botanical medicine, women's health, environmental health and ecology. She is an yerbalista wilder and borderlands woman, who is teaching this Spring in Wisconsin, Minnesota...then off to the Southwest U.S. and Mexico engaging in cross cultural down to the ground medicine.

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