

Eating right here: Moving from consumer to food citizen

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Abstract. The term food citizenship is defined as the practice of engaging in food-related behaviors that support, rather than threaten, the development of a democratic, socially and economically just, and environmentally sustainable food system. Ways to practice food citizenship are described and a role for universities in fostering food citizenship is suggested. Finally, four barriers to food citizenship are identified and described: the current food system, federal food and agriculture policy, local and institutional policies, and the culture of professional nutrition organizations.

Key words: Food citizen, Food choice, Local food systems, Policy, Sustainability

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Overview

First, I want to explore the meaning of an emerging descriptor for consumers – food citizen, or food citizenship. Second, I want to touch upon what I see as some of the obstacles to practicing food citizenship, and finally, I want to suggest a few ways that food citizenship might be applied beyond the individual to institutions, organizations, and policy.

My title, “Eating right here: Moving from consumer to food citizen” borrows from the slogan and “URL” of the American Dietetic Association (ADA), which is www.eatright.org. The ADA’s motivation for what might be considered a direct order to eat in a certain way – the “right” way – is based on its interest, as the primary accrediting organization of nutrition professionals in the US, to serve the public by promoting optimal nutrition, health, and well-being. My version of “eating right here” reflects, first, the notion that we make food choices on an on-going basis. In other words, eating is an activity that we are engaged in as a normal part of life. Second, it suggests that there is a right way to eat for health, and third, that what is right to eat, on the basis of health, can (and “should”) take on different characteristics depending on one’s geographic and agricultural location.

What is food citizenship?

The word citizen suggests belonging to or inhabiting a place, a native or denizen of a place. “Citizen” also conveys the notion of being a member of a state or nation and owing an allegiance to it by birth or naturalization. Citizenship carries duties or responsibilities along with various rights. (It is interesting that in the United States a citizen is not guaranteed a right to food!)

Food citizenship, then, can be interpreted to mean that, in relation to our food choices, we have certain rights associated with living in a particular place – the right to safe unadulterated food or truthful product information, for example, but that there are also responsibilities that go along with this kind of citizenship. Essayist and bard of sustainable agriculture, Wendell Berry (1989), suggests that people can “eat responsibly” to help stem the decline of American farming and rural life. While he believes that “eating is an agricultural act,” he concedes that most people do not think of their daily food choices in this way and have become passive, uncritical, and dependent consumers. Consumers, Berry says,

buy what they want – or what they have been persuaded to want – within the limits of what they can get. They pay, mostly without protest, what they are charged. And

they mostly ignore certain critical questions about the quality and cost of what they are sold (1989: 125).

Indeed, much of what has been termed the “pre-dental” questions or considerations about food – such as how and where it was grown, by whom, by what methods, and at what natural resource cost – are not included in any intentional way when most people make food choices. The story of how and by whom food was grown, processed, packaged, transported, and ultimately, how it ended up in the shopping cart we push down the aisle of our local grocery store or “super center,” is probably both unknown and uninteresting to most consumers. But the story can be a fascinating one, and the process of discovering it will most likely decrease the passivity that characterizes the majority of food choices made in our country.

In a recent white paper published by Cornell University’s Polson Institute for Global Development, the authors suggest that “the idea of food citizenship captures a shift in which consumers move beyond [mere food] shopping to a broader engagement with the food system in its many dimensions” (Polson Institute for Global Development, 2003: 7). The white paper calls on Land Grant institutions (such as Cornell University), as leaders in life sciences, socio-economic development, and human ecology, through their research, education, and extension missions, to “provide public and private decision-makers with the information and tools they need to support an engaged food citizenry, a sound public food policy, and a vibrant food landscape” (2003: 7). Finally, white paper authors state, “because food is central to our well-being and because personal and public decisions about food can have profound and far reaching consequences, our strongest recommendation is that the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences should play a much stronger campus and national role in food citizenship education” (2003: 8). I couldn’t agree more.

For the past two years, I have taught a food systems course in the Division of Nutritional Sciences at Cornell University. As part of this course, I have my students conduct an analysis of a single commercially available food product. The purpose of this exercise is to discover and describe the food system that is embedded within or reflected by their chosen food product. Invariably, this exercise leads to discovery. While this is preceded by a period of being overwhelmed, frustrated, and disillusioned, it ultimately results in empowerment. Armed with the tools to conduct such an assessment and the experience of doing it, students realize that the differences in food choices in the marketplace go well beyond the nutrition facts on the label, the ingredient list, and the product name, claim, and manufacturer.

While it is probably unrealistic to expect that any of us would undertake such an analysis without being required

to do so for course credit, having students begin to think about the kind of food system they want to support (versus are supporting) through their food choices is probably the most important first step toward food citizenship. A population of passive food consumers – people who do not think about the food system and its sustainability – is as Berry suggests, one of the chief goals of industrial food production. And, I would add, it is one of the chief goals or desires of the dominant food industry as well.

Is there a consumer goal for the kind of food system we envision?

What is this food system?

In her 2001 presidential address to the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society, Gail Feenstra provided the Sustainable Agriculture and Education Program (University of California–Davis) definition of a community food system as, “a collaborative effort to build more locally based, self-reliant food economies – one in which sustainable food production, processing, distribution and consumption is [sic] integrated to enhance the economic, environmental, and social health of a particular place” (Feenstra, 2002:100). According to this definition, the goals of a community food system include: (1) “improved access by all community members to an adequate, nutritious diet; (2) a stable base of family farms that use more sustainable production practices; (3) marketing and processing practices that create more direct links between farmers and consumers; (4) food and agriculture-related businesses that create jobs and re-circulate financial capital; (5) improved working and living conditions for farm and other food system labor; and, (6) food and agriculture policies that promote local food production, processing, and consumption” (Feenstra, 2002: 100–101).

Mike Hamm suggests that it is not unreasonable for U.S. consumers to ask what kind of food system they want. He proposes a set of questions that suggest one vision of a sustainable food system:

How about a food system in which we know where a significant percent of our food comes from? How about one in which the production, processing, distribution, and waste handling were consistently done in an environmentally sensitive manner? How about one in which the democratic principles under which this nation was founded are made stronger and not weakened through consolidation and monopolization? How about one in which the farmers who grow our food are honored as heroes and not marginalized as commodity producers? How about one in which every consumer and person working in the food system has the oppor-

tunity to reach their potential and is not limited by less than living wage jobs, poor nutrition, and substandard education? How about one in which food is a right and working honestly is a responsibility? (Hamm, forthcoming).

The consumer-level goal of these emerging, community-based, sustainable food systems, what my colleague Tom Lyson in the Department of Development Sociology at Cornell University (note that we no longer use the word “rural” in rural sociology, and we no longer use the word “agriculture” in agricultural economics!), refers to as “civic agriculture” would be food citizenship.

Food citizenship, in my view, is the practice of engaging in food-related behaviors (defined narrowly and broadly) that support, rather than threaten, the development of a democratic, socially and economically just, and environmentally sustainable food system.

We might also consider different stages or levels of food citizenship. Many of us in nutrition and related fields have been promoting diets that are locally-based and seasonally-varied to reflect local production and processing as having the greatest congruence with community based food systems. Engaging in a practice meant to bring about positive change in the food system is consistent with the philosophy attributed to Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) that “we must become the change we want to see in the world.” By making responsible food choices – choices that support sustainability – local food systems became a way of tailoring a necessary economic exchange for purposes beyond the biological need for nutrients and energy and the pleasure of taste. It is “voting with your food dollar.” Nearly two decades ago, Joan Gussow and Kate Clancy (1986: 210), leaders in both the nutrition and food systems arenas, coined the term “sustainable diets” to reflect a broader set of considerations beyond the health of the individual.

So, each of us can practice food citizenship by first thinking about the food system implications of how we eat and then by taking action. This action would include choosing foods grown or raised in a manner that regenerates natural systems, choosing foods processed and marketed in ways that distribute rather than concentrate the profits, and choosing foods that are transported locally. This is easiest to do by shopping outside the mainstream food system – buying at least some food at a farmers market or roadside stand, or joining a CSA. Beyond being very intentional in one’s daily food purchases, food citizenship also can involve other actions that send signals to the marketplace. One such signal can be requesting that locally produced and organically grown food be available locally – both fresh when in season and processed when out-of-season. At a restaurant, food citizenship can involve asking where and how menu items were produced and choosing those items that

came from local agriculture and a sustainable food system. Engaging in public policy development locally and at the federal level can often be awkward and difficult, but to foster food citizenship people need encouragement and tools to effect change.

Barriers to becoming a food citizen

Are there barriers to practicing food citizenship? I believe that there are several critical obstacles that consumers face in the food environment and in our society at large. I will mention a few that I think will serve to remind us that our work as stewards of the food system is far from complete.

1. The first barrier, as I see it, is the food system itself. Obviously it would be easy to practice food citizenship if the food supply was reflective primarily of a sustainable, community-based food system and if a trip to the supermarket wasn’t the bewildering and distancing experience it can be. Today, about 1,200 food products are introduced into the marketplace every year. A disproportionate number of these new foods are what we in the nutrition profession refer to as “top of the pyramid foods” or the euphemistic “sometimes” foods that are often high in refined carbohydrate, fat, and salt. Relatively few can be referred to as “good for you,” “everyday,” or “nutritious.” Fewer still reflect the local food system.
2. A second barrier is current federal agriculture policy and influences on policy-making. The abundance of foods that support neither sustainability nor health comes as no surprise when one considers the pernicious role agricultural subsidies play in propping up a failed system of agriculture. The subsidy-driven, over-supply of a narrow range of commodities has resulted in an abundance of cheap food components. High fructose corn syrup, fats, and salt, provide the starting materials for numerous inventions of the food industry, which then fill supermarket shelves, drain the wallets of the poor, and pad our midriffs.
3. Federal, state, and local institutional policies constitute additional barriers. Many of us who are involved in farm to school programs are confronting policies that make the purchase of locally grown foods challenging. But there are often clever ways to work within the policy structure as we work to change it. While schools are not allowed to specify place of origin for foods received through the commodity food program, they can specify “varieties” that are known to grow in their region – Cortland or Empire, for example – thereby increasing the chance of supporting the local agriculture within a system not set up to do so. Of course, “pouring rights” contracts (where schools can receive lucrative bonuses from soft drink

companies in exchange for the exclusive right to sell their brand on school property) are another example of an educational system's financial dependence on the sale of foods of minimal nutritional value, and they too constitute policy barriers at the very local level. I'm sure if juices made from fruits grown in the Hudson Valley were the only a la carte and vending beverage choices outside the school meal, a profit could be made from them as well. In this case, of course, the profits would be kept local.

4. Finally, as a food system thinker originally trained as a nutritionist (and a dietitian, even), I am compelled to mention the need for our professional organizations in health and nutrition fields to maintain their credibility and autonomy in an era of increasing corporate influence and cooptation. Our professional nutrition organizations, it seems to me, need to foster critical analysis of the food system and encourage serious evaluation of food products, dietary patterns, and other food-related behaviors on a set of criteria ranging from the nutritional to environmental. It is no longer (many of us believe it never was) particularly helpful or useful to perpetuate the food industry's supporting mantra that "there are no good foods or bad foods – only good or bad diets" (Ayoob et al., 2002: 264). This is a barrier to improving the public's diet or protecting against chronic disease. We, nutrition, agriculture, and food system professionals, ought to be able and willing to evaluate foods both on nutritional grounds and by the extent to which they reflect the food system values we uphold. Fortunately, there is a growing number of nutrition professionals who are leaders in food citizenship, as evidenced by the increasing membership in organizational subgroups – the Division of Sustainable Food Systems within the Society for Nutrition Education and the Hunger and Environmental Nutrition group within the American Dietetic Association, for example.

The challenge ahead

While there are other barriers that are important to think about, such as the lack of cooking and other food skills, in the interest of time, I would like to end with some reflections on where we, as an organization, have been and where I would like to see us go.

My work on food citizenship fits into the broader context of social change and how we, in the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society, would like to see the agriculture and food system restructured.

Virtually all past presidential addresses have tackled a piece of the food system puzzle. And most of the papers and presentations that comprised the heart and soul of this society are the intellectual grist out of which a new,

sustainable, democratically organized system of food production and consumption can be created.

But it will take more than intellectual grist. Change will come about through: (1) small decisions made forthrightly and relentlessly by individual consumers; (2) courageous policy-making decisions by individual political leaders responding to public interest, environmental stewardship, and human health rather than corporate survival and growth; and (3) the work of farmers who return to the soil the richness that was harvested from it.

While we often use the metaphor of war to address food issues, such as "the war on the obesity epidemic," or "foot soldiers for a new food system," maybe now is the time (as we are reminded daily of the gross inadequacy of war as a path to peace) to step away from that image. I want us to think of ourselves not as Spartans (apologies to my dear friends at MSU) but rather as Athenians – as the builders and weavers so beautifully articulated by Stevenson et al. (forthcoming), and as the creators of spaces that Gail Feenstra clearly described for sustainable food systems (Feenstra, 2002). Perhaps, we need to become "Food System Keepers" such as the Riverkeepers¹ that grew originally out of a concern over the thoughtless, long-standing, and profit-driven polluting of the very river that flows with astonishing beauty by this site. Interestingly, it was the fishers, concerned about the safety and health of their very local food supply that provided the spark that ignited a much larger movement to protect the nation's rivers.

The promise of a new food system rests as much on reforming the existing system as on becoming food citizens. As new food systems emerge, as they surely have through the kind of work done by members of our two societies, it will be the food citizens who will sustain a socially just, equitable, and environmentally regenerative food system for generations to come.

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Note

1. Riverkeeper is an advocacy group that monitors the Hudson River ecosystem and challenges polluters, using both legal and grass roots campaigns. Its mission is to safeguard the ecological integrity of the Hudson River, its tributaries, and the watershed of New York City (protecting the city's drinking water supply) by tracking down and stopping polluters. Since 1983, Riverkeeper has

investigated and brought to justice more than 300 environmental lawbreakers. Riverkeeper believes in the rights of every citizen to enjoy and defend our nation's water resources.

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