

Rachel Peterson

Food for Thought

Essay2/Draft 3

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### From Candy to Corn: Changing Children's Tastes

Wendell Berry, in his "The Pleasures of Eating" and Michael Pollan, in his "Cruising on the Ark of Taste" share the idea that food tastes better when the eater is somehow involved in the agricultural process. Indeed, this is one of the main ideas of Berry's essay. Berry is considered an agrarianist and environmental writer. Pollan's works often concern gardening. Both have a great deal to say on the topic of one's relationship to food. Berry argues that if the eater is ignorant, he is not free and the pleasure of eating is diminished. When the eater isn't involved in the process (which Berry and Pollan both agree is the current situation for most people), the food industry can expand and substitute "machines, drugs, and chemicals for ...the natural health and fertility of the soil."

Berry says that by understanding where the food comes from, or preferably growing the food, one can eat with "understanding and with gratitude." While Berry tends his garden, Pollan cites his visiting of the turkey that he will eat for Thanksgiving as a part of his connection to the food. Pollan also tells of its superior taste. Both writers agree that there is more pleasure in eating a food when one knows its life. Pollan, while hinting at the social aspect, says that the food, with which he has been acquainted, is actually superior in taste. Berry suggests this by saying that local foods, with which one has a greater connection, are freshest and thus possibly the tastiest.

The question then becomes: how can we integrate this philosophy of connecting with food into our daily lives? Berry's talk of connection to food centers on growing it. Pollan is

involved in the food process by considering the environment and biodiversity. You could attempt to grow a portion of your own food, or even try (very, very hard) to visit your future dinner, but the practicality of this for most of us is arguable. One way to create a connection between society and the food it consumes is to start young—to create a connection that is meaningful but not unfeasible.

Alice Waters has clearly considered this problem and in response has created the Edible Schoolyard Program. This project, implemented in Berkeley, California “brings . . . students into a garden and the garden into the curriculum and cafeteria.” The project began in 1995 at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School. The students plant and harvest food from an organic garden and then use it to prepare meals. The program is broken up into garden, kitchen and classroom lessons.

First reading about the idea of incorporating gardening into school, I thought it was a bit unrealistic. Corby Kummer, in his “Good-bye, Cryovac,” believes that “in college, gardens offer students the psychic and physical release of manual labor, and serve the invaluable purpose of distraction from papers and exams.” My initial reaction to this was: “you’ve got to be kidding.” Knowing how little free time I have now, there is no way I could or would want to spare time to do that. But that was me thinking in a way Berry says most eaters think---as uninvolved, passive consumers.

But what would the world be like if there were Edible Schoolyard-type programs in all schools? This question may sound a bit trivial at first thought, but I believe that such a program would have great benefits for our society.

According to the philosophy of Berry and Pollan, students will consider their home-grown foods superior to other foods in taste. Eating, for example, these fresher vegetables, kids

may start to notice the better taste. Maybe the tomato on their cheeseburger at McDonalds doesn't quite taste like the ones from the garden...the tomatoes they eat at school. This is consistent with Kummer's ideas on how to get people to appreciate fresh food. First, "give people something raw and ravishing" and then "get them into a garden to pick tomatoes...." Besides the actual taste, there is an added pleasure, Berry would say, simply arising from the child's connection to the food. Knowing those are the tomatoes he or she tended to or planted allows the child to enjoy it more. I recall my great pride as a child in making dishes from scratch. In a sense, an Edible Schoolyard-type program capitalizes on a child's great pride in his or her own creation.

Among the benefits of an Edible Schoolyard-type program are those of health. Fresher foods are healthier. Because the foods are fresh and straight from the garden, they will not have the preservatives and additives that typically make food products less healthy. This may help curb the increasing problem of child obesity. Also, if a child develops a taste for fresh and additive-free food at a young age (which has a high likelihood because of his connection to the food), he will be more likely to eat healthy in the long-term. If the salad itself tastes so good, will one really need all that ranch dressing? Might this program even influence kids, and eventually society, to stop eating fast food and junk food?

This project might also cause the kids involved to appreciate each food item better. I know that I would certainly savor my piece of fruit (a lot more than before) if I had spent time and energy planting and caring for its source plant. This is the point at which, for the children, food becomes something more than what you eat when you're hungry. I believe that this may make children more appreciative in general. By being able to experience the whole lot that goes into creating the salad that appears on his or her plate, the student may begin thinking: if there is

so much behind making food, maybe other aspects of my life -- the care my parents give me, my clothing, my home, the cleanliness of my school -- involve a lot more than I had previously assumed?

In some ways, taking care of garden can have as much learning value as the student's other classes of the school day. They learn about soil, about weather, and probably a bit of disguised biology. There is a lot to say about the value of learning hands-on. This applies even to the kitchen part of the project. For example, the official website of the Edible Schoolyard cites students learning the "origins of staple ingredients by grinding their own wheat and corn into flour...." While making food, the students will come to learn that different foods have different seasons. Could the understanding that one's favorite things (here: food) may not always be available make children less demanding or more understanding? Could these children also learn life lessons? It is because we expect such uniformity that companies must cater to us in order to make money. Pineapples aren't always in season, yet consumers demand to have pineapples every day. If these children can accept changing their diets and their habits to include a connection to healthy food and an open mind, the society of tomorrow will be the better for it.

To better take advantage of the connection to and pleasure from food, both Berry and Pollan endorse knowledge. Berry suggests knowledge mostly about the source of the food; Pollan wants eaters to be aware of the possibility of the loss endangered organisms and loss of some cultural aspects of food due to standardization. An Edible Schoolyard-like project is really about giving kids knowledge. Accordingly, the project should be accompanied by an environmental and food health class; in other words, the supporting curriculum should be enhanced. It is confounding that this isn't already required. Of course, for any class to be effective, good teachers must be recruited for these courses. An intelligent team of people,

including organic farmers, scientists, teachers, pediatric psychologists, environmentalists, could be organized with the goal of devising the course's curriculum---one that will make students second-guess the status quo—especially concerning their food and the environment. This class and project combination gives children the knowledge to make more informed choices, not limited to the category of food, for the rest of their lives.

Kummer tells of Yale students desperately lined up to get into dining hall that uses fresh local ingredients. Some people say kids are even better at getting what they want. If children enjoy the taste of the fresh food they have grown, by how much will the demand for fresh, additive-free food increase? How will this change society? How might these children, with a greater understanding and appreciation of food, improve the society of the future? I am very optimistic.