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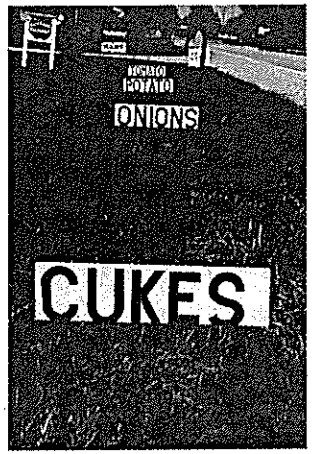
Food for change

My farmer is taking a break. After fifteen years of delivering homegrown, organic produce to dozens of households in the GTA, he's decided to spend the summer renovating his five-acre vegetable garden. Hardly a break for him, but for me, it's a hiatus in a much-loved arrangement. I feel bereft.

I'll miss Ken's biweekly visits and his regular email updates on how things are going at the farm. I'll miss putting an ice-filled cooler on the porch so he can deposit an occasional frozen chicken there. I'll miss our hurried conversations about pickling experiments and recipes. And I have no doubt that my porch cat Flora will miss Ken's ministrations (along with appreciating Ken's pats, Flora knows that the chicken is headed for her bowl).

Ken and I have a pact, albeit a temporarily disrupted one. It is an ancient pact, one that links food-grower to eater. We both take it seriously. At the end of each season, when Ken has delivered his last batch of potatoes, chestnuts and apples, there's more than a hint of reverence in our expressions of appreciation: 'It has been an honour and a pleasure to grow flavourful and nutritious food for you,' Ken emails his customers. 'Ditto and amen, buddy,' I say.

It's hard to replace what Ken offers, but it's not really surprising that more farmers don't do what he does. Growing food is labour enough, but then Ken has to pack up and organize all the different orders into his truck, drive from his farm into the congested streets of Toronto and zigzag his way through the city, dropping off myriad distinct deliveries on porches where customers like me want to chat. Though these porch chats slow him down, Ken doesn't seem to mind. He knows we buy his produce not just for the food, but for our mutual connection to that food.



Ken's customers know exactly who is behind each radish and bean; every bite has the flavour of his care.

The defining feature of food in Toronto may well be available choice: whatever you want, whenever you want it, someone is probably selling it. But what if you want sustainably produced, economically feasible and fair food that doesn't cost the earth, that doesn't hurt people or the planet, that supports local organic farmers and that's available for one and for all? The options are decidedly slim. Even something that should be as simple as buying an Ontario strawberry – organic or otherwise – at a Toronto supermarket in June is difficult.

From fresh raspberries in February to asparagus in November, Toronto's smorgasbord is truly global. It is, after all, always spring or summer somewhere in the world, and so we eat to the disjunctive rhythms of far-off seasons.

What we're consuming, though, is not just food: it's fossil fuels. We're gobbling up the energy used to produce the synthetic fertilizers, to power the farm machines, to refrigerate and transport food around the globe, to package or process it and to get it to our plates, while this same food provides far less in the way of caloric fuel for our bodies than the fossil-fuel energy required to get it to us. It's hard to imagine a better definition of the word *unsustainable*.

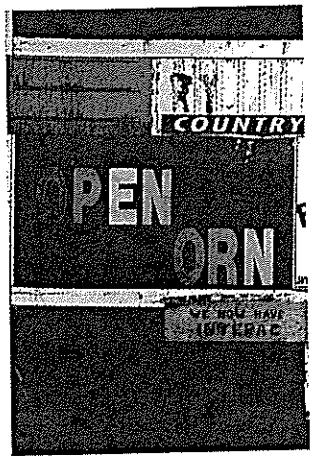
Despite the vast amount of energy consumed by the global food system and in spite of the current interest in global warming, there's very little government attention focused on the food system and the impact of our food choices on the climate crisis. All levels of government are, to varying

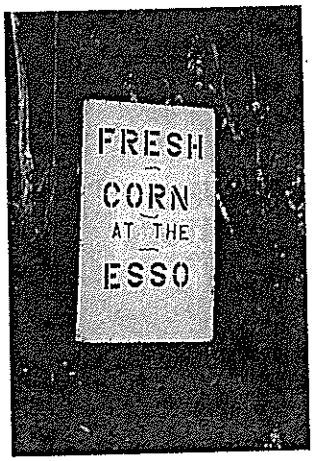
degrees, talking the talk about the need to reduce emissions, but they're not making the connections to people's plates.

Consider, for example, recent attempts to engage citizens in developing the City's new Climate Change and Clean Air Action Plan. In a document called *Change Is in the Air* released in March 2007, the City provided a framework that outlines 'some ideas on the types of strategies, policies, programs and projects we need to put in place' to reduce emissions. While the emissions-reduction targets are ambitious – a 30 percent cut from 1990 levels by 2020, and an 80 percent reduction by 2050 – the proposed actions related to food are anything but. Indeed, food merits just two tentative mentions.

'Identify opportunities to replace imports with locally produced goods and food,' the document says in a section on diesel. It's hard to see food here as anything other than a tagged-on afterthought. I suspect that most people could devote five minutes of brainpower to identifying opportunities and come up with an eminently sensible, consultant-free list. There are, for example, cafeterias in each of the city's seven civic centres. Close to sixty city-run daycares feed toddlers. Of the Toronto District School Board's 568 schools, 152 have cafeterias and 300 have student nutrition programs. As well, there are more than 120 community centres, many with food services of some sort, and at least ten city-run homes for the aged. And how many catered events does the city sponsor in a year? A significant and immediately realizable goal would be to serve locally produced food – say, 50 percent at least – in institutions directly under City control. We could have our cake and drink coffee, too.

The second reference to food in *Change Is in the Air* is equally disappointing. It states that the City should '[r]equire all large food retailers to

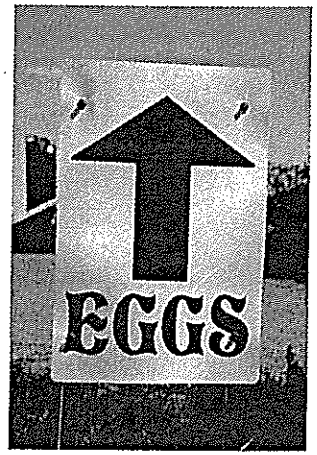




indicate the food kilometres (shipping distance) for 10 commonly used types of produce by 2012.' We already have labelling laws that require food retailers to identify where all produce on the shelves – not just ten common types – comes from. Those labels don't currently spell out the actual kilometres, but surely the city has enough faith in its citizenry to count on us to figure out that asparagus from Peru comes from, well, a long way away. Wouldn't it make more sense to ditch the geography lesson and go straight to greenhouse-gas education? Instead of labels that give us information easily gleaned from a map, how about labels that give the carbon output of a California strawberry compared to an Ontario-grown strawberry? The information currently exists, so why not make it easy for consumers to access by putting it right on the label?

The city could use a recent study published by the Toronto organization FoodShare entitled *Fighting Global Warming at the Farmer's Market* as a start. The study compares transport distances, energy consumption and carbon dioxide emissions for seven locally produced items and equivalent imported items. Among its findings: the imported items in the survey were transported an average of eighty-one times further than the local items. By translating distances into emissions, the study calculates that moving eight apples from Collingwood to Toronto releases 23.8 grams of carbon dioxide, while transporting eight apples from Washington State releases 974 grams of CO_2, or more than forty times that amount. An apple a day (a CO_2-fuelled apple from Washington or New Zealand or China, anyway) starts looking like dubious health advice for people and the planet.

Speaking of health and labelling issues, why not ask the Toronto Public Health Department to research the pesticides approved and applied to fruits and vegetables in produce-exporting countries like Mexico and



Ecuador, let us know whether or not these pesticides are approved for agricultural use in Canada and put that on the label? I bet we'd all think twice about chomping on an apple from China if we had ready information about pesticide registration in that country.

One of the strangest omissions in the City's *Change Is in the Air* report, though, is that while it trumpets individual action, the section on what people can do to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and improve air quality is completely silent on the issue of buying locally produced food.

Though the municipal government is lagging on making the climate-change connection to food, a number of groups are making it easier to buy local. Farmers' Markets Ontario (FMO), an advocacy organization, opened two 'Real Farmers, Real Local'-certified farmers' markets in Toronto in the summer of 2007, one in Liberty Village and one at the Woodbine Shopping Centre. Through farm inspections, FMO certifies that 'authentic farmers' or 'true farmers' are actually growing the food that they sell. While FMO's essentialist language might give people pause (what farmer wouldn't bristle at being labelled somehow inauthentic for supplementing his lettuce and peas with lemons and mangoes from the Food Terminal?), there's also something refreshingly honest in the approach. If consumers want to buy local, they can do so with confidence at an FMO-certified market.

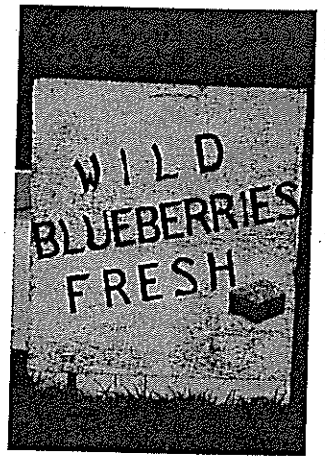
Another organization going the certification route is Local Food Plus, a non-profit group that certifies local sustainable food producers and encourages large institutions to buy from those producers.

Certifying food helps direct consumers to local food producers, a significant step towards reducing emissions. However, it's just one aspect

of the complex confluence of issues around food. A number of Toronto non-profit groups, such as FoodShare and the Stop Community Food Centre, are connecting food issues not only to the environment but also to a host of related social issues. And it doesn't take much time in the creative kitchens of Toronto's food-security movement to realize that this city's food activism has a uniquely Toronto flavour. Not surprisingly, one of the things that makes it unique is the diversity of interests involved. The ingredients that go into Toronto's simmering pot, ingredients for a recipe called 'making a better food system,' are supplied by a diverse mix of people and groups working in the realms of the environment, social justice, economic policy, racial equity and community health. Food is where so many of these concerns intersect.

This intersection (which sometimes seems more like a collision) leads to hard questions. Take the debate over buying local, for example. A strictly environmental critique would say that we need policy changes and consumer education to promote access to locally produced food, changes that would make it easier and more economically viable to fill our grocery carts with Ontario's bounty. Even there, though, debates rage. Local or organic – which is more important? Shouldn't we be supporting Ontario's farmers, especially those in the greenbelt, whether or not they've made the transition to organic?

Adding social justice, economic, racial and health critiques to the mix complicates the questions even further. There are a multitude of reasons why someone's food choices might be limited or circumscribed to the extent that buying local is simply not an option, especially when local is priced at a premium. And perhaps there's more than a whiff of hypocrisy to the carbon-footprint equation anyway; after all, chances are that the



person buying the least expensive (but high carbon-output cost) produce at Wal-Mart is not driving an SUV to the store. As long as discussions such as those around the issue of buying local remain isolated in the environmental sphere, meaningful change that gets at the root causes of damage and inequities will continue to elude us.

The Toronto non-profit groups expanding the food critique beyond environmental issues and into the social and economic realms are also involved in on-the-ground projects that demonstrate what a transformed food system – transformed at its roots – might look like. Many of these projects are about the literal roots that anchor food in the ground, in our lives. The Stop Community Food Centre, FoodShare and the Afri-Can Food Basket, for example, are all deeply involved in community gardening projects where, together, people grow food and share the bounty. These groups are adept at finding fertile, opportunistic spaces that can be transformed into productive, food-growing places – in parks, for example, or on school, church or community-centre grounds. Furthermore, these groups have fostered direct distribution systems at food banks, drop-in community meals, community kitchens, markets in parks and in food boxes delivered to homes in an effort to keep prices low and to bridge the gap between food-grower and eater.

These groups excel at creating a sense of community around food, and there are plenty of ways the City's policies could help foster this. There could be a policy, for example, promoting food markets in parks, with a streamlined permit process for community groups to start markets. The TTC could be the Better Food Way and include food markets at major stops, as is done at many Metro stations in Montreal. Every community centre could be home to a food-growing community garden. Tax

incentives could reward homeowners who plant food on the yards and boulevards in front of their properties and donate the produce to food banks. The city's tree-planting program could be expanded to include edible fruit trees, with students hired in the summer to gather the bounty and organize giveaways at local libraries. All these admittedly small but locally meaningful steps would place food front and centre, not just in our personal lives (which it already is), but in our social selves and our lives within our communities.

Environmentalism has taught us to sing the chorus of 'What can I do?' As useful and valuable as this might be, it's not really possible to answer this question with consumer action until we have first asked, 'What do we know?' For example, do we know who grows our food and how and where and under what social, environmental and economic conditions? This is the question Ken answers for me. More important, this is a question that positions us not as individual consumers but as community citizens.

The need for food is one of the precious few of a few precious things we all share. Food is the perfect nexus around which to gather and galvanize the many movements trying to make the world better. If we put food first – good, healthy, sustainable and fair food for all – it would be more than a start. It would be the centre that holds.

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