

LOCALLY GROWN

What's up with supermarkets in Iowa
selling apples from . . . (huh) China?

By Annie Spiegelman the dirt DIVA



When I first moved to Northern California, after a sordid and jaded past in the New York film industry, I didn't quite understand why herds of cows and sheep congregated aimlessly alongside the freeways. Being a prototypical type-A Manhattanite, I questioned why they weren't being busy. I initially questioned if they were actually real or had simply been placed there as rural "set dressing", as we so craftily do in the movie business. I could imagine some irate film director screaming through his bullhorn: "Could a Production Assistant PLEASE move that bull's rear end away from the camera? HURRY PEOPLE! We're losing the light! CUT! What's wrong with that bull? Get me another one. **I want one that knows just what the hell he's doing!**"

Nowadays, I'm a recovering Hollywood First Assistant Director, with a sliver of my soul still astonishingly intact. I am grateful to be living in Marin County, a community internationally famous for it's hot tubs, of course, but also it's abundant ranches and farms which produce a cornucopia of fresh, local, sustainable and organic foods. In fact, Great Britain's Prince Charles recently visited and traded organic farming secrets with my pals at Grown-in-Marin. (They didn't invite me to join them, but that's okay. I'm pretty sure I was busy washing my hair that day . . .) The Prince stressed the urgency of promoting and protecting small-scale family farms and sustainable agriculture. Chucky was soo right on. *This is what Princess Di must have seen in him.*

A recent report by The US Department of Agriculture asserts that we have lost more than 34,000 farmers in the last two years. That's an average of 330 per week. Just sixty years ago there were 6.8 million farmers across this great country of ours, and now the number of farms stands at a lowly 2 million. An alarming statistic from Anna and Frances Lappe's book *Hope's Edge* states, " The typical supermarket contains no fewer than 30,000 items. About half of those items are produced by 10 multinational food and beverage companies. And roughly 140 people-117 men and 21 women-form the board of directors of those 10 companies." In other words, rather than these food items coming from salt-of-the-earth farmers growing diverse local varieties, these products have been universally homogenized and chosen for maximum profit by a few powerful executives.

When you purchase a food item in your supermarket, there's a good chance it traveled many miles to get there. This requires more packaging, refrigeration and fuel, and generates

large amounts of pollution and waste. (Researchers estimate that local sourced produce entailed 4-17 times less petroleum consumption and 5-7 times less carbon dioxide emissions than ingredients trucking through the conventional food chain.) In Britain, food transportation is now amongst the biggest and fastest growing sources of British greenhouse gas emissions- a pattern emerging around the world. While here in the U.S., the shipping, processing, packaging, advertising and retailing of the food has left American farmers more and more squeezed out of the equation. In 1910, the farming community would receive 40 cents on the dollar of its crops sold, while in 1997, it has shrunk to 7 cents. The typical wheat farmer now gets just 6 cents of the dollar you spend on a loaf of bread.

I truly believe the American farmer has a critical role in saving us all from what I see as a pandemic of electronically obsessed, overweight children being shamelessly targeted by predatory corporations unscrupulously selling their overly processed and nutritionally void junk & fast-foods. Ravenous corporate greed is FEEDING on our children. Have you walked down the breakfast cereal aisle of your local supermarket lately?

If you ask most kids today where their food originates from, you'd probably get the name of some fast food chain or mega-supermarket or possibly . . . **Spongebob's Crusty Crab shack.** The connection of food coming from the land is a way of life that is sadly and rapidly disappearing. No less than Mahatma Gandhi once said, " To forget how to dig the earth and tend the soil is to forget ourselves."

I say let's teach our children how to grow, prepare and be thankful for the foods so

generously provided by Mother Earth. Let's initiate them to the wonderful tastes, vibrant colors and healthy benefits of fresh and locally grown fruits and vegetables. Let's show them how to prepare delicious "non-packaged-meals" using whole grains, native herbs and spices, and dairy and meat products from animals that haven't been pumped full of dangerous hormones and antibiotics. If we, as enlightened mothers fail in this moral mission, I hate to be the one to tell you, but we'll all be going to "Mother Hell."

And I'm pretty certain there isn't a Starbucks there. *Or is there?*

What's a solution? I have two words for you:
FARMER'S MARKETS!

Helge Hellberg , Executive director of Marin Organic declares, " Farmer's markets provide more than just the freshest local and organic foods. You get the opportunity to engage directly with the farmer who grew your food, and you are part of creating community. Our little farmers market in Point Reyes Station, for example, is an amazingly beautiful and fun place to spend your Saturday morning and feel the interconnectedness between soil, organic produce, farmers, local residents and visitors. There are lots of smiles on the faces."

When you shop at farmer's markets the money you spend on local produce stays within the community. (*Here 80 cents of each dollar goes to the farmer. When you buy the same item at a supermarket, only 9 cents on each dollar goes to the farmer.*) There are fewer transportation costs and fewer middlemen. Of course, some long-distance food makes practical sense such as seasonal crops or for those living in some remote locations. Unfortunately, much of the world's food chain is entirely illogical!

For example, a recent survey in England found that the nation imports large amounts of milk, pork, and lamb and yet exports comparable amounts of the same foods, thus shuttling hundreds of millions of tons of *the same food* in opposite directions. In the movie business, I admit, we waste a good chunk of the film budget on fancy coffee runs for the director and his or her "handlers", but we'd be SO fired by the producer if we were caught paying for unnecessary *travel and shipping!*

But I digress . . .

In the recent book, "A Song For America," written by Farm Aid, the extraordinarily talented and committed organization that puts a spotlight on family farmers, the creators list its "**Ten Ways to Ensure Healthy Food Campaign**":

1. Know Your Food
2. Be an Active Food Shopper
3. Ensure That Your Food Dollars Support Family Farmers
4. Get to Know a Family Farmer
5. Teach Children How to Grow Food
6. Bring Food and Farm Issues to You Community
7. Strengthen Local Support for Farmers
8. Get Involved in Grassroots Efforts
9. Demand Democracy in Our Food System
10. Become a food activist

And finally, anyone who eats "food" must read the social and ecological manifesto Eat Here, by the prestigious WorldWatch Institute's Senior Researcher, Brian Halweil. Hailwell optimistically concludes, "Changes are unfolding in millions of different communities in a million different ways . . . Farmers will plant a greater diversity of crops. Less will be shipped as bulk commodity and more will be packaged and canned and prepared to

be sold nearby. Small food businesses will emerge to do this work. And shoppers, seeking pleasure and reassurance, will eat deliberately and inquire about the origins of their food. It is the fact that communities around the world all possess the capacity to regain this control-to declare food democracy-that makes the simple idea of eating local so powerful. These communities have a choice. And they are choosing instead to eat here."

See you at the Farmer's Market!

For more information and to find a Farmer's Market in your area go to:

www.FarmAid.org and www.worldwatch.org

www.anniespiegelman.com



Amazing photos by Russ Eddy of Marin Organic