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## Going to Extremes

Many years ago, at the height of the Cold War, I landed a job with the United States Information Agency as a guide for exhibitions about American life that toured the Soviet Union. The great Kitchen Debate between Nixon and Krushchev took place at the first exhibition, "The American Home," in 1959. The year I signed on, in 1978, the theme was "Agriculture USA."

Our stateside training took us to Illinois, where we endured ten intensive days of lectures on topics from agricultural credit and finance in the U.S. to plant diseases and new methods of irrigation. We also visited several mega-farms that demonstrated the latest technology. There was no question: American productivity would leave the Soviet farmers in the mud. I remember my first sight of an industrial pig farm—the huge holding ponds for waste, the cold, metal-slatted floors where a desperate sow tried to nurse her piglets comfortably. From the heartland we headed to the usda Agricultural Research Center in Beltsville, Maryland, to learn about plant genetics and germ plasm. Our training ended at Esskay, a Baltimore slaughterhouse and sausage factory, which makes the official hotdogs for the Orioles and the u.s. Naval Academy. I can still hear the screams of the pigs as they were shunted onto the disassembly line.

My job in the Soviet Union was to tout the glories of efficient American agriculture to the poor, hungry Russians. And so, for a good year of my life I participated in—and to some degree believed in—our industrial food system. My thinking has changed drastically over the years (I think it began at that Baltimore slaughterhouse), but even though my politics and eating practices are aligned—we make sure that our meat is local and humanely killed—I've lately been troubled by how polarized the discourse about food has become. Either American food production is big and bad ("corporate farming," "the agroindustrial complex," or simply "Big Ag," the abuses of which I've seen firsthand), or it is small and heartwarming—the farmers' markets, the csas, greenhorns choosing the life of the soil over the corporate rat race. Our national conversation has descended into argument: Either you are on the side of *might* (the existing American food system), or on the side of *right* (the locavores or, as my husband the organic vegetable gardener

calls them, the locabores). Both sides are blindered. Industrial is pitted against local; growers are either laboratory dependent or committed to “natural” practices. Such extremes lead to cynical decisions, like the waving of green and sustainable flags by corporations that are anything but environmentally concerned.

My problem is that the current American conversation about food lacks nuance. And with the issues so polarized, they have become too predictable. That worries me. If I—someone who is deeply involved in food—am finding myself increasingly bored by the conversation, how do others outside the food world feel? Boredom leads to withdrawal and retreat; it dampens enthusiasm for activism and engagement, which are precisely what the food movement needs most now.

Food is not the same as fashion. Though trends are inevitable, and fun to follow, food concerns should not change as capriciously as hemlines do from year to year.

Constancy is one true meaning of sustainability. Food ought to be a constant, a welcome assurance that what you had last year will still be around next season, even if bad weather or high prices make it harder to obtain. But if sustainability becomes a trend, then it inevitably will be replaced with another trend, a newer cause célèbre. As any observer of American popular culture knows, once something becomes ubiquitous, it's passé, time to move on to the next great thing. While this approach may suit the automotive and fashion and technology industries, the same paradigm ought not to hold for healthy, satisfying food. Bubbles burst. Now that organic farms and csas have entered into the American mainstream, they risk no longer seeming trendy enough. Already, within the past year or so, for food to be deemed truly authentic, it has to be foraged by hand. Only then will you be genuinely connected to the source of your food.

The current American obsession with food continues to grow, and if not for the immoderation, this is a good thing. It has increased awareness of what we put on our plates. But I worry that the constant barrage of food images on television, in magazines, in the cookbooks now written by celebrities, in food-themed novels, will soon turn to overload and diminish the important questions that need to be raised. Let's keep our interest focused on the essential issues and find a way to sustain not only food production but also a dialogue that will allow for some contradiction and nuance. Let's resist the simplifications of the extremes.