

What's a Food System?

(Published in the Las Cruces, NM Grassroots Press – 12/2005)

Do you know where your food has been? Who grew it, who handled it, how it got to you? Do you know what country it was grown in, how long ago and how far away? If the questions seem odd and difficult to answer, you are in the majority of Americans today.

Answering those kinds of questions requires information and understanding about the mainstream food system that supplies most Americans with their daily sustenance. For the vast majority of people the food system begins and ends at the local supermarket, or restaurant or fast food vendor or convenience store and they seldom think about where it all comes from and how it gets here – its just here.

So how did we get to this point of dependency on others for our daily sustenance and what are our attitudes about it and what are the chances for changing it?

Understanding people's attitudes about our common food system and the businesses and industries that create and manage it can provide the insights necessary to make informed choices – choices about what kind of food system best serves us, not just agribusiness and food corporations. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Food and Society Initiative recently published the results of their communications research that helps us understand how people think and reason about food system issues.

For the majority of us acceptably healthy food has always been available and dependably supplied by the grocery and restaurant industries. Today in the U.S., grocery stores have a customer satisfaction rating of 92% - the highest rating of any business type. In general, we hold great trust in our grocery stores and packaged food manufactures.

On top of that, fewer and fewer people participate in food production or even see it in action. For most of us, farming and growing food happens somewhere distant and is done by someone just as distant. So, it's not surprising that we seldom think about where our food comes from. However, there are other less obvious reasons that prevent us from thinking about the whole topic of food systems.

Most of our thinking about food is based on our *lived experience* of eating, shopping, cooking or being served. The dominance of this way of thinking about food makes it much more difficult to think about the larger picture of food *systems*. More pleasurable and immediate matters crowd out the big picture of the whole food system.

We also think of ourselves as food *Consumers* who are responsible for the choices about what we eat. And to some extent that is true, but it is not the whole story. In reality, most of the decisions about what is available for us to choose from are made long before we enter the picture. The decisions about what to plant, how to grow, what to harvest, where to distribute, what to process, how to ship, what to manufacture and to market are all made long before we have any say about it. The result is that we can choose only from what is profitable to those who supply us.

Much of our notions about food systems are generalized from our understanding of modernization. We think the food system is structured by our modern way of life that it is, in general, beneficial for everyone and shouldn't be questioned. It's beyond our control and we can't change it.

Why don't food scares change our relationship with the food system? Well, in the short run they sometimes do – but all food scares go away and the system returns. The general attitude is that if you don't hear about it anymore then it's been fixed. And trust in the growers, manufacturers, retailers and government supervision returns. Passive consumers really can't afford to remain scared about the food they eat and it always 'happens to someone else,' anyway.

So, how can we effect changes in our food system?

There are two immediate way to effect change in your food system. One is to become a food *Citizen* and play a role in creating a local or regional food system. The closer to home the better – you get to know who grows it, who supplies it and can have a more immediate impact on what they grow and supply. There are few things as satisfying as “food with a face on it”. Buying direct from farmers through Farmer's Markets or CSA's (Community Supported Agriculture) and purchasing local produce through a Coop or regular retailer will bring your food system closer to home.

The second way is to restore your role as a food producer. Taking an active part in producing your own food, whether in a home garden, or in community gardens restores some of your responsibility for feeding yourself and it reminds you that food comes from nature in one of the most ancient relationships know to humankind.

The published report, *Perceptions of the U.S. Food System: What and How Americans Think about their Food*, is available online at: <http://www.foodandsociety.org>.

Darrol Shillingburg – is an artist, graphic and web designer and avid food gardener. You will find information about his art and gardens on his website <http://www.darrolshillingburg.com>