

COMMENTARY

Commentary – Local and Sacred

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By Alan Mammoser

Alan Mammoser's exploration of European local food systems is part I of a two-part European food series. Next month travel to Terra Madre, Italy with Lynn Peemoeller and Kelly Gibson for the second Slow Food International.

Can food in the age of industrial food systems feasibly come from local sources? As an urban regional planner in the US, I have become deeply concerned with fostering more vital economic links between city and countryside, and conserving valuable farmland, energy and ultimately, the health of the consumer. Hoping to discover where local food systems still thrive, I spent seven weeks on a fellowship traveling through the ancient landscapes of Europe, where I learned not only about food, but also more than I ever dreamed about the land.

In much of the UK, maps like the one of Dorset County in the west of England list all the parishes and farms in the region by their traditional, Old English names. Rather than interstates and metro regions, these maps show forests, copses, cemeteries, chapels, churches, villages, archaeological sites, hedgerows, lanes and footpaths. Like a window to the past, and like my foray into the old traditions of food, these maps reveal the way we once conceived of things, to reference ourselves. They are a study in what we used to consider important.

The English countryside is far more finished than ours in America. And in its deepest dimension, it is a spiritual land. Long ago people here did what people always and everywhere have done prior to our modern age of ravaging the earth. They made it sacred, worshipped it and gave back.

Everywhere are signs and symbols of the land made sacred. These appear in the burial mounds around Stonehenge, in the precious hilltop chapel of St. Catherine, where old stone walls have overlooked Dorset pastures for 600 years, in the crisp villages of southern Germany where church towers with delightful garlic-bulb domes appear for miles across pasture and field, in the wooden shrines on every hillside of Austria, and in the stone shrines standing on the edge of village and field throughout Tuscany.

What brought land and food together were the many people I met—farmers, entrepreneurs and advocates who want to build (or rebuild) the supply lines between cities and nearby lands. Some bring food to market; others bring the market to the food. What they're all doing, in one way or another, is shortening the links between people and land.

And the food was transcendent. At farmers' markets and homes, I sampled berries wild and domestic, vegetables from many gardens, obscure apples from England's impressive repertoire of some 2,000 known varieties, chops and burgers of lamb grazed on Shropshire hillsides, rare English, French and Italian pig sausage, and sausage made of wild boar. There was thick double cream from brown Jersey cows, creamy white cheddar cheese, the dark honey of a chestnut tree, polenta from chestnut flour, ravioli filled with Tuscan potato and cider so earthy it evoked apples rotting beneath the tree.

The British have a strong interest in local food these days. Farmers' markets thrive in London, and celebrity chefs visit farms to highlight regional specialties. Borough Market, under old sheds on the south bank of the Thames,

teems with people on a Friday morning. They're buying beautiful breads, puddings, pies, poultry, game and fresh fish. Anything that can walk is called "free range," and portraits of the pigs are proudly displayed above the individual piles of butchered meat. Many producers come from the west and midland counties, although most fruit and vegetable sellers have their farms in nearby Sussex or Kent. Generally, any farmer within 100 miles of the M-25 (the beltway around the Greater London metro area) is considered local. That's a big piece of England just to feed the capital.

On the other side of the Channel the topic gets less publicity. Local food is nothing new in France, where every village has a long-standing tradition of weekly farmer's markets. Parisian chefs, many of whom have their own farms, become friends with their food producers, so they are regularly seen in the markets chatting, hugging and kissing each other. And although even the urban French buy most of their food in stores with national and international supply chains, there is a burgeoning community supported agriculture (CSA) movement in Paris called AMAP (Association pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne).

In Italy, one can go virtually anywhere to see the principles of local food played out in resplendent fashion. In each region, the people enjoy a unique cuisine that they have crafted themselves, with great skill, over the centuries, and which is now known all over the world: Tuscan, Florentine, Calabrese, Romano. But I was in search of the traditional, not the famous, so I went to a little-known valley called Casentino, near Tuscany, marked by haunting hilltop castles that once sheltered Dante in exile.

In earlier centuries, peasants here ate chestnuts as a main staple—a food consumed in this part of Italy for perhaps 4,000 years. Farmers still gather chestnuts to make stone-ground brown flour. A few farmers, with help from agronomists at the University of Florence, revived the growing of a small red potato, typical of the area for centuries, called patata rossa di Cetica after the town of Cetica.

With just a few fields planted, they've formed a consortium of growers, with outlets in local shops and restaurants. They refuse to mass distribute through big grocery chains. Instead, working with provincial officials, they've mapped out a "Route of Taste" (Strada dei Sapori), to draw more visitors into the area by highlighting local farms and farm shops and the regional specialties they offer.

There are exciting signs of expanding local food efforts throughout Europe, but as my travels wound down and I arrived in Terra Madre to attend Slow Food International, I was burdened by a concern that, without some systemic change, local food is destined to remain a small percentage of what's available in stores. Yet that percentage, even if small, can grow. It requires spreading greater awareness of where food comes from, with a consequent desire by people to link to growers who are linked to the land.

Still, the local markets are a revolutionary force. Food writer Michael Pollan has said that "some of the most important politics today are going on at the farmers' markets" because their very existence actively undermines the industrial food (and tax) systems that both Americans and Europeans heavily subsidize.

But if for no other reason, farmers' markets and local food systems have reintroduced the idea of community, which the supermarkets took away. My friend Marion Desmartin visits the Aligre market in the Bastille sector of Paris almost daily. She loves the familiarity of the place, the coming together of food vendors and the city's people. As she says, "I know where this food comes from—from life."

That perhaps is the essence of local food. Were we to expand our idea of community to include the land itself and what the land provides across the seasons, we would begin to expand the realm of local food. We might enjoy a closer connection to the land, to life, and find in what we eat something of the sacred.

Alan Mammoser is a regional planner based in Chicago traveling on a generous grant from the German Marshall Fund of the U.S.

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