

Big Apple, Homegrown

Feeding New York in New York

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Feeding New York in New York is an investigation into the possibility for New York City to provide all of its food supply within the boundaries of the five boroughs. At first blush, this seems improbable. How can nutrition be supplied to eight million people on a site which is substantially built and in which virtually all open space is already devoted to other uses? And, how can this be done in a responsible, sustainable fashion that respects the earth, addresses the toxic cruelties of the factory farm system, and provides both sound nutrition and ample choice to eaters?

Big changes in our thinking and habits will be required. Current standards and practices are problematic on several counts. The industrialized, fast-food regime is dangerous in both production and consumption. The questionably organic basis of the system—with its heavy dependence on mono-cultural industrialized agriculture, fertilizer inputs, pesticides, fossil fuels, standardization, corn and soy hegemony, drastic packaging, long-distance transport, labor exploita-

tion, and other much-criticized elements—must be revised. The logic of “organic” agriculture is that its farms be small, diverse, and near. However, bringing food production home to New York will demand solutions other than the return of the small, well-managed, organically-driven, family farm. This is not to say that much farming cannot remain both organic and small-scale, conducted in back-yards, balconies, stairways, and elsewhere. New methods, however, will be essential as will great diversity.

We are habituated to a cornucopia of “fresh” foods in all seasons—kiwis from New Zealand, asparagus from Argentina, strawberries from Mexico, tomatoes from the Netherlands—all of which are incredibly energy intensive, and are bred to exclude many qualities of nutrition and flavor that a more organic process would provide. This is, in its own way, as unsustainable as the vile product of the fast-food empire; itself corrupt at every link of the chain, from farm to consumer. It’s nonetheless also true that the reduction of our agricultural insanity to a matter of “food miles” is—like most reductive analyses—not as shinningly obvious as it appears at first glance. The economic rationale requires extensive attention to such externalities as labor-exploitation and the loss of the kind of autonomy that a proposal predicated on the idea of self-sufficiency is devoted to. From the standpoint of energy inputs, a cargo ship transporting apples from the Antipodes to Manhattan can be far more efficient than bringing a few dozen bushels in the back of a pick-up from an orchard in upstate New York. Even more fundamentally, a check-list mentality (like the LEED system) which simply inventories individual inputs—energy, water, fertilizer, resource depletion, climate change—has a tendency to abstract and de-individualize responsibility and de-politicize the problem.

This proposition offers its possibilities by degrees. The idea that the New York City food-shed could be completely co-terminus with its political boundaries is at the most radical end of a larger set of possibilities. Indeed, the practicalities of a regional approach have been argued by many and the dramatic rise of the local and slow food movements, the growth of many sites of urban agriculture, the proliferation of farmer’s markets, and so on represent a burgeoning “new food movement.” Even an extreme approach to self-provisioning might allow for the barter of local foods with more distant markets, able to produce foodstuffs that are particularly unsusceptible to regional or local growth. Coffee, a narcotic few New Yorkers can survive without, is something that will be far more difficult to produce than chicken or apples; only under a regime of the most fantastical com-