

Ecological Eating as a Political Act

REVIEW

Eating Tomorrow: Agribusiness, Family Farmers, and the Battle for the Future of Food
By Timothy A. Wise



Once every year, the elite of the industrial agriculture world meet at a Monsanto-funded Norman Borlaug shrine on the polluted Des Moines River to celebrate the greatest among them and the father of the Green Revolution. That pollution, as well as the dominance of agribusiness in Iowa's politics and economy, is part of Borlaug's legacy. He developed high-yielding grains and showed the way to increased food production. But less celebrated is the fact that those high-yielding crops require commercial fertilizer, herbicide and pesticides, and most importantly, seed that a farmer must buy every year rather than the open-pollinated seed farmers could save themselves. Every year, this system requires more seed, more fertilizer and more money.

You can sell the crop, but then what do you eat? You've used your land, water and energy to grow a cash crop your country can export to cities or other countries, but nothing for people to eat at home. Thus, author Timothy A. Wise argues, the real legacy of Borlaug is world-wide hunger for people and increasing profits for the world's large agribusiness firms. It wouldn't be nice to mention these consequences of Borlaug's work in Iowa, the state of nice. That's one way to suppress opposition to the dominant agribusiness model promoted by Iowa State University and its donor corporations the state's economy has become so dependent on.

There are other more draconian methods that Monsanto-Bayer and others routinely use. Intellectual property rights give them ownership to the seeds they develop. Woe be the person who purposely or accidentally plants one of their seeds without paying for it. Yet all of their

seed, Wise indicates, is derived from seed banks of crops developed over the centuries by native peoples. It is public property that the corporations use for private gain. Wise shows that this plundering of the public domain for private gain is only one dimension of the perverse economics of the contemporary food system.

Add that farmers and corporations foist their real costs onto the community in what economists call "externalities," those costs of production that a firm passes to the public. Those costs include polluted water and soils that kill life in the Gulf of Mexico, as well as poisoned air.

Wise styles himself as a recovering economist. And to judge by this book, he's doing pretty well so far. I don't know why economics was ever called the "dismal science," because it's neither very dismal nor a science. We've all seen economists' cost-benefit analyses for, for instance, confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs). They are full of optimistic assumptions that bear no relationship to reality, but they produce models of great economic gain that result in devastated environments and economies. Wise documents the process in Mexico as well as in Iowa. Science describes realities. Economics deals in optimistic assumptions.

When economists get out of the air-conditioned offices and stately suites and put their feet on the ground, they usually sober up pretty quickly. Wise has his feet on the ground, from Malawai to Zambia to Mozambique to Iowa to Mexico to India. He tells us of the dire results of the Green Revolution, the grim fact that more food does not mean less hunger. He reports the lived realities of the hungry season when crops are coming in but the last harvest's food is gone. Even if you can get money from selling the crop, you can't eat that money, and there's never enough of it to buy food. Wise abandons his religion of economics in favor of experienced facts, a refreshing turn for

an erstwhile economist.

It is unfortunate that the U.S. government, whether headed by Obama or Trump, does not follow suit. We Americans insist that India's program for feeding its hungry subsidizes food and distorts markets while the U.S. subsidizes agricultural production and dumps its products on world markets at below the cost of production. What is good for U.S. agribusiness is not good for the world, and agribusiness has a lock on agricultural and trade policy. That's worth repeating because it helps us understand why, in the midst of plenty, people around the planet are hungry, whether in the U.S., Mexico, India or Africa.

True to his background as an economist, Wise manages to end his volume on an optimistic note: "All are striving for the same thing: the right of everyone to eat safe and healthy food today while ensuring that we steward our natural wealth so we can all eat tomorrow." But that comes after chapter after chapter of bad news showing in detail how agribusiness is starving the planet for its own profit and how it has the political power to continue in the U.S. and in the world. It's hard for me to see anything optimistic at the end of this book.

If you have any interest in how food is produced, distributed and consumed, this book is for you, though it might not leave you feeling very good about it. You will have a firmer grasp on the realities of the world food system and why it is so resistant to change. In fact, every person could eat well if they had access to land, water and seed. What they do not need is super-crops or agricultural chemicals or fertilizers. Or agribusinesses controlling their economies and governments.

As a note, I'll report that while Iowa claims to feed the world, it doesn't even feed itself. We import nearly 90 percent of our food. Our corn and soy beans, as Wise shows, are destined to be made into animal

fodder, junk food and fuel. There is no food in that system.

— Paul Durrenberger

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REVIEW

Food from the Radical Center: Healing our Land and Communities

By Gary Paul Nabhan



In the midst of the echo-chamber world of anger and isolation comes the calm voice of Gary Paul Nabhan to remind us of what's important in life; good food and people. Reading this book, I remembered growing up on the Gulf Coast, sitting at my grandfather's knee as he endlessly peeled figs from the tree he had started from a cutting from his father's tree. He would peel each with his pocket knife, explaining that eating unpeeled figs in any number would result in a sore tongue. I remembered the sweetness of the Japanese persimmons from the tree next to that tree and his admonition to wait until after the frost because the green fruit would pucker my mouth. Being the person I am, I had to learn those lessons for myself as I relished the persimmons, plums, pecans, figs, kumquats and vegetables from our own organic garden, which fed our family of seven during good times and bad.

My grandfather's place was taken for a freeway. My parent's place was taken by a trophy mansion. Gone are two places that provided good food. I have never experienced the voluptuous pleasures of a Black Sphinx date from Phoenix that Nabhan so vividly describes. Neither persimmons nor figs, much less date palms, could flourish in the harsher weather of my adopted Iowa, but some food does. Japanese pears, chestnuts, peaches, apples, paw paws and a different kind of persimmon grow and provide food along with garden vegetables.

The political weather is equally harsh, as radical Republicans in the legislature and governor's office have defunded the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa's Morrill


Land Grant, Iowa State University. Industrial monocultures of corn, soybeans and swine rule the countryside and the waterways. (As I write this, Iowa Public Radio announces that hog manure lagoons are overflowing from the heavy rain this spring.) They are supported by a legislative agenda dictated by the Farm Bureau and the Koch Brothers. Iowans are brought up to say nothing if they cannot find something nice to say. Silence reigns. So it is refreshing to find some good words.

The radical center? It took me about two-thirds of the book to appreciate the power of the concept, but it's like the eyes of the hurricanes that still devastate the Gulf Coast. The center of the storm is a quiet place. In today's politicized and weaponized world, finding that space of quiet can be an act of courage. Perhaps that will allow people of all persuasions to hear what Nabhan has to say. Stop for a moment. Appreciate your food. Seek out some of the foods that have been lost in the wake of the industrial agricultural system. Revive them if you can, but at least enjoy them while you can. And share them.

The radical center, Nabhan writes, is neither an ambivalent refusal to take a stand nor a compromise. "It is a disciplined position of listening intently and taking into account voices other than your own."

So, I invite you to enjoy the quiet place that Nabhan offers. You can travel with him from his desert orchards and garden terraces to search for olden varieties of wheat such as White Sonoran, dates (Black Sphinx), apples (Green Newton Pippin), lamb (Navajo-Churro) and other forgotten foods that have been eradicated from the American agricultural system, just as the orchards and gardens of my childhood were bull-dozed from the Gulf Coast.

Nabhan reminds us that the bread we eat is not just from the wheat we grow, but from the whole system of food production, which includes mills, bakers and consumers as well as farmers. He tells the story of Carolina golden rice and how Glenn Roberts and David Shields revived it, along with a mill, cooks and chefs, to prepare it and serve it to customers. I had heard the story at a meeting of Seed Savers' Exchange where I had the pleasure of meeting David and Glenn and exploring the possibilities of growing rice in Iowa. Glenn later sent me some seeds from Lithuania that did flourish, in contrast to the ones I'd brought home with me from Thailand in the late '60s. That was when I had learned a lot about the different varieties of rice and how different the highland rice was from the many long-grained white rice varieties of the lowlands and from their short-



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