

BEYOND THE VICTORY GARDEN

Slow Food Nation remembers the farm workers, eventually

BY TIM KINGSTON

It was not the standard set of ragamuffin activists one usually sees at political events. The plenary sessions of ‘Slow Food Nation,’ the sustainable food and foodie extravaganza held at San Francisco’s Civic Center and Herbst Theater August 29 – September 1, 2008, were populated by a more fit, healthy, and white crowd than usual. Outside of City Hall (whose gold trim fit in well with the occasion) stood a brand spanking new ‘Victory Garden,’ brimming with fresh vegetables and populated by excited foodies, crunchy granola food activists, and a mélange of other interested parties. Nary a glimpse was seen of Civic Center’s more traditional Tenderloin denizens and homeless folk.

Inside the theater, the crowd was even more upmarket than in the Victory Garden. This, however, probably had a lot to do with the fact that organizers charged \$20 for *each* session.

Under the Herbst’s Art Deco murals of happy peasants and farmers we all leaned eagerly forward to hear August 29’s sessions on “Building a New Food System: Policy and Planning,” “Re-Localizing Food,” and “A

New, Fair Food System.” Hosts and panelists included such luminaries as author Michael Pollan, NYU professor Marion Nestle, chef and restaurateur Dan Barber, food safety activist Andrew Kimbrell, and even Native American activist, food educator, and former Green Party VP candidate Winona LaDuke.

The insanity of our current food model was illustrated by an anecdote from Professor Nestle, who was told by one federal official that “America should not be growing food.” Instead, he said, agriculture should be “outsourced.” A better way to create food insecurity and instability in the United States would be hard to find.

“The U.S. food system overproduces the wrong kinds of food as part of a system to generate profits,” said Nestle, adding, “They cut corners.” The predictable outcome is a food safety crisis in which crops from around the country and globe—and their contaminants—are mixed



Photo by Carole Topalian

and matched here and abroad. Thus we see last year's spinach recall, and this year's "tomato, or was it jalapeño, or was it cilantro?" crisis, incidents in which a particular crop is blamed and nearly driven to the wall when the overall system of food production itself is at fault.

As the day went on, your faithful correspondent heard much talk about the unsustainability of our "tragically broken" and "fossilized" (i.e., oil-dependent) food system, the "catastrophe that is the American diet," the difference between an efficient food system vs. a resilient one, the failure that is the recent farm bill, how the poor cannot access healthy food, and the need to respect traditional crop techniques while adding technological innovations, as well as the necessity of keeping American farmers in business. But, as with the temporarily invisible homeless of Civic Center, there was precious little discussion of the people who actually harvest the food we eat, be it organic or otherwise.

While the poor and hungry were noted (particularly if they were children) farm workers were not. Even when Andrew Kimbrill, founder and executive director of the Center for Food Safety, quoted César Chávez saying, "Don't you dare eat that grape without thinking of the people who picked it," the discussion promptly skidded off in another direction.

An understandable desire to discuss a replacement for our dysfunctional, brittle, and profit-driven global food system overrode issues of economic justice for farm workers and the less well off who can't afford \$4-a-pop heirloom tomatoes. It is all very well to tell people to vote with their forks and make choices about their consumer purchases, but as Paula Jones, the director of San Francisco Food Systems, noted, "Not everyone can join CSAs. Not everyone can go to the farmers markets."

The emphasis was on consumer and macro issues. Michael Pollan argued that it is "exciting that the infrastructure is breaking down" be-

cause that means even large companies like Bud Antle are growing more locally based food due to burgeoning transport and other costs. Pollan also noted, "Industrialized food is artificially cheap, it is not that local food is too much." This is true, but where does that leave the poor? As Pollan suggested, fiddling around with food stamps does not really touch the critical issue of economic justice.

By this point I was ready to start smoking Camels and look for a Bud Lite, or even a Coors, out of sheer bloody-minded frustration. Where were the workers? That was exactly when the capstone of the entire day, the final session, "A New Fair Farm System," finally dropped into place.

"We have organic tomatoes, but do you want to eat them if it involves slave labor?" was the blunt inquiry posed at the start of the session by moderator Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*.

Finally.

The panel revolved around conditions endured by farm workers in America, the poorest of all with annual earnings of only \$12,000. "They are exploited in ways reminiscent of the worst of the 19th century," said Jose Padilla, the executive director of California Rural Legal Assistance.

Rattling off endless statistics, Padilla noted that farm workers are second only to miners in on-the-job fatalities and second to construction workers in on-the-job injuries. Equally disturbing is the fact that farm workers are second only to *firefighters* in numbers of heat-stress deaths. Five farm workers have died this year of overheating. One of them, María Isabel Vásquez Jiménez, a teenaged immigrant who was two months pregnant, had a core body temperature of 108 degrees when she died.

Even though the topic was grim, for those of the audience who stuck around it was critically educational. Lucas Benitez and Greg Asbed, of



*For over 106 years Piedmont Grocery
has been a distinctive market with
consistent quality and choice for the
discriminating shopper.*

4038 Piedmont Ave • Oakland, Ca 94611 • 510-653-8181 • Open seven days a week

MR. ESPRESSO
OAK WOOD ROASTED COFFEE SINCE 1978



696 Third St. • Oakland, CA 94607
phone 510-287-5200 • fax 510-287-5204

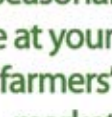
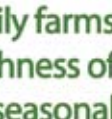
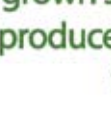
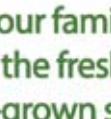
We are passionate about coffee - from our slow roasting process to the proper method of preparation. We hope that you will come to share our enthusiasm for this drink once described as "lovelier than a thousand kisses."

We carry organic and fair trade coffee.

Available in gourmet restaurants and cafés
and online at www.mrespresso.com.

"Home of oak wood roasted coffee"

Don't let our local food fade away



Help preserve our family farms
and enjoy the freshness of
locally-grown seasonal
produce at your
farmers'
market

Your Food,
Your Community,
Your Farmers' Market



For Your Location:
www.FarmersMarketFresh.org
1.800.949.FARM



the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), explained the plight of the Florida winter tomato-pickers they represent, and the group's cooperation with the Department of Justice in freeing, very literally, enslaved Florida farm workers. As they spoke, a light bulb went on in Nat Stratton-Clarke's head. "I own a restaurant in Seattle, for me this was the most important session. It made me want to enact changes in how I buy tomatoes in winter and find out where they came from."

And because of CIW's success in forcing growers and brand-name chains to raise the price of their tomatoes by a penny a pound, he can now choose which tomatoes to buy. "The issue of workers' rights does not get enough airtime; it needs more," added Stratton-Clarke. "This [lecture] gives me much more confidence in the Slow Food movement."

The success of CIW holds an important lesson for the Slow Food movement. CIW first tried to pressure growers, who were both deeply recalcitrant (as one grower put it, "The tractor does not tell the farmer how to run the farm") and up against their own fiscal wall. "They are," as Benitez put it, "the meat in a hamburger, squeezed from the bottom for tractors, fertilizer, et cetera. They have to pay the price those companies dictate. From the top they have pressure from Subway and Chipotle . . . who demand cheap tomatoes. Who pays the price? Us!"

That realization led CIW to formulate the Campaign for Fair Food, a consumer/worker strategy targeting the brand name companies who force cheap prices on growers. After four years of hard work the campaign succeeded in getting Taco Bell on board, then Burger King. "For the first time, they had to reach into their pockets to pay us," Benitez proclaimed.

And this is the lesson that the Immokalee Workers offer. Not only does the Slow Food movement need to be about sustainability, consumer action, fresh organic produce, and local farming, it needs also to be about bottom-line fairness for the people who actually do the work. There is no one policy that will change our food-supply system; instead, all the strategies and tactics must be used at the same time. Leaving out any one of them weakens the whole movement.

It takes high-end consumers who go to the Blue Hill Restaurant and shop at Whole Foods. It takes the local food banks, and charities like Oakland's Bay Area Community Services, which is trying to serve all farm-to-table meals instead of relying on corporate products. It takes the farmers markets and the farm workers to create a sustainable food system.

In spite of his cranky ranting about foodies and their upmarket tastes, this reporter came to realize that we are all in this particular campaign together, because we are all in trouble if, or when, the entire system fails. BUT when consumers and workers cooperate, the results can be rewarding, as CIW shows. On September 9, barely a fortnight after Slow Food Nation wrapped up, the notoriously anti-union Whole Foods chain agreed to work with CIW to improve wages and working conditions for Florida tomato pickers.

Tim Kingston is a veteran investigative and general assignment reporter in the Bay Area, who has covered everything from HIV/AIDS activism to the dangers of letting journalists play with live ammunition. His stories and opinion articles have appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, *East Bay Express*, *San Jose Mercury News*, *AlterNet* and *The Nation* among other outlets.