

EATING IN TIMES OF ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTY

BY SAGE DILTS



I am straining just a bit to hear my grandpa Bob's soft and gravelly voice. With his one working vocal cord he is striving to answer my question about what it was like growing up in Berkeley during the uncertain times of the Great Depression and the start of the Second World War. I ask because I wonder how his experience might parallel my current situation of living in the East Bay, with not a lot of money, during a time of global financial insecurity.

I am struck, as I always am, by Bob's memory and by his technical understanding of how the world works. His analysis of social issues is not particularly progressive but it is thoughtful and intensely economic. His bachelor's degree is from Cal in Agricultural Economics, and he worked briefly as a farmer and then in agricultural lending until his retirement.

He explains that the East Bay was a diverse place early on and that families ate largely according to culture. His own family meals were based on the preferences of his British-born father, which apparently meant that his mother boiled vegetables until the flavor evaporated.

My great-grandmother Adelle was raised on a farm near Yuba City and she was fundamentally a frugal person. I realize as my grandpa describes his mother and her practical hardworking nature that many people got by during the Depression because they had always lived simply; many families that operated this way did not experience much change in the 1930s as they lived out their modest lives.

It also becomes clear as I listen to my grandpa that currently popular ideas about eating locally, particularly through urban agriculture, is old news to his East Bay generation.

"We had a big lot down on Roosevelt. She [Adelle] had her big rhubarb patch and we had a screen house that had loganberries and blackberries. The neighbor behind us had a big cherry tree that came over into our yard, and they didn't care that we picked that part clean. Our next-door neighbor had a great big lot and he had chickens and rabbits and a great big garden. So it was not uncommon in the city for people to have their own little farm. When we got to be big enough, we had to do the spadework to make our own gardens; turning the Bermuda grass to break it up and dig out these very dense root pads. One of the things that my mother and I used to like to do was sit out on the front steps late in the afternoon and shell peas."

Counter to my assumptions about my grandparents' youth, there was not any consistent food insecurity or great strain to put a range of healthy foods on the table. The produce coming out of California farms was richly diverse so Adelle had plenty of opportunity to cook the flavor out of an array of vegetables. Luckily, in addition to the unfortunately transformed vegetables, Bob remembers always having lots of fresh fruit and there is some indication that his mother managed to let some veggies avoid the boiling pot. The



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Photograph courtesy of Sage Dilts, illustration at left by Margo Rivera-Weiss and above by Helen Krayenboff

climate and good soil of the rural areas surrounding Bay Area cities provided an incredible variety of fresh foods at every season and miles of pasture for healthy meat, none of which traveled very far to get to your table. Eating in season was simply a reality, but the peak season of a given food was, as it can be today, the most economical time to buy. Bob's family would wait until watermelon was one cent a pound before getting it, and of course it was pricelessly ripe and delicious.

"When we lived on Roosevelt I would say that our economic and living circumstances were the equal to any of our neighbors: We weren't flush with money and were just getting by. I don't believe that anyone was going out for dinner. There were no restaurants near us, but on Shattuck Avenue there was Edy's Ice Cream and the California Theater."

Circumstances did eventually get more difficult for Bob's family, a change that he connects to the end of Prohibition. His father became less reliable and at one point left town with all of their money. He returned with little money left and no job waiting for him. They moved out of the house on Roosevelt and let it to Bob's aunt and uncle who ran a piano repair shop on Dwight and Milvia with my great-great-grandfather from England. Bob's parents opened an electrical repair store on College and Alcatraz and they lived in an apartment behind the shop.

The family budget was about 90 dollars a month. After 30 dollars rent and the PG&E and telephone bills, most of the money went to food—they had maybe a dollar and a quarter a day for this. On the weekends they would go up to Byron and fish, bringing back many pounds of catfish. They now had an icebox and they would often eat catfish three or four nights in a row. They no longer had a garden but the recently established Safeway across the street did provide a new convenience. Times were harder for others as well. Bob remembers that unemployed men would come around looking for something to do in exchange for food. They wouldn't just take something without working for it, so his mother would have them wash the windows and she would give them a bologna sandwich as payment. She sometimes would get the windows washed twice a day a few times a week, just to give these men something to do. This didn't go on for too long though as the WPA programs began and people could find good work.



Adelle and her sons



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My grandpa explains that once you experienced getting by on only a little it was easy to do it again. He considers most Americans today as unprepared to live in a conservative way, in terms of using their resources wisely, because they don't know any other way to live but with abundance and almost infinite choice. His example is this: "If you grow up with lots of things to put on your broccoli, you never really know that you can eat it plain. So when money gets tighter you don't know what to change because you don't know any other way to live. Now your grandmother and I only discovered balsamic vinegar about five years ago and now I love to put this on steamed broccoli. If money got tight I know I could eat it with just salt and pepper or even just eat it plain. But I know that because I've done it before and it just isn't such a big deal. I have the benefit of turning back the clock to a different way of life.

"Another piece to this is waste. Just to give you an example: If my mother made something where she had a batter she would work at that pan till she got every bit—you would think that she would peel the metal off. There was no waste and that was just her habit. She did this always but it was particularly important at a time when other people were really in need."

Compared to today, Adelle had much less choice during her trips to the corner grocery, but unlike today, her options were mainly limited to things that were good for her family and the environment. Adelle would have been hard pressed to really go wrong in her shopping in terms of health. She also would have never had to consider whether the food she was feeding her family contained harmful chemicals or poisoned land or workers. "Conventionally grown" for her would have meant food as it had always been grown, using nature's strategies to avoid infestations.

"You had a different kind of agriculture before World War II," my

grandpa explains, with a new tone of seriousness in his voice. "They were growing more grains, taking land out of pasture. But it really changed after World War II. You know, it was not thought by the general public that the use of pesticides was deleterious to our health. Just as no one thought that atomic energy would be a problem, it was sold as being benign. Some people were more perceptive and they felt that the way they had been doing it they could control the insects and so why spend the money and why potentially damage the soil—they didn't know what would happen...so they opted out. But most people did not think this way. Farmers didn't want their crop eaten by bugs so when a salesman would come by telling them they wouldn't have to worry about that anymore, they went with it."

If we were to walk into the average-sized grocery store today and put over our eyes a 1930s filter so that the ten to forty thousand different products currently available to us became less than a thousand, maybe even closer to a hundred, we would likely see a store only dreamed of by people in the growing local/organic food movement. There we would be, in the store closest to our house, surrounded by food that has organic production as the standard, that is sourced locally and therefore seasonally, and of which only a limited amount would be processed or packaged. In many ways the food system in the 1930s seems like common sense and indeed maybe that was the last time food was approached in a more sustainable way.

In honor of Bob's background in economics, I want to look at the numbers driving this common sense: According to the USDA, in 1933 the percentage of income Americans spent on food peaked at 25 percent: 22 percent at home and 3 percent spent out. When a quarter of your total spending goes to feeding your family it makes sense that you would be as practical as possible. In fact my grandpa's family spent closer to a third of their income on food, hence waste was simply unacceptable. Still, the population was pretty food-secure so families in 1933 were getting plenty for that 25 percent since food was abundant and accessible. But this meant there was less money for other things (and fewer things to buy anyway) so life was simpler materially. Food was a large part of families' lives generally, with much of their time going to its procurement and preparation.

What is so interesting about Americans' historical perception of the value of food is that despite so much of their income going to groceries, families in 1933 were still not paying a fair price. The abundance of food in California was made available to families through cheap resources like labor, just as we read in *The Grapes of Wrath*, as well as water. Many of the better practices of '30s agriculture, such as the lack of pesticides and smaller family farms providing in-season produce to local communities, have been lost in subsequent decades to further cost-cutting measures, making the ways in which we now rely on externalized costs to produce cheap food rather too numerous and discouraging to list.



Photograph: Nina Yeaco

Cheaper and cheaper food prices has meant a steady decline in the portion of spending that Americans put toward food—now at an average of 10 percent, only 6 of which is spent at home. If it is fair to see some parallel on where families put their money and what they value, then the significance of food in our lives has been diminished by other material needs of modern life.

Our perception of the value of food is intrinsically tied to the strategic freeing of the consumer to spend less time and money on subsistence and more on all the new things being manufactured after World War II. As this manufacturing got going, the conservative approach to life that helped my grandpa's family through difficult times began to lose ground as "common sense." Bob recalls the creeping aggression of marketing against the values of simplicity and practicality of his youth:

"People changed because there was this entire manufacturing food industry, proving to you that this new product that they have packaged is really going to make your food experience a lot better than it used to be. You had all those people who were champion advertisers and a lot of money going to the universities to carry out experimental work, to produce a redder apple or one that had a longer shelf life, manufacturing nature's product so you would like it better. They were not letting you drift from the old way to the new way—they were pushing it with radio and TV. It wasn't that my mother was dying to get something different, she was being pushed and shoved and molded to get something different."

The changes made to mold Americans into energetic and dependable consumers meant that many of the skills involved in living well with less have been lost. Like many who want to live in a different way, I have learned to wear great-grandmother goggles to the store. I filter out a majority of what I see, leaving mostly whole foods from near where I live. The variety and abundance of the Northern California landscape provides for me as it did for Adelle and her family, and I can even be transported back to the time of crops grown without pesticides.

This great-grandmother filter on today's store actually forces me into paying the true cost for food, or gets me closer anyway. To buy the same kind of flour Adelle would have found, grown in the region without pesticides, maybe by a family farm, is to pay a premium. And that is actually what I am interested in doing. I want to pay the full cost of my food because not doing so means my family may eat for less at the expense of another family that was not paid fairly for their work. Environmental problems are just getting worse, and my health may suffer. I don't believe this trade-off is worth all the other things I could have bought with the difference. Having a below-average income means I make paying a higher price work for my budget by learning the skills and strategies that my great-grandmother had in living with less. With older values of conservation, the thrift of eating in season, simplicity, and using my own labor, I can have an approach to food that also takes into account the ways in which all our efforts to live well are fundamentally linked. I feel that we should be able to eat well in a way that does not impact others' ability to do so and we should be able to feed ourselves without relying on inequalities. I know that this approach currently isn't common sense, but it is the only way I can think to live to be both practical and just.

Sage Dilts authors a blog, mindtomouth.org, on which she writes about the subjects of using limited resources to eat and live well and the use of domestic skills to practically support health and a vibrant regional food system.

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