



Organic garlic cloves hang at the Sliwa Meadow Farm in Decorah, Iowa, one of many independently owned farms dedicated to furthering the food social movement.

# Reading the Food Social Movement

*Marion Nestle*

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**I**f we didn't know it already, Slow Food Nation, a huge event held in San Francisco over this past Labor Day weekend, made it clear that we are in the midst of a food revolution. Although the idea of food as a social movement is not organized in a comprehensive way, it is composed of many separate movements converging on a common goal: a food system that promotes the health of people as well as the environment. These separate movements address the production and consumption sides of our nation's food system. On the production side, we have:

- the good, clean, fair food movement
- the Slow Food movement
- the farm-animal welfare movement
- the organic foods movement
- the locally grown food movement
- the safe food movement, and
- the good pet-food movement (a special interest of mine).

On the consumption side, we have:

- the anti-marketing-foods-to-kids movement
- the school food movement
- the anti-trans-fat and anti-high-fructose-corn-syrup movements, and
- the calorie labeling movement.

Uniting both production and consumption, we have:

- the community food security movement and
- the better farm bill movement.

Separately and together, these movements derive from the best aspects of the long tradition of American grassroots democracy.

The overall food movement has its roots in that long tradition. As an academic who lectures and writes about food, I am often asked what is out there to read about such things. There is plenty, as it turns out, and more with each passing year. Not all that long ago, most people considered food too common—too quotidian—to be taken seriously as a field of study, let alone as an agent of social change. University departments routinely dissuaded doctoral students and untenured colleagues from wasting time on anything that seemed as trivial as the role of food in culture or commerce. Yes, *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair's muckraking account of the horrors of the Chicago stockyards, spurred the U.S. government to pass food safety laws, but it was published in 1906. Even though that book is still in print and considered a classic piece of literature, it seems to many like ancient history. A century later, few could have imagined that books about food would spark a social movement . . . but they have.

I credit three books from quite separate genres—cookery, scholarship, and journalism—with creating a revolution in the way Americans consume, think about, and produce food. These books catapulted food into the mainstream of modern culture and advocacy for social change, and opened doors for scholars as well as journalists to write about the political, commercial, and health aspects of food in modern society. All three of these books were best-sellers in their respective fields, still sell well, and are widely read and used.

My vote for book number one goes to *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (Knopf, 1961), by Julia Child, Simone Beck, and Louisette Bertholle. This publication thoroughly overturned my generation's ideas about food. My own treasured copy—signed by Julia Child the night I had dinner at her house in Cambridge nearly twenty years ago—is yellowed and spattered from my

early housewifely experiments with bouillabaisse (pretty terrific, if I remember correctly), soufflés (tricky but worth it), and Hollandaise (never mind). As Laura Shapiro makes clear in her splendid Penguin Lives biography of Child (2007), *Mastering* was a monumental work of research that transformed the entire cookbook genre from “mere” to taking its place as a respected cultural indicator worthy of scholarly investigation and careful preservation.\*

But *Mastering* was revolutionary in another way: it made American cooks realize how disadvantaged they were when it came to obtaining foods of the quality available in France. Enter Alice Waters. Her insistence on using nothing but fresh, seasonal ingredients in her Berkeley restaurant, Chez Panisse, exposed the inability of our industrialized agricultural system to provide food of the quality she demanded. The idea that how food is produced determines how food tastes on the table is the central theme of the Chez Panisse cookbooks. It also is the rationale for contemporary accounts of the Alice Waters phenomenon such as David Kamp's *The United States of Arugula: How We Became a Gourmet Nation* (2006) and Thomas McNamee's *Alice Waters and Chez Panisse* (2007).

Book number two is Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (Viking, 1985). This book laid the groundwork for the new academic field of Food Studies. Mintz, an anthropologist, used a cultural history of sugar as an entry point into the analysis of such varied social problems as the plight of the working classes during the industrial revolution and the development of slavery as an institution in the New World. By linking something you might put in tea to the development of major political

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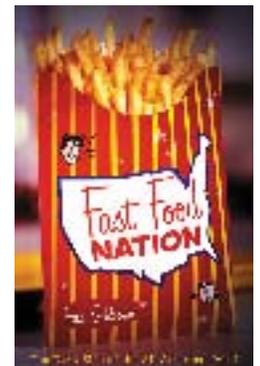
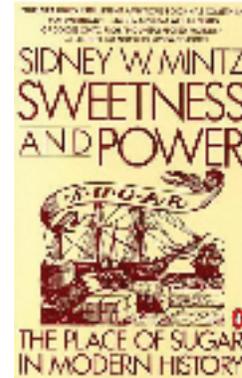
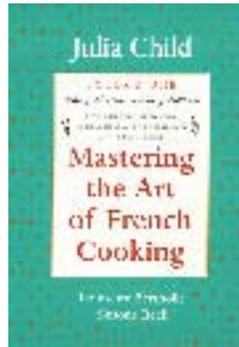
\* My institution, New York University, now houses a splendid collection of more than twenty thousand cookbooks and other books, documents, and personal papers about food in its Fales Special Collections Library—all acquired within the last five years—where any researcher can peruse them by appointment.

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institutions, *Sweetness and Power* proved that food was not only a suitable topic for research in the humanities and social sciences but could make social issues accessible to a wider range of readers. This made it possible to construct academic programs focused on food such as those at Boston University (Gastronomy) and New York University (Food Studies) and, more recently, at the New School in New York, Indiana University, and the University of Gastronomy in Bra, Italy. Additionally, NYU's Food Studies program has just added a concentration area in food systems to its more traditional area of food and culture. Let's add the Food Studies movement to the list of movements that encompass production and consumption.

Book number three is the remarkable best-seller *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001), journalist Eric Schlosser's exposé of the "dark side" of hamburgers and French fries—how fast food is bad not only for our health but also our economy, workforce, and environment. This book—already a classic—reached a huge audience, continues to be widely assigned on college campuses, and has turned masses of readers into advocates eager to change the current food system into one that is better for producers as well as eaters.

Each of these books has encouraged a new generation of writers that have done wonders to promote food advocacy. Warren Belasco's now classic *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* (updated edition, 2006) explains the historical basis of the new movement. A great entry point into the movement is *Farm Aid: A Song for America* (2005), a collection of essays by dozens of people (including myself) who advocate a more just, sustainable, and healthful food system. Michael Pollan's engaging *Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (2006) presents a compelling case for transforming our food system into one that is much more rational. Peter Singer and Jim Mason's *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter* (2006) argues that raising farm animals more humanely will be better for



humans as well as cows, chickens, and pigs. The focus of Dan Imhoff's *Food Fight: The Citizen's Guide to a Food and Farm Bill* (2007) is the need for a serious overhaul of our government's agricultural policies. Michele Simon's *Appetite for Profit: How the Food Industry Undermines Our Health* (2006) is a how-to manual for opposing the marketing of junk food to children, and Ann Cooper and Lisa Holmes's *Lunch Lessons: Changing the Way We Feed Our Children* (2006) calls for a revolution in the school lunchroom. Raj Patel's *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System* (2007) analyzes the causes and consequences of today's globalized food system as a basis for food advocacy. And Mark Winne's *Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty* (2008) presents the practicalities of community food-security advocacy based on his long experience with the Hartford Food System. Such books provide much cause for optimism that the food system will change, much for the better, and soon.

I hope that my own books—*Food Politics* (2002; expanded and updated in 2007), *Safe Food* (2003), *What to Eat* (2006), and now *Pet Food Politics: The Chihuahua in the Coal Mine* (2008)—have contributed to this movement, although I must leave the assessment of their impact to others. But I am proud to be part of this food revolution, which holds so much promise for making our world a better place as well as for improving what we eat for dinner. Now is the time to pick the issue you care most about and join the movement. May it flourish!

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