

Ethical indigestion

Intense debate over principled eating has made every food store a potential garden of good and evil

BY MIA STAINSBY, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 13, 2013

true

Eating is hard when conscience sits at your table. Take quinoa. Or wait. Maybe, don't. Recent news reports say Bolivian farmers who grow quinoa can no longer afford to eat this traditional food because demand from North America and Europe has driven prices too high.

But, hey, wait a minute. "I laughed when the story came out," says Hannah Wittman, associate professor in the faculty of land and food systems at the University of British Columbia. I reached her by phone in Brazil where she's doing research on small-scale farmers in new agricultural communities.

"This quinoa controversy has been going on for a decade," Wittman says. "A student recently did a thesis project in urban Bolivia looking at the consumption of traditional foods like quinoa in school food programs. They found that these foods were becoming less popular - parents reported that they cost more, take longer to cook when compared to rice or pasta, and that their children prefer the shiny packages of 'junk food' that are increasingly prevalent with the spread of the Western diet. But in the countryside, people who grow quinoa are eating it.

"Bolivia is a complex place. In the highlands, they eat a bit of quinoa but in the lowlands, they're not traditional quinoa eaters."

The point is that truth is a trickster, playing its game of hide-and-seek while earnest consumers search for a moral, just and healthy way to eat.

David Kaplan, author of *The Philosophy of Food*, says the ethics of eating has reached a tipping point. "When I approached publishers in 2009, they were very skeptical," said Kaplan, an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of North Texas and founder of *The Philosophy of Food* blog. "The subject has finally taken off. It's front page in *The New York Times*; there are easily four or five books and more set to come out in the next year or two."

But, Kaplan admits, caring demands mental gymnastics. "People do care, but perhaps they resent the burden of responsibility placed on them. They'd prefer if some regulatory body with enforcement powers could make sure food is produced, distributed, prepared and consumed in a way that's right and just and fair and appropriate. It's very hard to disentangle food from its web of production, distribution and consumption."

Organizations promoting sustainable seafood and fair trade are effective but they only cover parts of the food system. Some choices are easy for some, harder for others.

"Shark's fin. It's a no-brainer. I'm with the sharks on that, but I could see for some, it's a matter of status, desire, and taste versus the welfare and suffering of the sharks," Kaplan says.

Recently, media jumped on the bandwagon about a **Stanford University study which concluded that conventionally grown fruits and vegetables were as nutritious as organically grown**. TV's Dr. Oz, once

pro-organic, flip-flopped on his messaging, saying you didn't have to be part of the "one per cent" who could afford organics to eat healthily. News reports didn't weigh environmental impacts of conventional versus organic farming.

"It's complex," Wittman says. "We're talking about micro-levels of nutrients. An apple is an apple but some studies show nutritional differences between them. Some show fresher is more nutritious. We don't know enough yet, scientifically."

But here's something else: Who funded the study? Cargill, the world's largest agri-business was one funder, as was the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has ties to agricultural and chemical biotech companies such as Monsanto (the philanthropists believe GMOs can help small farmers in the developing world).

On the farmed salmon front, detractors have been hard-nosed about negative impacts on wild salmon. But not all farmed salmon is bad. If they're grown in landlocked farming, then it's good. Chilean sea bass? No, no, no. But that doesn't mean all sea bass is on the verge of extinction. North Atlantic sea bass that's been hand-line caught or trapped is OK, but not Atlantic sea bass that's been bottom-trawled or caught in the southern Atlantic. It's complicated.

LOCAL IS GOOD - SOMETIMES

And what of that mantra of sustainable food systems - local, local, local? Well, turns out it's not always the most ideal choice. **When soil conditions, climate and transportation systems are factored in, some local produce might contribute more to global warming than imports.**

"Food miles is not always a good measure," says Herb Barbolet, a founder of FarmFolk CityFolk, currently with Simon Fraser University's Centre for Food Security and Community Development and committee member with Local Food First.

"An example would be apples from New Zealand. Our apple crops are very small, about one-tenth the size (of that) from Washington state which, in turn, is one-tenth or less than that of New Zealand. **Apples from New Zealand are shipped by water, which is the most efficient form of transport. You compare that to a whole bunch of trucks running around the Lower Mainland.** You can ship apples from New Zealand very economically," he says. But, he adds, **New Zealand apples are still not the appropriate option: "We have to get better at our distribution."**

In another example, a **British study by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs found growing a ton of tomatoes in Britain emitted 2.4 tonnes of carbon dioxide compared with 0.6 tonnes if the crop was grown in Spain.** The difference was due to the climate. The study also found British dairy farms used twice as much energy to produce a tonne of milk solids than farms in New Zealand.

Wittman says poor farmers in developing nations generally don't prosper from growing crops like soy beans, corn and other vegetables for the hungry maw of developed countries.

"In Guatemala from the mid to late '90s, for example, farmers were pushed to grow broccoli and snow peas for the global market. Research shows the global market is volatile and small-scale farmers invest a lot to grow for export; they throw a lot away because it doesn't meet quality standards; they take land out of production for traditional foods they eat and create a food security crisis. Guatemalan farmers didn't benefit from increases in food prices. They suffered because demand went down."

While she would support small-scale farmers in the developing world through a fair trade network (which exists for bananas, sugar, coffee, cotton and a few other products), she says most small-scale farmers don't produce for export. "They produce for their own regional markets and are often threatened by cheap food imports coming from places like Canada and the U.S., which have subsidized production systems."

And the higher price of locally grown organic foods can't be fairly compared with conventional produce in supermarkets, Barbolet says. "It has a lot to do with international trade agreements and subsidies," he says.

"Why do organic growers have to pay for certifying organic to give us healthy, fresh, plentiful produce when transnational food companies get subsidies to give us poisons and obesity? Multinationals get all sorts of tax breaks and fuel and energy subsidies. It's a huge cost factor. The economies of scale work very well for multi-and trans-nationals but not for anyone else."

He adds environmental costs aren't factored into conventionally grown foods: "We do know oceans are being heavily polluted by biochemicals and pesticides. There's a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico stemming from agriculture."

SOY AND CHOCOLATE

Soy, long the poster child of health food, is fighting for its reputation. I Googled 'dangers of soy' and came up with more than two million results.

One detractor, Kaayla T. Daniel, author of the book *The Whole Soy Story: The Dark Side of America's Favorite Health Food*, outlines a long list of health risks associated with non-fermented soy products including malnutrition, digestive distress, immune-system breakdown, cognitive decline, reproductive disorders, cancer and heart disease. Fermented soy products like miso, tempeh, natto and soy sauce do not have the same effects. As well, most soy beans grown in the U.S. are GMO (resistant to the herbicide Roundup and thus, sprayed generously with it). That's not to say, stop eating soy. Organically grown, properly fermented soy (miso, tempeh, soy sauce, natto) is just fine, say detractors.

Another hidden cost of soy? The increased demand for soy for animal feed and biofuels has increased soybean production in places such as Brazil and Argentina, resulting in deforestation and encroachment on indigenous and smallholder farming systems, Wittman says.

But to complicate matters, there's another side. (Of course!)

John Robbins, an eloquent, longtime vegetarian advocate (author of *Diet for a New America*, *The Food Revolution*, *May All Be Fed: Diet for a New World*) takes huge issue with soy detractors. He cites the Okinawa Centenarian Study, analyzing diets of the longest-living citizens on the planet. "This is important because the highest soy consumption in the world is in Okinawa," he said in a rebuttal to Daniel's book in *Mothering Magazine*.

He claims soy detractors are often associated with meat-advocacy organizations.

And chocolate? Glory be, it's now a health food, right? Hold that truffle! Was a child slave involved in the production of it? Save the Children Canada reports that about 15,000 children, between nine and 12, have been sold into forced labour on cocoa farms on Africa's Ivory Coast. "If it's fair trade

chocolate, good; if it's not, definitely bad," Barbolet says.

A COMPLICATED ISSUE

But even fair trade can be complicated, Wittman says.

"For example, Fair Trade USA recently split from Fair Trade International, the international labelling organization. The U.S.-based organization wants to certify plantations and individual producers as a way to increase fair trade sales. Traditionally, fair trade was certified through a co-operative model supporting groups of farmers and communities. By certifying plantations, the new fair trade standards could be subsidizing large-scale production systems that push small-scale farmers off the land. We're seeing that with soy beans," she says.

"Because it's so difficult to understand, I tell people, go for what you're sure about. Eat healthy, buy local for environmental, economic and social reasons. If you buy from a local farmer, you can be pretty sure the money will be recirculated within the community."

She says a lot of students she talks to hardly cook, let alone make food choices. "They've lost the ability to share knowledge and information on how to cook healthy foods and acquire them."

Says Kaplan: "Philosophers are increasingly joining other academics, journalists and citizens who take food very seriously. More philosophical work has been done on food and agriculture in the last five years than in the previous 30.

"Regarding animal welfare, my sense is that most people either are horrified or would be horrified if they knew what happens in factory farms."

Barbolet and Wittman are at the forefront of food issues but for a succinct answer as to how to eat, they turn to Michael Pollan, author of several books on the far-reaching implications of how and what we eat.

"He nailed it in Food Rules: An Eater's Manual," Barbolet says. The book begins with: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants."

Says Wittman: "We can't eat 100-percent local. I drink coffee, eat bananas but I buy local and fair trade when possible and ask grocers to stock more local products to help the price go down. I'll buy non-organic local over organic from New Zealand."

TIPS FOR ETHICAL EATING

Let your conscience be your guide is a good motto, but when it comes to food, that can be a bewildering exercise. Here are some guidelines for ethical eating:

. Shop at farmers markets. It's a shortcut to fresh (the freshest!) local products and local producers. It short-circuits long transports and the politics of international agro-business.

. Join community-supported agriculture groups, another way to support local farmers by pre-buying shares of their crop. You can find programs at www.farmfolkcityfolk.ca/resources/knowledge-pantry/csa. "Through a CSA, I'm getting Rubbermaid bins full of produce for \$30 a week. It feeds five in my household," says Hannah Wittman, of the University of British Columbia's Institute for Resources,

Environment and Sustainability.

- . Shop less at supermarkets, especially the middle aisles where the processed foods are sold. "Eighty per cent of food in supermarkets have GMO ingredients," says Wittman. GMO foods are controversial from ethical, safety and environmental standpoints. Thus far, GM foods aren't labelled. If you wish to avoid them, avoid processed foods as most will likely have some form of GMO soy or corn product. Species of corn, soya beans, papaya, rice, tomatoes, zucchini, potatoes, peas and dairy cattle have been genetically modified to achieve different properties.
- . Shop for organic products. It's good for the health of the land, and possibly yours.
- . Buy free-range or organic eggs; the chickens won't have spent their life in cruelly small cages.
- . Look for fair trade certification, especially with foods like chocolate and coffee. With imported foods, it's insurance that farmers and workers are treated justly and humanely and, in the case of chocolates, that no children were enslaved.
- . Choose foods low on the food chain. The higher up the food chain the higher the environmental impact. Meat requires a lot more resources to produce, transport and store than vegetables. If you do eat meat, cut back (it will have a huge, positive, environmental impact) and avoid factory-farmed meats; instead, look for butchers that buy meats locally, or from identifiable ranchers.
- . Grow your own food. Carbon emissions for transport? Zero.
- . Sushi lovers, stay away from Bluefin tuna. Local spot prawns and albacore tuna are very good choices.

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