Christina Benedict

Dr. Branch

WRI 340: Rhetoric in Food

20 December 2016

Why “Organic” Is An Unhealthy Trend

Usually when I think about *trendy*, I think about clothes, hobbies, and haircuts – it wasn’t until recently that I realized food can be trendy too. Perhaps it is because the foodie movement is hitting harder than ever before, and has become an almost unavoidable source for social capital. A large part of the hipster foodie movement has to do with organic, freshly grown foods that use simple ingredients. Trends in food are beginning to turn away from the mechanized ways of growing, gathering, and preparing foods in favor of locally grown, natural products. Those who take part in this food culture seem to be following the mantra “don’t eat what your grandmother wouldn’t.” Insinuating that older generations kept food “simple,” in the sense that they knew where their food came from and how it was grown. Today, food culture trends are reverting back to this mindset.

There are lots of reasons for this change in food culture – Americans are fighting against “big agriculture,” processed foods, GMO’s, chemicals and preservatives infused in the things we give our body as fuel. A rise in health culture and awareness as American combat rising obesity rates is also a factor in the push for organic. Several food movements have begun in an effort to improve the healthiness of our foods, and to protect the environment they’re grown in. The Green movement, Slow Food movement, and Farm to Table movement are just a few that I will discuss in this paper, but there are several more advocacy groups pushing for “good” food. With a large percentage of American people joining in on the fight towards healthier foods, the trendiness of organic, natural food grows as well.

As with all trends, the market economy sees a window for profit. The demand for organic foods rises, and therefore, the cost can too. Here is the problem: the food movements fighting against big agriculture are subsequently raising the prices of locally grown, organic produce, making it more financially difficult for a lower to middle class family to have access to the foods it’s class is producing. *When are we going to realize that making organic food “trendy” is detrimental to the livelihood of the very people producing these crops?* Over the next few pages, I hope to walk through the reasons why enough is enough – it’s time that organic food becomes the normal, not the trend.

Don’t get me wrong, growing organic food, and being aware of the ways food consumption and waste effect the environment are great initiatives. The Green Restaurant Movement, pioneered by the Green Restaurant Association (GRA), aims to certify restaurants as they move toward more environmentally sustainable practices in energy and water use, waste disposals, building infrastructure, and food choices. In the last five or six years, the rise of the Green Restaurant Movement in Asheville, North Carolina, has skyrocketed the city into one of the top destinations for foodie culture. The city’s devotion to culinary excellence, and longstanding support for local farmers helped the transition to “green” restaurant culture seem more natural than the food itself.

Today, Asheville has over 17 active farmers markets, and more than 250 independent restaurants for the nearly 100,000 citizens to enjoy. But what makes a restaurant successful in Asheville? Co-owner of the *Corner Kitchen*, Kevin Westmoreland, explains that “Asheville is a city that wants to be green, and that is trying to be green. The Asheville Independent Restaurant Association is taking a big step toward making that happen by helping restaurants earn their Green Restaurant Association certification.” (qtd. In Livability 2011). For most restaurants, earning their GRA certification means eliminating Styrofoam, using low-flow sprays on dishwashers, using grant money to provide solar panels and other energy saving devices, as well as reducing waste participating in composting methods. These practices, in addition to purchasing ingredients from local producers, make restaurants in Asheville enticing to consumers and increase the likelihood of its success.

Today, foodies look for environmentally friendly criteria in restaurants all over the country – perpetuating the eco-friendly trend in restaurants. In an interview with the *New York Times*, founder of the Slow Food Movement, Carlo Petrini, states that “A gastronomer who is not an environmentalist is just stupid. Whereas an environmentalist who is not a gastronomer is sad.” In America, we might substitute the word ‘gastronomer’ for ‘foodie,’ and see that the environmental focus on clean food has infiltrated the minds of many consumers, leading to increased popularity of organically grown foods. And what better way to ensure that we know the foods going into our bodies are grown naturally without any harmful chemicals than by purchasing foods from local producers? This is the mantra of the Slow Food Movement.

The Slow Food Movement began in the 1980’s when a group of activists protested the building plans of a McDonald’s at the Spanish Steps in Rome by sharing bowls of penne pasta with passers by, changing the slogan “we don’t want fast food…we want slow food!” The idea sparked a movement that focuses on reconnecting people with their culture and family through food. It aims to encourage people to “slow down” and embrace regional traditions through food. Officially, it’s initiatives are to “inspire individuals and communities to change the world through food that is good, clean, and fair for all.” This motto is one of the key parts of this paper, so I will take a moment to dissect what each initiative sets out to do, and why.

**Food that is good**: The Slow Food Movement defines “good” food as local, fresh, and wholesome. In other words, the movement supports naturally grown, healthy foods produced by local farmers, distilleries, etc..

**Food that is clean**: Clean food means that it is not harmful to the environment, rather it is sustainable. Defining sustainable as food that preserves biodiversity, and nourishes a healthy lifestyle for all organisms – humans and animals – draws on many of the Green Restaurant movement fundamentals.

**Food that is fair**: The Slow Food Movement defines fair food as food that honors the “dignity of labor from field to fork, and the diversity of cultures and traditions in the world.” Meaning that fair food is accessible to everyone – it is present and affordable to all socioeconomic classes, from the farmers who grow it, to the consumers, and does not undercut the amount of labor put into producing the food.

While the first two initiatives appeal mostly to the consumers participating in the organic foodie movement, the last initiative mostly aims towards protecting the producers of the food. As previously mentioned, the trendy organic foods have allowed prices of natural, healthy foods to rise in parallel to its demand. As the price rises, many people of lower socioeconomic classes can no longer afford to purchase healthy, nutritious foods – oftentimes, this includes the farmer who produced the food. I will explore the consequences of the organic trends on the farmer later in this essay, but for now, I would like to explore the final food movement that rose in response to “food that is fair,” in order to ensure that local farmers and local economies are supported.

The Farm to Table Movement is values knowing where your food came from, and promotes serving local food at restaurants, school cafeterias, and in the home. Usually, the acquisition of the food is from local producers such as wineries, farms, ranches, fisheries, or some other type of food producer. The movement favors direct interaction between the producer and consumer as the relationship between these two helps incorporate a sense of food safety, freshness, seasonality. In addition, restaurants and schools purchasing local produce helps small-farm economics – a main initiative of the movement as the decline of small family farms, and rise of poor nutritional integrity of shipped ingredients occurred over the last few decades.

In restaurants, the Farm to Table (F2T) movement means that restaurants source the foods they use for their dishes on their menus, labelling them with either the direct producer’s location, or labelling them as local. I don’t think that restaurants had bad intentions when they became advocates for the F2T movement. In fact, many of them saw their clientele rise when they began implementing F2T ideals in their kitchens and dining rooms – listing ingredients and their sources on the menus, purchasing directly from the producer, creating savory meals from simple, natural ingredients. Some restaurants even go as far as decorating their dining rooms to reflect farmhouse décor. *Vanity Fair* editorialist, Corby Kummer, explains that Commonwealth, a restaurant in Cambridge, Massachusetts, adorned it’s dining room with hardwood floors, unstained plank wainscoting, light fixtures with soft glowing “Edison” bulbs, pictures of fields and produce. Other restaurants have began to decorate their entrances with crates of fruits and vegetables, chalkboards listing their local produce sources, and oftentimes a display of local products like honey, or maple syrup.

Unfortunately, as with most trends, things tend to get out of hand when taken to the extreme. As more and more restaurants began to redecorate in order to reflect the themes of the F2T movement, meals became more about the atmosphere, food sources, and décor of the restaurant than about what the food itself tastes like. And here is where I draw the line on the food trends currently taking over our culture – enough is enough. When the dining experience becomes about everything *except the food,* we should realize that food movements have taken a turn for the worse, perpetuating the very problems they set out to improve.

Let me be explicit. I am all for food culture becoming more environmentally sustainable, organic, and local. What I am against are the ideals of well-intended food movements such as Slow Food and Farm to Table, becoming “trendy.” Because when things become “trendy,” they almost always become exclusive to those who can afford them – the middle to upper class. Unfortunately, this exclusivity is exactly what has happened with foodie trends in American culture; only those with the financial capital equipped to support expensive, organic tastes reap the social capital that comes with this trend. The Farm to Table movement has aided in romanticizing the ways farmers and producers live – it has become an outlet for wealthy consumers to experience “farm life” without actually participating in the labor that produces the now “trendy” products.

One example of romanticizing farm life is the ever-so-popular method of decorating restaurants to reflect a farm. When a customer has a meal in a dining room filled with farm tools on the wall, drinking out of mason jars, surrounded by displays of hay and produce crates, it allows a glimpse into where their food came from. It helps satisfy the sense of wondering how and where the food was grown, and reflects the fact that the food went directly from the farm to the plate. But coming from a family with a long history of farming, I can tell you – farmers don’t like to eat in their barn. It’s kind of the least appetizing place I would ever dream of eating. Next to dirty farm equipment, smelly animals, and piles of fertilizer? No thanks. Beyond that, farmers want to get away from their farm after a long day of physical labor. So the popularity of foodies finding restaurants decorated to look like a farm as representative of the ways farmers actually eat meals is a disillusionment in itself as that is not the true “experience” of farm culture.

Furthermore, small-farm economics has been greatly harmed by the F2T restaurants which bombard customers with the sources it has for produce and listing the exact ingredients on the menu. When the customers saw they could make a tasty dish from the exact ingredients a restaurant did, they bought the produce themselves. Therefore, in order to remain competitive, restaurants began to draw a clientele willing to pay extra money for dishes they could make themselves. As with any business, the main goal is to achieve the largest profit possible. So many restaurants began to pay less and less for the produce they received from farms – increasing the gap between farmers, and who is able to purchase the food produced by them. Now, we see that many farmers cannot afford to buy their own products because the demand for organic products allows the price to be driven up, and therefore makes the products exclusive to wealthier families.

The dichotomy of current Farm to Table trajectories is perfectly illustrated by the restaurant Blue Hill at Stone Barns. Following F2T ideals, the mission of Blue Hill is to use sustainable, local ingredients in order to enlighten consumers on the viable ways of farming and eating. And what better way for a restaurant to portray the importance of local ingredients than by purchasing its own farm? That’s right, Blue Hill is a restaurant that serves meals prepared with ingredients from its backyard. Jen Lessick of Spoon University explains that Blue Hill “places a great importance on nutrition, sustainability, and efficiency to counter the mass market of nutrient-poor food industries that seem to be taking over the country.” In her restaurant review of Blue Hill, Lessick describes the meal as “an array of tiny vegetables, each untouched by a stove, sauce, salt, pepper – anything to indicate to us that there was indeed a chef behind the wall.”

Despite the minimally prepared food – which arrived in “too many courses to count” – the check for each person in Lessick’s party would come out to be roughly $380 per person. Naturally, this seemed like a staggering number, but when I checked Blue Hill’s restaurant, the homepage immediately informs viewers that plates start at $188 per guest. This is a prime example of the problematic fate of F2T restaurants. Based on several restaurant reviews, and Blue Hill’s own descriptions, most of the courses do not require much labor or cooking by the chef. Yet customers still pay obscene amounts just for fresh food. Not just any customers though – wealthy customers. Which is generally the clientele F2T restaurants target. Albeit, Blue Hills is an extreme example of the F2T movement gone wrong, but looking at the rise in “trendy” organic foods across the country, it is not hard to make a more generalized connection. The necessities – fresh, nutritious, quality ingredients – are not what is available for the average consumer. Instead, healthy foods have become an exclusive part of wealthy families; while farmers and minimum wage Americans can only mostly afford processed, chemical-ridden foods that poison their bodies. It is exactly what movements like F2T and Slow Food set out to fight against. America now has an entire class of people – farmers, and other working class families – completely excluded from their own livelihood and food culture.

So what’s the solution? It’s time for foodies to wake up and realize that “organic” isn’t a healthy trend. It is a healthy lifestyle. Yes, I am glad that food movements have opened the eyes of many American consumers to make use of local products. But the focus of our foods needs to be put back on the food itself – not it’s background. The Green Restaurant Movement has a pretty strong hold over restaurants and food industries using sustainable methods in growing, using, and disposing of food. Now it’s time for foodies, and Americans at large, to realize that we have come to expect that all food is unhealthy in some way, unless specified that it is made from quality ingredients. This habit is perhaps even more unhealthy than the processed food itself. We have demanded that food industries stop poisoning our foods with unhealthy chemicals, and legislature has listened. Now is the time that we should come to expect the best of the best – and never let our standards for quality ingredients fall below the threshold of healthy again. It’s time to shift our focus back to the food itself, and not demanding organic ingredients, in turn taking them away from lower class Americans. Being financially equipped to eat healthy shouldn’t be a ticket for social capital; and expensive tastes shouldn’t be a synonym for non-harmful foods. It’s time to become more inclusive to the nutritional needs of all Americans. It’s time to make “organic” our normal, not our “exclusive.”