

Food in Review 2010

Locally and nationally, there were plenty of food ideas to chew this year.

The obesity epidemic clamored for attention. Interest in home food production swelled, and new producers popped up at the many farmers markets around the region. The fall found many concerned with food and agriculture glued to the news, waiting to hear the fate of the beleaguered Food Safety Modernization Act.

Let's start with the obesity epidemic. Somehow, the elephant that America has become has escaped much notice. Although health and nutrition professionals have observed rising weights and declining health metrics over the last decade, reporting on the trend has lagged. We entered the New Year with a grim look at the statistics: state by state, adult obesity rates range from 20-30%, and childhood obesity rates range from 10-25%. Experts predicted that this generation of children might be the first since the Civil War to live shorter than their parents – because of weight related health problems.

Amidst this sudden consciousness, First Lady Michelle Obama launched a campaign to end childhood obesity called “Let's Move!” The multi-tiered agenda tackles child health and nutrition on many fronts, calling on parents, local governments, health care workers and chefs to get in on the project. The White House sends chefs into the schools two days a week to talk about food and cooking, and Let's Move! asks chefs to get involved with the kids in their locale, too. Locally, none have yet formally answered, but Executive Chef at the Governor's Mansion Noah Sheetz is involved in statewide efforts to reform school lunch.

Speaking of reform, Albany County challenged its non-chain restaurants to reformulate their recipes without trans fats. The switch was unpleasant for bakeries because the approved fats are not as easy to use; places with outlets in two counties, like Bella Napoli, which is in Latham and Troy, now sell different products on either side of the Hudson.

The soda tax proposed by Governor Paterson in January of 2009 and 2010 was much criticized, especially by the beverage industry, and got nowhere. That didn't stop New York City's Mayor Bloomberg from proposing a soda tax of a different stripe: he sought to ban soda from the list of acceptable foods to be purchased with food stamps.

In all of these battles about what people should eat, the real enemy of health is not often named: commodity crops that are cheap because of government subsidies, therefore making junk food inexpensive. Someday, the link will be made and the country will align food and agriculture policies with health policies to present a consistent message.

Until then, pictures tell the story. The Center for Disease Control has put together a nice slideshow of maps at <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/trends.html> tracing the evolution of the obesity epidemic. Compare these with the 1967 invention of High Fructose Corn Syrup, and the amounts Americans spent on fast food. Back in 1972, we annually spent \$3 billion on fast food. That number today is over \$110 billion a year.

Yet beyond these brutal facts, another America is eating. The number of farmers markets continues to swell. There were less than 2000 across the country in 1994, and in 2010 there were over 6000. Brunswick, Bethlehem, and Cohoes are among the locales that developed markets over the last couple of years, and the markets are thriving throughout the growing season.

Farmers markets are incubators for food businesses: witness newbies R & G Cheesemakers, from Cohoes, and a pickle producer from Salem called Pucker's Gourmet. Direct marketing at farmers markets is far more lucrative than selling wholesale to restaurants or groceries, so as these outlets increase, more food businesses open, such as Duncan's Dairy Farm.

Robert Duncan had dreamed of opening a dairy since his father sold the cows when he was a kid. That dream is now his days, and he milks 18 Heifers in Brunswick morning and night. The milk is bottled on site after low heat pasteurization, a process that preserves enzymes and taste. Duncan brings his milk to Troy just like his great grandfather did, except not in a wagon. Find him at the winter market in the Atrium.

Interest in gardening has also been rising. This is a natural growth of the locavore moment – what's closer to the table than your backyard? Foodies with less of a political agenda have also fallen in love with the loud, proud flavors of locally grown produce. They are turning the soil, as are those concerned by widespread outbreaks of E. coli and salmonella in the national food supply. Remember the wildfire of packaged spinach? Taco Bell finally tracing problems to its tainted jalapenos? The threats are real, and people who can do something to lessen the risks of eating are, as evident in sales of seeds and supplies. Another indicator: Capital District Community Gardens had waiting lists for people wanting a plot in one of their 47 locations.

Growing your own leads to too many tomatoes, and a need to save the harvest. Classes in canning offered by Cornell Cooperative Extension in Albany County had wait lists, too. The Jarden Company, manufacturers of Ball canning equipment, experienced double-digit growth in the first two years of the recession, and sales were strong in 2010. In the 1970's, during the last back-to-the-land movement, Jarden built a community cannery in Albany, a place for kitchen education and quantity canning to take place. Talk of similar endeavors is percolating through holiday parties in certain circles, but what kind of action that talk will yield, who knows.

Urban agriculture got national and local attention – Seattle just finished The Year of Urban Agriculture, loosening its regulations on city chickens, among other home scale sustainability issues. Albany is poised to follow suit – perhaps. Stay tuned.

The country used to turn to Detroit for the newest car. Now, people look to the city for developments in urban ag. The city, with its plentiful supply of empty lots, is refooding itself with fenceless community gardens, and other bold growing operations.

Locally, The Produce Project, a youth powered farm on Eighth Street in Troy, grows vegetables and other things, like business skills. The Troy High students who tend the beds and high tunnel at this Capital District Community Gardens enterprise learn how to grow and market vegetables. They sell to chefs – like the aforementioned Noah Sheetz – the Pioneer Market, and at the Bethlehem Farmers Market.

The Pioneer Market, run by the Troy Food Coop, is the first grocery in downtown Troy in five years. The market stocks its shelves for a wide variety of clientele, from the selective organics/locally made crowd, to the budget consumer.

Last but not least, The Food Safety Modernization Act survived a tense fall bouncing between the House and Senate, and will be signed into law in January. The legislation gives the FDA recall powers, and requires food-processing facilities to have plans in place to deal with outbreaks. Scale and distribution exemptions – under \$500,000 in

sales, and within 275 miles – protect small farmers, but might not insulate larger sustainable operations that are decidedly not part of the agribusiness food system.

Critics argue that the underfunded FDA doesn't have the human muscle to implement or enforce the outlined protocols, but as the first legal changes to the FDA since 1938, the time has arrived. For many advocates, this makes for a happy new year.



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