From Cotton Mill to Co-Op: The Rise of a Local Food Culture in Carrboro, North Carolina

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Abstract

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From Cotton Mill to Co-Op: The Rise of a Local Food Culture in Carrboro, North Carolina
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Once a bustling mill town, Carrboro, North Carolina, is today a haven for local food. Adjacent to a major research university and mile after mile of rolling farmland, Carrboro is a place where, over the last thirty years, a group of citizens armed with progressive values has created a thriving market community for locally produced food. Area farmers’ markets, cooperative groceries, home and community gardens, urban chickens, and locally-focused restaurants play a vital role in the community as a whole--both to its identity and its social, political, and economic activities. This project illuminates some of the complex ties that developed between urban and rural, liberal and conservative, rich and poor (and middle class), young and old, cynical and idealistic, modern and traditional to facilitate the local food segment of Carrboro’s broader economy. It also investigates local definitions of place, group, taste, and tradition.
To my parents, the two most solid, patient, and giving people I have ever known.

Beacons in the fog, rocks in storms, cheerleaders on the sidelines... I would be nothing without you, and I can only hope I have made you proud at the end of this long, hard journey.
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The process of researching and writing this thesis has been a lengthy one with many twists and turns, as much a voyage of self-discovery as one of academic research. Throughout, my greatest resource has been the people around me. I have found inspiration, guidance, and support in countless individuals, and there are many who deserve my thanks.

April McGreger, my friend and mentor, is a recurring voice, and a strong one. She was my guide to Carrboro, to radical food politics, and to the kitchen. April was glad to tell me when I had misunderstood something, or failed to consider other factors, and her honesty made her one of my most valued consultants. My talks with her were an invaluable resource in understanding this community and its politics. Highly articulate and well-connected, April led me to big ideas and opened up a world of interesting people, and she waited patiently for me to catch up. She welcomed me to her kitchen and table, and even suffered through a few bouts with recording equipment. I will be forever in her debt.

My consultants’ voices in concert paint a picture of local life in a way that nothing else can. As their mediator and interpreter, I bear this responsibility with great seriousness. My gratitude extends to all who endured questions and offered opinions, but in particular, I would like to thank: Sarah Blacklin, Sheri Castle, Kimberly and Dan Marston, Claire Brandow, Emily Hilliard, Lora Smith, Betsy and Alex Hitt, George
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makes a graduate student feel capable and excited. A true soldier, Kathy carried on her
duties as a committee member right on through the arrival of her second child. Best of
all, she is always eager to talk about--and eat--cake.

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insight, and great--if necessary--terror to my life. Her uncontrollable truthfulness is--
although sometimes disguised--a blessing, and her investment in me (and good wine)
deeply appreciated. Her intellectual fearlessness and ideological tenacity should be a
model for us all in the academy. If I am lucky, I will always have a place at her table.

Kelly Alexander first brought me into the world of professional food and, with
great humor and excellent guidance, made me pay attention to descriptive abilities (or
lack thereof). I am no great food writer, and a Master’s thesis is no place for great prose,
but hearing Kelly’s voice in my head as I drafted this piece pushed me to work harder and
better.

Many friends have stuck with me through this process. Emily Wallace, my
indefatigable writing partner, offered humor and empathy that kept me afloat many a day.
Carlene Stephens’s guidance, practicality, and humor have been with me since my first
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In the last year I have had the good fortune to spend time with two extraordinary women who shaped me in powerful ways: Angharad Pearce-Jones and Phoebe Lawless.

Angharad Pearce Jones, a true kindred spirit and a creative genius, introduced me to metalwork during a much-needed academic hiatus across the ocean in Wales. With coal dust on her face and Earl Grey in her hand, she gave me shelter, laughter, skills, strength, and a stock of warm memories that keep me going on the worst of days. Her personal and professional generosity were a joy to behold, and our relationship will always remind me that a little bit of faith and trust after a chance meeting can go a very long way, offering endless and surprising rewards.

Phoebe Lawless, yet another creative genius, mentored me in her professional kitchen as I finished this project, and I will be forever grateful for her humor, faith, patience, and encouragement. A woman with less self-pity and more self-discipline than anyone I have ever encountered, she has been a model for hard work and toughness, and a true inspiration along the way. May I one day reach her level of resolve, dedication, and confidence in the kitchen and in life.

Finally, my family, who have loved and shaped me for twenty-seven years, remain the bedrock of my existence. My extended family have tolerated a very distant niece, cousin, and granddaughter as I have been in classes, working out of town, or gallivanting around Wales these last three years. I have missed birthdays, holidays, and even
weddings, and the fact that you are still happy to see me when I do make it home means more to me than you will ever know.

My brother, Taylor, is always excited about my next leaps in life (and ready to pony up the travel logistics to facilitate them!). His silly inside jokes warm and cheer me to the core in a way that few things can. Thank you for being on my side, no matter what, and for encouraging me to dream big.

As I have already written, this project is dedicated to my parents, who have stuck with me through many ideological and occupational transitions, and who have provided crucial emotional and financial support along the way. My mother is always--always--a kind and sympathetic ear and a curious, inquisitive mind. My father is always good for a bad joke when you need one (You just can’t get that kind of humor just anywhere, can you, Dad?), but also for the reminder and the courage to do the right thing at the moments when I don’t necessarily feel like it.
Walking west along Weaver Street one Saturday morning in late July, I couldn’t help but smile. People passing on the sidewalk smiled back, even offering up, “Good morning!” because, for the most part, people in Carrboro do that kind of thing. It was my first day back in town after three months away, so despite my late-night arrival on Friday, only a Class One Act of God (read: town and self obliterated) could have stopped me from getting out the door first thing in the morning on market day. And people were already speaking to me. Good sign.

Making my way eagerly on foot, I began to spot cheerful, tomato-themed posters all over town. As if I weren’t excited enough simply to be back in Carrboro with my stuff, my friends, and an all-together easier pace of life, it also happened to be Tomato Day at the farmers’ market! Welcome home indeed. Given the rather miserable performance of my Anna Banana Russian and Cherokee Purple tomato plants in pots on a tiny northern Virginia patio, my innermost Southerner was crying out for the real thing. I was, after all, high season for some of the South’s most glorious fruits and vegetables. These posters gave me hope.

But my urgent tomato quest was delayed by my even more urgent need for breakfast. With absolutely no food in the house, I headed first to the Weaver Street Market co-op, where I relished my bottomless mug of locally roasted, fairly traded Counter Culture Coffee and a heaping bowl of cheap but delicious oatmeal from the hot bar. (Ringing up well under $2.00, the cashier piped up, “Best breakfast deal in town,
don’t you think?!) The infamous hula-hoopers weren’t out under the big oak trees just yet, but other blatantly happy people--and dogs--filled the picnic tables of the store’s lawn that morning just as they always do in fine weather.

There is always something overtly political going on at the market entrance, and it isn’t always food-related. As I crossed over into the market grounds, I was greeted warmly by people petitioning in support of Obama’s health care package. Almost as soon as I put down the pen, a kind-faced volunteer with a bowl full of Sungolds welcomed me to the market’s Tomato Day celebration with a giant smile and a free sample. I ate the tomato, smiling back at him from the inside out.

For me, the sweetness of this tiny tomato mirrored the character of this place that I had adopted as my home four years before. There on the Town Commons, where familiar farmers and artisans star in a biweekly pageant of food and community, and friends and neighbors stroll with bulging tote bags of fresh, local produce, it began to resonate with me that coming to the market--not passing the Carrboro Town Limit sign, or pulling into my driveway, or even sharing that first long-awaited drink with friends--was what truly marked my reentrance to the community. The palpable hum of the market on a special day only enhanced my excitement. The farmers’ market is about so much more than just food. It is not simply a one-dimensional grocery store substitute, but a town hall meeting, a church service, a political rally, a family gathering, a community investment, a place of education, and a venue for economic exchange, all rolled into one. The market is not just about people and place and community; rather, it is their very embodiment. This market--and, often, Carrboro more broadly--is a place where people
regularly come together around food and politics and taste, and many do so in a conscious spirit of community. They like small-talk and eye contact, and they have since 1978, when this farmers’ market first came together.

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has said: “The sense of place is perhaps never more acute than when one is homesick, and one can only be homesick when one is no longer at home.”¹ My three months away were hardly Homeric, but it took the contrast of my Washington experience to remind me that not every place was like this, and to let me know that I had begun to take for granted the powerful sense of belonging I felt in my adopted home town. It means something when people know you and share your values, and when the landscape and even the food are a familiar comfort.

When I moved to Carrboro--twenty-two years of age, straight out of college, and absolutely clueless about cooking--I found myself in a strange new world. For starters, Carrboro was a politically liberal community, and there was no epic, RV-based college football mania like there was in Tuscaloosa, where, as a total cultural misfit, I attended the University of Alabama. Carrboro had standard supermarket grocery stores, but I also heard about a co-op grocery, a local farmers’ market, and something called a “farm share.” Local and so-called “natural” foods were not a niche, but a serious market. Interesting. For a while, I continued shopping and eating the way I had always done, buying everything at Food Lion and Target. Much of it was frozen and pre-made. I was a creature of habit, but I was also intimidated, not knowing how to change my eating patterns. Despite fond memories of my grandparents’ garden and the peaches, berries,

and apples my family occasionally drove to the country to pick when I was a child, I had no idea what was in season when. I was skeptical of the comparatively high prices at the Weaver Street Co-Op, and the farmers’ market had way too many human and vegetable variables for comfort. It was unfamiliar territory, particularly for someone used to red delicious apples—maybe Granny Smith for kicks—and a relatively quiet, anonymous shopping experience that involved carts and credit cards.

It took a year for me to learn about seasonal eating and get over the initial sticker-shock of real, local, sustainably produced food. At the urging of my roommate, I finally tried out community-supported agriculture by signing up with Maple Spring Gardens and paying in advance for a weekly box of farm-fresh fruits and vegetables. This is when I realized that I could not cook. We wasted a significant amount of food that first season. Eventually I learned to bake, and soon I even learned what to do with Swiss chard and butternut squash, two of many items that did not exist in my South Carolina universe. The freshness and natural sweetness of local vegetables and the encouraging cooking advice of local farmers won me over. Tomatoes did not have to be the pink, mealy, and tasteless blobs I picked off my iceberg and Ranch salads as a kid. Tomatoes, in fact, could be vibrant red, or even purple or orange! They could have flavor, and it might be sweet or acid or somewhere in between. It was a revelation.

Hunting for exotic tomatoes at local farmers’ markets became a favorite summer hobby of mine, and over time, I came to love my Saturday morning and Wednesday afternoon trips to the Carrboro Farmers’ Market as much as I had once loved Sunday

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2 Oddly, the encouraging roommate could cook even less well than I could and had zero interest in learning, but her sister was an organic farmer in Maine, so she knew about CSAs.
dinners at my grandmother’s house. I made the trips almost automatically, and they became part of my weekly rhythm. Not only did I become accustomed to the patterns of fresh, seasonal cooking, but I also adopted the politics of the Slow Food movement. I focused on the sustainability of tradition, regional culture, and fair trade as I pursued the most flavorful and savory offerings of the place I lived.

Indeed, the gourmets, farmers, food activists, and idealistic farmers of Carrboro transformed this former microwave-loving, Southern Baptist, Walmart-shopping, Republican tomboy into a left-leaning farmers’ market cook with a share in the co-op. Now, four years later, I was back at my home market after months away, and I had returned to a place where it was appropriate to relax and let myself interact with people the way that feels natural to me. I could share my expertise with a fellow shopper as she tried to decide between several Farmer’s Daughter jams, or exchange enthusiastic remarks about the fresh-shelled pink-eyed purple hull peas from Brinkley Farms that are so good boiled with only a little bit of butter, salt, and pepper. I could hobnob with farmers Alex & Betsy Hitt of Peregrine Farm about the heat of their peppers, marked in matchsticks on their handmade labels. I could catch up with my former student Claire Brandow, then baking with April McGreger’s Farmer’s Daughter Brand as her part-time college job, and I could beg April to hurry up and make some 12-Pepper Jam. (“What’s the hold-up? Peppers are in season now!” I had been waiting for a year, after all, since the last time they were in season.) I could guide distinguished professor and Carrboro newcomer Bernie Herman to my favorite market treasures and then listen in as he chatted with vendors about figs and offered them cuttings from his heirloom trees on the Eastern
Shore of Virginia ("You’ve heard of Johnny Appleseed? I want to be Bernie Fig Tree.")

I could smile at strangers if our eyes happened to meet. In fact, it would be rude not to.

Now, a full five years after my move to Carrboro and even after extensive research, I still find myself with many questions. Who exactly are these people of Carrboro, how did they come to be here, and why have they affected me so? How did this former mill town become a center of food activism today? How did the citizens of Carrboro transform their town, and what, in turn, made this place transformative for me and so many others? In my study of Carrboro, I examine these questions and attempt to explain how the powerful world of food creates community, connects people, and builds upon an evolving sense of tradition.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Literature Review & Methodology

Introduction

[...] if you want to create a better future, start by learning to cook. In our quick-and-easy age, it’s one of the more subversive things you can do, for when you cook you take control of a piece of the food chain.

--Warren Belasco, *Food: The Key Concepts*

Once a bustling mill town, Carrboro, North Carolina, is today a haven for local food. Adjacent to a major research university and mile after mile of rolling farmland, Carrboro is a place where, over the last thirty years, a group of citizens armed with progressive values has created a thriving market community for locally produced food. Area farmers’ markets, cooperative groceries, home and community gardens, urban chickens, and locally-focused restaurants have grown in strength and number in recent decades, gathering speed over the course of the last ten years in particular. Not all Carrboro residents have access to these institutions or choose to participate in them, yet these institutions play a vital role in the community as a whole--both to its identity and its social, political, and economic activities. Focusing specifically on these institutions and their constituents, this project illuminates some of the complex ties that developed between urban and rural, liberal and conservative, rich and poor (and middle class), young and old, cynical and idealistic, modern and traditional to facilitate the local food segment of Carrboro’s broader economy. As politically-charged local food movements

take hold across the United States and indeed the world, Carrboro’s intricate web of food production and consumption is an excellent example of national and global trends.

This project takes the shape of a community-based ethnography, focusing especially on the formation of community, the construction and performance of identity, expressions of creativity, and interpretations of tradition in a subset of Carrboro’s population that explicitly expresses interest in a local, sustainable food system. Drawing upon texts from American Studies, folklore, anthropology, food studies, and geography, as well as my fieldwork in Carrboro, I consider four primary themes. First, how the nature of place evolves with those who inhabit it. Secondly, how my consultants use food (from commerce to conspicuous consumption to shared meals) as a medium for creating community and group. Thirdly, how a community collectively defines “good” food. Lastly, how my consultants give shape to their idealism—particularly environmental and community values—and creativity through food. In light of these themes, I frame my consultants in a history of agrarian idealism/radicalism, countercultural politics, and reform-oriented revivals involving both skills and values. At its essence, this is a study of community and idealism, and how they are represented in the food of one specific place.

I began formally observing Carrboro and its people during the spring of 2008 in an ethnographic study of the fledgling Carrboro Community Garden, created on Town of Carrboro land by private citizens wishing for a more intimate and affordable connection to their food, through that, their fellow community members. It was during that time that I first began to think about food politics, though I initially came to the garden to study
how the grassroots group functioned. Intrigued by the human and ideological connections I made during my time in the garden, I spent the next two years exploring the community of people invested in the town’s food production. This project, which is a mix of fully collaborative ethnography and participant observation, is the result. It includes formal and informal conversations with a group of approximately twenty-five chefs, food writers, activists, students, scientists, farmers, gardeners, health professionals, curators, professors, market shoppers, and even skeptics, all of whom have strong ties to Carrboro. Some of my consultants live on farms outside of the town limits, but are connected to the farmers’ market.

In addition to the twenty-five consultants in my study, I spent hours observing community activities and scrutinizing people’s food choices at Weaver Street Market, the Carrboro Community Garden, the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, and other local food events. Because issues connected to the food system are so tied to the news cycle and our daily routines, they also came up in conversations at potlucks and dinner parties and happy hours, especially if someone happened to inquire about the focus of my research. Many people had opinions to offer on local food institutions, national food politics, area chefs and restaurants, and the cost of food. Lastly, I would add that my work is informed in part by conversations with people representing parallel communities around the world, whom I met as a student delegate to Slow Food’s international Terra Madre gathering in Torino, Italy, in October 2008. It was there that I began to understand Carrboro as part of something big--something global.
The group I interviewed expressed a desire to retreat from the cheap, convenient industrial food system that evolved over the course of the twentieth century. Responding to diverse elements and influences, they find themselves straddling a space somewhere between the past and the future of food--a space sometimes infused with an understanding or interpretation of tradition. Some have answered the back-to-basics call from scholars, writers, farmers, chefs, and activists such as Vandana Shiva, Michael Pollan, Wendell Berry, and Alice Waters to rebel against the mainstream, industrialized food system, and to respect local and traditional growing, preserving, and cooking practices. Others are simply in pursuit of the healthiest and tastiest food. Some worry for their children, others for the planet. Addressing these concerns means taking their food into their own hands, and today, they are gardening, cooking, and canning activists. We might consider what is happening with food as just one small part of a far-ranging series of interconnected mini-revolts carried out by a small but growing body of ideologues. In fact, each meal of local, fairly and sustainably produced food might be considered a revolt in itself. We might also view it as an investment in the future.

Though I frame my consultants in a history of countercultural politics and previous revivals of particular skills and values, their actions are motivated by more concrete and immediate concerns like the environment, personal health, and quality of life through a sense of belonging and the enjoyment of good food (however each consultant defines it). Generally, as they have attempted to lead contented and responsible lives, they have turned to two general categories of meaning: tradition and community. For example, traditions such as seedsaving or seasonal eating were absolute
necessities for most of history, although today they are valued for their perceived sustainability. Also popular among many of the same people are old time and bluegrass music and dance, which suggests there is a traditional aesthetic sensibility at work here. Community, as a second category, serves as a source of human bonds, shared investment, familiarity, and day-to-day friendliness (and perhaps the old time and bluegrass are things to bring the community together). Many consultants see themselves as engaged in progressive rather than traditional activities, while others do not perceive themselves as part of a “movement.” Nevertheless, their actions firmly place them in a tradition of radicalism and activism that is at home in university communities like Carrboro.

My consultants shared a youthful idealism, whether they are young now or when they came to Carrboro thirty years ago. The values themselves have not changed much since the late 1970s, but the size of the crowd now espousing them has grown exponentially, and the media through which those values may be dispersed and debated has changed dramatically. This agrarian-oriented counterculture is fed by the internet and the iPhone. People Tweet and email and blog about it, but the debate over our food system has also moved from the printed pages of underground newspapers and co-op bulletin boards to the Op-Ed pages of The New York Times. My consultants and others like them may still be a minority in Carrboro, and certainly in the United States, but their ranks are swelling and their causes receiving increased attention.

Critics of local food movements have cited elitism, racism, fetishism, isolationism, protectionism, hypocrisy, cluelessness, privilege, self-righteousness, and
condescension among its members. It is true that we can neither honestly discuss nor fully comprehend what some call America’s “food crisis” and the vast range of responses to it without talking about money. Economics, class, and geography directly impact food production, eating, disease, and, of course, the decision to eat local (or not). However, what I have discovered in texts and interviews has often surprised me, and certainly it has negated the flat, oversimplified assessment that the movement toward organics and local, seasonal food is only for the affluent.

As my colleague Josh Davis said following a brief presentation on a small piece of my work, “There is more than one Carrboro.” He posed questions on class and racial issues, pointing out that there are single parent households where no one has time for more--or any--cooking, and that there are people who cannot afford to feed their families from the farmers’ market even with help from WIC or SNAP (Women Infants & Children; Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, both federal food aid programs). He also pointed out that most people involved in Carrboro’s local food movement are white. He is correct.

To Davis’s critique, I will add that even if the financial and time commitments of locavorism were something every community member could afford, certainly not

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4 For a extensive discussion, see James McWilliams’s Just Food: How Locavores are Endangering the Food System and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly (New York: Little Brown, 2009).

5 On the national level, Slow Food USA is careful to put minority activists in the spotlight when it can. Slow Food is aware of its critics. For instance, at the meeting of the US delegation to Slow Food International’s Terra Madre gathering in 2008, Americans heard from Will Allen, the African-American urban farmer from Milwaukee who works with underprivileged people to help the grow their own food, and also from Ojibwe activist Winona LaDuke. LaDuke, whose people have been fighting genetic patenting and research of their sacred wild rice, manoomin, reminded everyone that in fighting agribusiness, “We are not fighting to eat at Whole Foods!” LaDuke, Winona. “Stewardship of Traditions from One Generation to the Next.” Lecture at United States Regional Meeting, Slow Food International Terra Madre conference, Palaisozaki, Torino, Italy. October 24, 2008.

6 Josh Davis, conversation with the author, Chapel Hill, NC, April 6, 2010.
everyone is engaged by the politics of food. To many Americans, including a significant number of Carrboro residents, the country is not in a “food crisis” if their plates are filled with relative ease each day, regardless of the path that food took to get there. Time, money, habit, and convenience at home take priority over seemingly distant environmental and economic issues. Not everyone wants to make the extra effort to cook from scratch at the end of the day, let alone shop in more than one place, which the farmers’ market almost forces people to do.

If a mother has only $30 a week to feed her family, is she going to spend it on a few pints of raspberries, local goat cheese, honey, and focaccia? These are not the high value items at a farmers’ market, though such items do exist.7 (They are usually vegetables in high season.) If a single man can heat up package or two of twenty-cent, chicken-flavored Top Ramen noodles in a few minutes in the microwave and feel satisfied, what is the likelihood that someday soon he will make the extra effort to source and cook a whole, local chicken that costs $4.00 per pound and serve it over fresh pasta? If a Latino immigrant sees few familiar foods at the Carrboro farmers’ market and can shop more cheaply down the road at the Buckhorn flea market and feel part of a community based on shared language and taste, why shop in Carrboro?8 These questions

7 On the front page of its website, the Carrboro Farmers’ Market has placed a photographs to illustrate what $90 of market produce looks like compared to $90 of comparable grocery store produce. The farmers’ market pile of lettuces, greens, and tomatoes dwarfs the grocery store pile, which was presumably sourced from Whole Foods or Weaver Street Market, though the photographs not clearly labeled. What would a pile of conventional produce look like? Or a $90 pile of Ramen noodles? See Carrboro & Southern Village Farmers’ Markets, “Home,” http://www.carrborofarmersmarket.com/index.shtml (accessed November 15, 2010).

8 The Buckhorn Flea Market, located in Mebane, NC, is a haven for Latino shoppers. It is full of traditional foods from a variety of Latino cultures, and Spanish is widely spoken. For a fuller description, see David Cecelski, “Tamales at the Buckhorn Flea Market,” NC Food blog (hosted by the North Carolina Folklife Institute), entry posted October 8, 2008. http://www.ncfolk.org/NCFood/TamalesattheBuckhornMarket.aspx (accessed July 31, 2010).
are partly an issue of economics and partly one of perceptions and misperceptions. The Carrboro Farmers’ Market cannot simultaneously defeat poverty, lack of desire, or cultural differences. To compare the market to these other food sources is to compare apples and oranges. Local food can be a hard sell when the alternative is generally cheaper, quicker, and easier.9

Carrboro is many institutions and many kinds of people. All over town, one can still find fast food, conventional grocers, synthetic pesticides, and plenty of high fructose corn syrup and trans fats, and those often sustain the underprivileged and the unconcerned. For this project, however, I narrowed my focus to those people sustaining the market for local foods to illustrate of how various contemporary food trends manifest themselves in this place at this moment. These trends do not constitute the entire community. While the issue of access—which is one of poverty and a subsidized, unhealthy industrial food system—is an extremely important one, it is not one I will address here. Instead, this study is one of those who can and do participate in local food, and what that says about who they are and the world they are negotiating.

The current dialogue about how we feed ourselves is part of a much more expansive critique, returning us to “‘wider questions about the role of food in relation to a widespread loss of faith in the project of modernity.’”10 This is not as wholesome and

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9 The cost of food is a highly contentious issue, particularly since many processed foods are indirectly subsidized by federal government dollars available to farmers who grow commodities such as corn and soybeans, which are then processed into the endless numbers of cheap food additives used by manufacturers today. Furthermore, critics of the industrial food system cite the eventual health care costs associated with the growing numbers of diet-related diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, obesity, which are on the rise in America and predicted to reach epidemic proportions. Thus, while processed foods such as chips, sodas, and heat-and-eat meals may be cheap at the cash register, the issue of cost is far more complex. The question becomes one of long-term cost, particularly with regard to the health.

one-dimensional as a revival of values and hard labor in the dirt. What is happening in the food system today, from Whole Foods to communal farms to farmers’ markets to local gourmet bistros, is complicated.

To tackle this a complex series of concepts, I have relied upon texts from a wide range of disciplines. I have grouped them thematically here as: Ethnography, Comprehending Place, Food as a Window on Identity, Defining and Redefining a Toxic Food Culture, Southern Food, and Tradition & Revival.

**Ethnography**

As I began the writing process, I searched for academic models to help me craft an ethnography of a small place, focusing in particular on its politics and rituals, and its intricate social and economic circles. I also wanted to do so with thick, vivid descriptions. I selected works by Henry Glassie, Leslie Prosterman, Dorothy Noyes, Glenn Hinson, Clifford Geertz, and Paul Stoller.

Henry Glassie’s lyrical ethnographic work in *The Stars of Ballymenone*, set in a small village in Northern Ireland during “The Troubles” of the 1970s, revolutionized the way I thought of scholarly writing. In parts, it read like a memoir, but Glassie could always be trusted to reveal a point of analysis, no matter how many twists and turns and diversions there were along the way. As both person and ethnographer, Glassie is present in his own work, and he makes no effort to conceal his love for the people he describes, nor does he treat his personal relationships as coincidental or insignificant. He is

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emotional--perhaps even nostalgic--and unabashedly so. Like Glassie, I want my consultants’ voices to shine through, and like Glassie, much of my research was based in informal conversation.

Leslie Prosterman’s *Ordinary Life, Festival Days*\(^\text{12}\) offers a well-researched consideration of how community aesthetics are informed by the economics and practicalities of farming and rural life. Documenting agricultural fairs in the Midwest, Prosterman’s work is a model for understanding a food community from both the production and consumption ends of the food chain. Not unlike what I am attempting in Carrboro, she explores how the realities of farming, area traditions, and consumers’ changing expectations work together to shape a shifting standard of “good” food.

Dorothy Noyes defines “group” as “a product of interaction rather than a precondition for it.”\(^\text{13}\) It is in this way that we must think of the food community in Carrboro I seek to define and explain. How else does the ethnographer best describe such large, not-so-well-defined population who gravitate toward but do not formally commit to certain institutions? Who share certain but not all values and styles? Some constituents have many traits in common (graduate or professional degrees, past associations with other liberal/progressive places, political affiliations, clothing styles, preferred mode of transit), but others have none beyond their shared interest in a certain kind of food. “That groups are not homogeneous is the first realization of any scholar doing fieldwork,” Noyes writes, yet the scholar still must work to define the group--who is in, who is out.\(^\text{14}\)


Avoiding stereotypes in my characterizations has been challenging. I have attempted to highlight a range of representative individuals who, I hope, will show the group’s diversity as well as its common interests.

Glenn Hinson’s ethnographic work, *Fire in My Bones*, as well as his classroom teachings on ethnography, gave me the freedom to experiment with writing styles and informed my ethnographic ethics. Because the class was based in collaborative ethnography, we explored how we might include ourselves in our written work, and to artfully describe the worlds of our study. In fact, the class was called “The Art of Ethnography,” and the syllabus describes ethnography as “a process based in conversation and the search for shared understanding, is inherently creative. It is always a ‘making,’ an enacting that begins with conversations in the ‘field’ and eventually finds voice in various forms of artful representation.” Hinson conveyed the importance of maintaining good relationships with consultants as well as writing artfully about people, places, and experiences. At its best, collaborative ethnography is a research method designed such that each of these goals helps facilitate the other. The relationships that I have developed with my consultants--many of whom are now friends--are invaluable. They have helped me comprehend community and values, and they also gave me continuous feedback on my perceptions and ideas.

Clifford Geertz’s “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” is a meditation on the role and practice of the ethnographer. Geertz ponders what is and

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is not realistically knowable to an observer of culture, and what end form his observations might take. Toward the end of this project, I took comfort in Geertz’s words, knowing that I was not the only ethnographer who felt that the more I learned about my subject, the less I seemed to know, and the more incomplete my project felt. Geertz explains:

Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is. It is a strange science whose most telling assertions are its most tremulously based, in which to get somewhere with the matter at hand is to intensify the suspicion, both your own and that of others, that you are not quite getting it right. But that, along with plaguing subtle people with obtuse questions, is what being an ethnographer is like.17

Recognizing the inherent incompleteness of my and any ethnographer’s work shifts the task to one of description rather than conclusion. As observers and even as interrogators, there is much we cannot know about culture. The ethnographer must strive to paint the most accurate picture possible from his or her individual perspective and to use that perspective to key raise questions and suggest interpretations. To be sure, this project has left me with more questions than I had when I began, and I am compelled to work well past my deadlines in an attempt to include it all. This is impossible, of course, and we all must keep in mind that this is simply one snapshot of Carrboro from one ethnographer’s perspective. Could I have focused more on the punk politics, the surprising artistic sensibilities of the food community, or the perspective of the market’s founding farmers? Yes, but not in this space. There are limits to what ethnographers can do, and the best we

can hope for is to ask good questions of people willing to talk and to try to do justice to those responses.

In recent years, some anthropologists and folklorists have advocated for the inclusion of sensory-based descriptive passages. Anthropologist Paul Stoller proposes “melange” in ethnography—a mix of dialogue, description, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony, smells, sights, and sounds” to create a tasteful ethnographic discourse. Such discourse should “blend the ingredients of a world so that bad sauces might be transformed into delicious prose.” Stoller encourages scholars not to write dryly and analytically for the specialist, but broadly and memorably for bigger audiences, and to enhance the descriptive power of our writing with the incorporation of smells, tastes, textures, and sensations. He is also a proponent of “sensuous scholarship,” which is the “fusion of the intelligible and the sensible” in scholarly practice. Stoller’s model suggests that food is best understood not on paper, but through experience—through the senses. If food and its specific qualities are something that is important to consultants, and if taste and smell are our primary interactions with food, the ethnographer must address the senses.

Comprehending Place

In a local food movement, place is of the utmost importance. At its most elemental, place defines what you may eat and when, for climate and soil impose certain limitations today in much the same way that they have for thousands of years. Place is

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also imbued with histories and filled with individuals that influence what appears at the table. Understanding these intimate connections between food, culture, and place is paramount to the interpretations of this study. Geographers, historians, as well as landscape and architectural and environmental specialists, have offered diverse ways to decipher the meaning of place. In particular, works by Yi-Fu Tuan, Kingston William Heath, William Cronon, Gary Paul Nabhan, and Bernard Herman have written key texts that inform this study of Carrboro and help contextualize its importance as hot-spot for local food and a ideologically transformative space.

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan artfully discusses sense of place, distinguishing between places that are built to have specific meanings (“public symbols,” such as the Town Commons, an official, demarcated space where the farmers’ market is held), and those that have meaning only because of people’s experiences within them (“fields of care,” such as the Weaver Street Lawn, which people have made into a community gathering spot). Tuan explicates the ways in which we come to know place, particularly through our memories and emotions, the “lores of bygone generations,” and the perspective of homesickness. Place is not simply defined by the material, but by the immaterial. In fact, it grounds the immaterial human experience in something concrete. Food functions in the same way as place and is, of course, intimately tied to place. The immateriality of human experience--now grounded in both place and food-- is highly relevant to this study, which includes “eat local” activists and politics and considers a town as a transformative space.

19 Tuan, “Space and place: humanistic perspective,” 236.
Tuan and Kingston William Heath each focus on a different aspect of place, but their writings are complementary. In broadest terms, each argues that it is people who give meaning to space. Heath argues that “abstract notions of place take the form of a ‘memory landscape,’ whereby clear images of place are framed not only by the awareness of the locale, but also by situations that resonate with personal identity.” Heath’s work, while primarily focused on reading culture through changing architectural landscapes, gave me a new way to think of widespread change in place as a broader concept, primarily as economies evolve and populations shift. He distinguishes between intended use and actual use of space, and much like New Bedford, Massachusetts, Carrboro was a mill town with housing designed specifically for factory workers. Today, as a bedroom community for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Carrboro is a haven for artists, radicals, cyclists, and students. *The Patina of Place* offers a way to understand how those people have experienced and shaped Carrboro.

William Cronon’s *Changes in the Land* first informed my thinking on land use and food, although it primarily deals with Native perspectives on American geography, landscape, and resources compared with those of the first Europeans explorers in New England. To survive, American Indians understood the landscape and ecosystems intimately. Europeans generally viewed the same landscape as a world of commodities. The European perspective that viewed the land as capital—as a source of profit rather than mere survival—revolutionized the American food system, and indeed all of American culture and economics. Land is still for profit in and around Carrboro, yet the small-scale

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organic farmers and those who support them understand their actions as a reinvestment in
the land--as caring for its long-term health and continued use rather than simply
exploiting it for short-term gain.

Gary Nabhan’s work examines native ecologies and the food systems that develop in those frameworks. In *The Desert Smells Like Rain*, Nabhan illustrates the importance and success of climate-adaptive crops by telling the story of O’odham (formerly Papago) agriculture in the deserts of the Southwestern United States and northern Mexico. In a reading of people and landscape, he discusses resource management, climate change, government regulation, and modern industrial agriculture versus traditional methods. Physical and agricultural marginalization go hand-in-hand in this story, and the reduced productivity of the desert is the result. Nabhan shows the value of indigenous knowledge and practice, which, on the whole, left people and place healthier and more self-sustaining. It is this reasoning that many of my consultants use to justify small-scale organic farming in the North Carolina piedmont.

At the center of the argument in favor of local foods is the concept of *terroir*, commonly defined as the taste of place. Bernard L. Herman’s work on *terroir* in the Eastern Shore Virginia foodways describes its power:

*Terroir* defines the particular attributes of place embodied in cuisine and narrated through words, actions, and objects. Place alone, however, fails to translate the deeper associations that *terroir* projects about identity. In its literal consumption, we ingest and digest *terroir*, imbuing ourselves with the tastes of identity and authenticity. The body literally absorbs the substance of *terroir* and translates it into narratives of place and experience and emotion, embodiment and immediacy, custom and invention, destiny and storytelling. It manifests itself in a constantly evolving style and synthesis of ingredients, recipes, preparations, and eating, from

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fancy holiday meals to workaday lunches. Finally, when people speak about terroir, they speak about themselves.23

Herman illustrates the ways in which food opens up narratives of not only place, but also of group and of self. The stories and understandings are as important as the food itself. Thus, terroir, with its particular tastes and tales, becomes a way to understand both human and physical geography. These narratives of place and self are crucial to our understanding of modern Carrboro, but also of consultants such as April McGreger, for whom place, story, and tradition play an especially important role.

Raymond Williams characterizes place as a symbolic form that is both culturally resonant and dissociated from geographic realities. Our formulations of place--of country and city--are products of social developments. These conceptualizations, then, become a way to understand cultural tensions. Williams examines the origins of the romanticized image of rural life wherein exploitation and poverty are simply forgotten, dissolving instead “into a landscape.”24 That simple country landscape is “an idea of an ordered and happier past set against the disturbance and disorder of the present.”25 He explains that a culture’s idealizations of place are “based on a temporary situation and on a deep desire for stability, served to cover and to evade the actual and bitter contradictions of the time.”26 For Williams, the country and the city are set up in a false dichotomy, with the country imagined as wholly bucolic, peaceful, simple, and unchanging, and the city as


25 Williams, The Country and the City, 45.

26 Williams, The Country and the City, 45.
invariably modern, dangerous, and exploitative, if sophisticated. When the city feels overwhelmingly chaotic and frightening, the country remains stable and safe--or so it appears. People need the idea of the country as a mental safety net. It is a crucial piece of cultural identity even for those who do not live there, for we situate a set of values in the countryside, and we cannot understand ourselves or our societies without it. Some in the local food movement are prone to romanticize the countryside and the American farmer. Williams describes the long history of using the countryside as an ideological retreat from troubled times or politically tricky situations. The idea of the country is escapist.

**Food as a Window on Identity**

Henry Glassie has written that when we think of food as material culture, we get at the “wordless experience” of people. From eons of unwritten recipes and histories to the sensory experiences described by Paul Stoller, “wordless experience” is a great part of food. Food is a powerful, material expression of culture, politics, and ideologies, one which can embody both the oppositional and the establishment--even the relationship between the two. Food--high and low, politically correct and handmade or industrial and anonymous--is Carrboro. It is one of the most approachable and alluring manifestations of the swirl of history, ideas, people, and *terroir* that make the town what it is today.

Scholars across many disciplines are writing about the role of food in our lives, and the innumerable connections between food, culture, and identity. Food is a marker of

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class, education, style, race, religion, region, and political consciousness, to name only a few. In other words, it speaks to the most basic elements of who we are. As such, it plays a central role in how we see ourselves and choose to present ourselves to the world.

For this project, the inheritance, construction, and performance of identity are crucial points of meaning. Marcie Cohen Ferris, Psyche Williams-Forson, Susan Kalçik, and Ashley, Hollow, Jones, and Taylor discuss food and identity.

In her study of southern Jewish foodways and the tension between competing regional, ethnic, and religious identities in the South, Marcie Cohen Ferris writes:

Eating is a simple act. We prepare food, and we eat it. But why do people have such strong feelings about food? Why does food cause people to experience a range of emotions from comfort to anger? Simply put, eating is not solely about nourishment. Eating is a complicated activity that reveals who we are and where we come from, an activity that defines our race, gender, class, and religion.28

Ferris examines the complexity of identity as manifested in food, something that, on the surface, seems an uncomplicated part of daily life. Politics should be added to the list of what food reveals about ourselves. The food-oriented political consciousness(es) of individuals in this area means that neither preparing food nor eating it is a simple act.

Miriam Lowenberg explains that: “[...] the eating of organic foods by some groups in the United States has operated as a protest against mainstream culture and a political and economic system that, by relying on chemical fertilizers and preservatives, puts profit and convenience ahead of ecology and people.”29


In her book *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs*, Psyche Williams-Forson discusses the continued presence and significance of fried chicken in the physical, social, and cultural journeys of African-Americans. Though the nature of African-American travel experiences has changed dramatically since Jim Crow laws and de facto segregation of food service and lodging facilities first made chicken a necessary traveling companion, the tradition of carrying chicken continues for some. It may no longer be a physical necessity, but some still perceive it as such, and the simple association of chicken with travel remains strong. Williams-Forson asserts that people “hold on to generational rituals and practices in order to maintain a sense of identity and sanity. But these decisions are also less dramatic. In some cases, continuing these practices is simply a matter of making familial connections.” Specifically, she is referencing the racial and cultural identity of a historically marginalized group, but I believe this explanation of continuity can also be applied more broadly. Our dietary and customary holdovers are not always logical, nor do they necessarily reflect physical needs; they are, however, key to our sense of self, whether as individuals, families, or entire cultural groups. They allow us a sense of connectedness to the past. Williams-Forson’s work explains why and how people hold on to traditional food behaviors. In Carrboro, I see this particularly in consultant and chef April McGregor, but also in the immigrants who come to town and bring with them the cuisines of their original homes.

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Virginia Nazarea’s “Southern Memories in a Globalizing World” from *Heirloom Seeds and Their Keepers*\(^{32}\) examines the motivations and actions of a generation of older seedsavers in the rural American South. Nazarea argues that the saving and sharing of heirloom seeds is a tradition with particular strength in the region, tying it to marginality, memory, identity, resistance, and sense of place. It quickly becomes clear that informal conservation efforts around the South predate contemporary efforts supported by anti-GMO (genetically-modified organism) movements around the globe. Before Slow Food had articulated an official ideology, held formal meetings, or printed earth-friendly canvas totebags, southern seedsavers--indeed seedsavers around the world--were engaged in what has now become an exalted, politicized activity.\(^{33}\) These seedsavers are working class and poor people. Rare southern fruits and vegetables are part of their identities and activities. Interestingly, there are some similarities to the motivations of Slow Food members: some are curious about varieties or are mindful of some version of tradition, while some simply love the taste, and others prefer the quality of heirloom seed. Paying adequate due to the people--an older generation who love the plants, place, and memories--who found the task satisfying and have made it possible for the next generation to employ their ideologies via the seeds, Nazarea’s work adds depth and complexity to the discussion of contemporary food politics.

If food embodies a host of unselfconscious individual and group characteristics and histories, it is also used consciously by some eaters to construct narratives and


identities of self and group--or to break out of those narratives. Susan Kalçik’s “Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity” offers excellent insight into both conscious and unselfconscious symbolic consumption of food.34 She writes, “People tend to eat as they want to be perceived, so that it is as much a matter of ‘you eat what you wish to be’ as ‘you are what you eat.’ Food is a whole area of performance in which statements of identity can be made [...].”35 Kalçik considers implications for identity when, for instance, someone abandons the foods of poverty, or when an immigrant decides to change or keep various elements of his or her native diet, or when individuals reject or accept ethnic cuisines. These types of choices also play a role in determining in-group and out-group status. Kalçik’s work helps us understand dietary change, as well as individual and group identity, in a community with a diverse, shifting population and many cultural variables.

In Food and Cultural Studies, Ashley et al also discuss the broad symbolism of eating and what food choices can imply about not only identity, but values and tastes. On the nature of what constitutes “good” food, they write:

The concept of ‘good’ food practices here no longer simply refers to nutritional value, but carries with it moral and aesthetic values. Furthermore, food tastes--our likes and dislikes--are not only social and cultural (rather than being biological or individual) but these tastes are related to broader aesthetic and moral classifications in which some tastes are seen as more legitimate than others.”36


35 Kalçik, “Ethnic Foodways in America,” 54.

36 Ashley et al., Food and Cultural Studies, 62.
How one defines “good” food may be a factor for inclusion or exclusion in various communities in Carrboro. Those who believe in eating local food have their own definition of “good” food, which keeps dollars local, reduces long-distance shipping (and eco-guilt), and prioritizes freshness and origin. So, too, do vegetarians or people who insist on buying Fair Trade-certified products. My consultants share particular tastes and values, though they may have nothing else in common. People from all walks of life and inclinations may conspicuously consume in such a way as to make their tastes and values known to others.

Ashley et al explain this sort of gastronomic adaptation and play in a chapter on consumption and taste:

The new middle class may innovate by searching out new exotic foodstuffs and transgressing the cultural boundaries of the edible and inedible. [...] These foods are usually ones that are outside the mainstream of a culture’s cooking: traditional working-class dishes which have fallen out of favour and the ‘peasant’ dishes of another culture.

Or perhaps the food is the peasant dishes of one’s own culture that were left behind for the sake of “progress” and convenience and novelty, or the peasant dishes of the latest immigrant culture. In Carrboro, this might mean returning to—or exploring for the first time—traditional Southern foods like cornbread and succotash, or turning to less popular

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37 Fair Trade products are certified by independent, paid companies such as Quality Assurance International, who also monitor and certify some organic producers. Fair Trade products not local, but usually from developing countries and industries with known histories of exploitative labor practices, e.g. the banana, cocoa, sugar, and coffee trades in Central and South America, the Asian Pacific, or Africa. Except for sugar, of course, these are products that are not widely produced in the mainland United States. Some locavores consume them anyway—along with imported wine and beer—while others refuse them all together. Those who do buy them often ease their consciences a bit by looking for Fair Trade certifications, though the value of the certifications has its critics as well. Fair Trade products are most often carried by cooperative groceries and places like Whole Foods, though mainstream grocers in wealthier or more progressive areas may stock them. Fair Trade products are generally more expensive than their uncertified counterparts.

38 Ashley et al, Food and Cultural Studies, 69.
cuts of meat. (Tongue or lengua, popular with North Carolina’s growing Latino population, is one of those cuts. Southerners are also experimenting with goat, the world’s most commonly consumed meat, which is not so commonly consumed here.)

The food itself, the nature of the places in which it is sold and consumed, its packaging and advertising, and other aspects of marketing, branding, and material culture are important to this study of what constitutes “good” or desirable food in a community, and what that food says about group and individual identity.

Perhaps the specific trappings of high status as derived from food have changed over the years, but food as a realm of play for the elite is nothing new. In his book *Beans: A History*, Ken Albala links garden experimentation and fascination with unusual varieties to Thomas Jefferson and the ruling gentry, implying that “heirlooms” have a long association with the elite. Furthermore, former *New York Times Magazine* food columnist Molly O’Neill has called her audience, who enjoy reading about haute cuisine and quirky vegetables, the “over-educated and over-privileged” elite. Carrboro is not insulated from class issues associated with food. Contemporary food trends--which prize the local and the homegrown--mean that today’s “over-educated and over-privileged” elite are enjoying, for now, the chance to rub shoulders with farmers. George O’Neal, a young farmer in the area, observed that farming is “the flavor of the month.” The elite certainly can be found browsing and chatting at the local farmers’ market alongside students with dreadlocks and middle-class mothers and farmers in Carhartts. My intent is

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40 Molly O’Neill. “Big Table” (lecture, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, January 29, 2009).

to demonstrate more than a one-dimensional depiction of the local food movement. It is not entirely elite, as it has been criticized, and it is not entirely grassroots, as it has been romanticized. Each criticism has its truth, and each element its importance. This movement has been unfairly stereotyped in both directions, and as usual, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

Defining and Redefining a Toxic Food Culture

Myriad sources discuss the evolution and far-reaching implications of America’s industrial food system in social, economic, environmental, and public health contexts, with some offering alternative models in addition to social history and critique. Warren Belasco and Harvey Levenstein have documented the history of the industrial food system and the countercultural responses to it. Marion Nestle, a nutritionist, and Michael Pollan, a journalist, define the unhealthy food culture to which Carrboro’s food activists are responding. Radical homemaker Shannon Hayes questions standard social measures of success (education and professional jobs), while Wendell Berry, the farmer-poet-philosopher, expresses deep skepticism that urban, fast-paced, technology-based modern life can bring true happiness and well-being. Economist Richard Florida, on the other hand, documents the rise of highly modern “creative communities” in urban hotspots around the country that combine high quality of life, high rates of migration and immigration, and access to creative professions.42 Each of these writers captures

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something intimately tied to my consultants’ way of life in Carrboro and its neighboring farms and communities.

Harvey A. Levenstein has written extensively on the history of American food, from industry to home cooking. In multiple volumes (Revolution at the Table⁴³ and Paradox of Plenty⁴⁴), Levenstein traces the drastic changes that began in the nineteenth century following America’s expansion into the Midwest and the growth of the railroads and farming and processing technologies. His work provides a comprehensive summary of the development of the American diet and food industry from both cultural and technological standpoints. Personal convenience and corporate profit are key themes.

Warren Belasco has written about the morals and meaning of food production and consumption, focusing in particular upon the development of the industrial food system and the countercultural response it generated. Food: The Key Concepts⁴⁵ is an excellent introductory text on food as culture and as business. Appetite for Change⁴⁶ focuses on the counterculture’s food activism, of which Belasco was a part. Belasco describes protests, communes, underground publications, and the transition of health or natural foods stores from health and exercise enthusiasts of the 1950s to long-haired hippies of the 1960s. He also describes food as one of many realms in which the counterculture sought to subvert mainstream politics and markets and morals. Yet for all of the serious politics surrounding food, Belasco reminds us that eating was also about pleasure.

⁴³ Harvey A. Levenstein, Revolution at the Table (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
Nutritionist Marion Nestle has written extensively on the growing number of public health crises related to poor diet, and she links these explicitly to the industrial food system with its fast food and junk food marketing. She focuses on obesity, heart disease, and diabetes, but she also critiques pet food manufacturers and those who market grossly unhealthy products directly to children. Nestle explains the root of the problem in terms of simple economics, explaining that companies must grow to stay in business, and one way to do so is by promoting unhealthy foods, which are the cheapest to produce. Nestle connects food marketing and negative consequences for public health:

> Food marketing promotes weight gain. Indeed, it is difficult to think of any major industry that might benefit if people ate less food; certainly not the agriculture, food product, grocery, restaurant, diet, or drug industries. All flourish when people eat more, and all employ armies of lobbyists to discourage governments from doing anything to inhibit overeating.

Companies spend billions of dollars to ensure that consumers buy the food calories they produce. What happens after the products are purchased is not their chief concern. Other companies, however, are very much concerned with the after effects; medical and pharmaceutical industries profit from the nation’s ill health.

Journalist and Slow Food activist Michael Pollan examines the relationship between the industrial food system and public health, and the deep cultural shifts that go hand-in-hand with it. His highly influential books, including *In Defense of Food* and *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, are core texts for the study of the modern, industrial food system—and perhaps ways to escape its pervasive control. He explores supermarkets, feed lots,

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48 Nestle and Brownell, “America’s Obesity Crisis.”
organic farms big and small, Whole Foods, fast food, California foraging and fishing, and family meals at home. In so doing, he has crafted a manifesto for the conscientious modern eater.

The first lines of In Defense of Food deliver Pollan’s now-famous advice: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” Pollan points out that no other animal needs professional help when it comes to food and reminds us that it is only relatively recently we have begun to turn to “experts” in the form of diet gurus and government-issued nutrition guidelines. In Defense of Food argues for real food and pleasurable, social eating rather than our new national routine of gorging on fast food behind the wheel or take-out in front of the television. Pollan encourages cooking from scratch, enjoying meals with family and friends, and seeking out whole, seasonal foods from farmers markets and conscientious grocers. Pollan’s critique is a familiar to my consultants in Carrboro, who are engaged in many of the activities he encourages.

Community activist, farmer, and writer Shannon Hayes provides a helpful and more holistic framework to consider food activism in Carrboro. Hayes considers both the ideological and pragmatic implications for American production and consumption and offers an alternative model for contemporary domesticity, economy, and community. The “radical homemakers” Hayes interviews transformed their homes and families into units of production rather than consumption. Often, the women--and sometimes men--left formal, salaried employment in the mainstream economy to instead grow food, cook, can, sew, educate their children, and do any number of other home-based tasks that contribute


50 Pollan, In Defense of Food, 3.
to self-sufficiency, but also to the four principle tenets of a “life-serving” (rather than extractive) economy:

1. Respect and care for the community of life
2. Ecological integrity
3. Social and economic justice
4. Democracy, non-violence, and peace.51

These principles and the acts they inspire connect local people in social and economic ways that create community. The first three principles are applied easily to a food system and tie directly to concerns expressed by my group of consultants.

Kentucky-based farmer, poet, philosopher, and rural advocate Wendell Berry with modernity versus tradition and biology versus technology. Berry’s numerous essays respond to notions of “progress” and modernity, and considers whether we might be progressing to our own detriment in some cases.52 The food system, for instance, is more dangerous for eaters and farmers--not to mention animals, plants, and land--than perhaps at any time in history. The taproot of this problem, Berry believes, is a cultural disconnect from the reality of farms and farmers, from life and death, from natural rhythms, and perhaps even from personal responsibility for the sources of our food. For Berry, then, modernity is largely an encroachment, and should be viewed skeptically and adopted sparingly, if at all. He glorifies a low-tech, sustainable, contemplative agrarian existence in which people know and respect the land and the world’s life cycles. Berry’s


philosophy is inspirational to members of the greater Carrboro community who have decided to become farmers.

Warren Belasco describes the philosophies of people like Hayes and Berry as “the anthropological fix,” wherein we question and seek to change people’s values in order to address the problems of the modern food system.\(^{53}\) It is the opposite of the “technological fix,” whereby we attempt to engineer our way out of every problem.\(^{54}\) In this case, the anthropological fix means un-engineering the food system, turning back the clock to the days before we ate so many processed foods, used pesticides, and food was shipped food thousands of miles from its source. It means cooking and gardening and eating seasonally again--returning to age-old traditions that were instituted simply by the absence of other options. Belasco’s “anthropological fix” --rebuilding a food system according to a specific range of values held in common by a distinct, localized population---is clearly visible in the food economy of Carrboro, North Carolina.

In *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida asserts that when the continuities of social capital are broken, innovation, reinvention, and play are more likely to occur. Florida, a cosmopolitan foil to Hayes and Berry, refers to a mixture of artists, intellectuals, and high tech professionals living in cities where there are many newcomers and few insiders. “Places with looser networks and weaker ties are more open to newcomers and thus promote novel combinations of resources and ideas.”\(^{55}\) Social norms and expectations yield stability, according to Florida, but the absence of a tight

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\(^{53}\) Belasco, *Food: The Key Concepts*, 118.


social network and social pressure also has benefits. People feel free to do things they would not do if they were surrounded by a close circle of friends and relatives who enforce behavioral norms and expectations. The creative class enjoys a freedom and flexibility that those living in small towns or other tight-knit communities do not have. Furthermore, they are more inspired to change because of the flexibility in their surroundings, and that change is considered positive. The unfamiliar provokes new insight and directions. Creative communities, as Florida calls them, are open, tolerant societies with good quality of life, and they experience more diversity, more innovation, and more economic growth as a result. Carrboro is a creative community, for the universities and industries that surround it attract a broad and constantly evolving population from around the country and the world, yet just outside the town limits, Carrboro residents have easy access to the type of agrarian landscape described by Berry. Inside Carrboro’s borders, one can find the increasingly self-sufficient homes described by Hayes. Carrboro is a hybrid of the three models described by Hayes, Berry, and Florida.

**Southern Food**

Southern food--indeed any regional cuisine--has been shaped for centuries by what grows locally. Rayna Green’s “Mothern Corn and the Dixie Pig” reminds us of the earliest roots of southern cuisine, while John T. Edge and Joe Gray Taylor describe its latter day iterations. Let this overview of Southern food serve as a backdrop for the

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hakurei turnips, daikon radishes, tofu, sweet potatoes, pink-eyed purple hull peas, muscadine meringue tartlets, and pastrami biscuits of today’s Carrboro.

Rayna Green’s “Mother Corn and the Dixie Pig” examines the intricate connections between the Native diet and the evolving southern diet.57 “Native food was once the only food story,” Green writes, though today it seems to be a mostly forgotten one.58 She describes the early Europeans as both impressed by and absolutely dependent upon the Indians’ mastery of the region’s natural abundance as well as their crops. As European colonists arrived in America and had to learn to feed themselves in an unfamiliar place, they turned to the Native diet. Corn was both sacred and sustaining to many Native peoples. It became an important part of the European colonists’ diet as well. Grits, cornbread, and succotash are the three of the most prominent and lasting examples of corn’s importance. Natives were also influenced by European and African additions to the food landscape. They eventually raised pigs, first brought to America by the Spanish, and pork became an ingredient in many Native dishes. Previously, they had relied only on fish and game for meat, as there was no Native precedent for domesticated animals. In Native, European, and also African-American culture, pork and corn could be found together in many dishes. “By the eighteenth century, [...] the ‘new’ foods from Europe (Spain, France, the British Isles), Africa, and the Caribbean merged with native staples to create the complex mélange that is today’s southern cuisine.”59 Green’s argument, in essence, is that even if southerners seem unaware of the indigenous peoples of the region

59 Green, “Mother Corn and the Dixie Pig,” 117.
in historical or contemporary contexts, the south’s foodways contain some of the most familiar, lasting material evidence of their presence in the region.\textsuperscript{60}

Edge and Taylor give a succinct overview of the history and major components of southern cuisine in their introduction to the Foodways volume of The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture. They, too, acknowledge the early and lasting role that Native cuisine played in shaping the broader southern diet, and they describe the early frontier diet as consisting of wild plants, fruits, and nuts, along with fish and game animals. Interestingly, they link the southern tradition of “big eating” to a combination of the Indians’ “feast or famine” state and the English concern for the quantity (as much as quality) of food one served guests, as well as the comparative abundance and variety of foods in America.\textsuperscript{61} Like Green, Edge and Taylor discuss the long-lasting importance of both corn and pork, which were eaten at almost every meal, but they also describe the “great triumvirate of southern vegetables”--turnips, cowpeas, and sweet potatoes.\textsuperscript{62} These grew easily, kept well, and were nutritionally rich. Cornbread did not keep well, so Southerners became accustomed to hot bread at every meal; cornbread was eventually replaced by leavened wheat flour biscuits. Edge and Taylor explain the changes and challenges the Southern diet experienced following the Civil War, the arrival of pork, meal, and wheat flour from the Midwest, and the increased importance of refrigeration.

\textsuperscript{60} Green also comments upon the movement to revive Native crops and “critters,” which, along with Virginia Nazarea’s work, broadens, diversifies, and complicates the discussion of Slow Food, local food, heirlooms, etc.


\textsuperscript{62} Taylor and Edge, “Introduction,” 4.
supermarkets, “eating out,” and the impact of urban/suburban lifestyles (as opposed to the farm). Even so, “Food patterns formed on the southern frontier persisted well into the 20th century, and indeed after World War II in many small towns and rural areas.”

**Tradition & Revival**

From the earliest days of the discipline, folklore has been concerned with people and things perceived to be threatened or vanishing. Folklorists romanticized the rural, the traditional, and the marginalized. In less cynical terms, folklorists have documented and preserved traditional expressive culture and lifeways, including food and farming. Historically, folklorists have gravitated toward the rural and the impoverished as particularly threatened, and also as places where authentic culture is most likely to survive. Although interest in “the folk” long predates the rise of industry as well as the discipline of folklore, the pairing of anti-industry sentiment with concern for folk or traditional cultures has been common for well over a century. Scholars and activists have

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64 William Wilson, “Herder, Folklore, and Romantic Nationalism,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 4 (1973): 819-835. From its earliest days, the discipline of folklore has had questionable ties to nationalism and nation-building through periodic interest in reviving regional, ethnic, or rural “traditions,” for instance. (To be fair, folklore scholars and revivalists have long been tied to anti-war, anti-capitalist, and preservation movements as well.) In eighteenth and nineteenth century Germany, Johann von Gottfried Herder and his countrymen, as discussed in William Wilson’s work, looked to the peasantry, who still spoke German, cared nothing for French political philosophy or language, and held the ancient “folk poetry” of their valiant ancestors. They were the unknowing locus of “survivals,” and in them, Herder saw something pure and essentially German that he believed could benefit the larger population--something that would unite the country and restore its faded glory. Though Herder was writing from the mid-eighteenth century onward, we must also consider his work in a slightly later context. Across Europe, the 19th century was a time of revolution (shockwaves from France), and shifting, contested borders with attempts at territorial consolidation, and Germany needed to be strong and unified to maintain control of its territory and resources. (By the 1930s, of course, Germany was powerful enough to seize control of other nations’ territory and resources, and putting Jews to death in concentration camps. The Nazi movement clearly drew inspiration from Herder’s work.) It was also the age of the Industrial Revolution and the growth of cities, which encouraged the romantic gaze toward the presumably unchanging peasantry who remained in the countryside, happily doing what they had done for centuries.
frequently positioned industry and folk in a dichotomy of sorts, with the former always overpowering the latter. Profit and progress threaten culture.

Tradition is one of my chief scholarly interests. “Heritage” is another term that frequently pops up in such discussions, thus I will draw freely upon articles discussing each. I am interested in tradition as a flexible and adaptable process, and particularly as a tool or reference point in politically-charged situations. I am most interested in applied or mediated tradition, in people’s particular perceptions and interpretations. Folklorists have argued about authenticity and survival since the discipline’s earliest days, but I am less concerned with authenticity than utility and nostalgia, or at the very least, how they find meaning in their perceptions of the traditional.

Theorizing the perceptions and applications of heritage, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett offers a dynamic definition: “Heritage is not lost and found, stolen and reclaimed. It is a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past.” Expressing a similar formulation of tradition, Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin assert that “there is no essential, bounded tradition; tradition is a model of the past and is inseparable from the interpretation of the tradition in the present.” They describe it, instead, as a symbolic process. Lastly, Henry Glassie writes, “Accept, to begin, that tradition is a creation of the future out of the past.”

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Gimblett, Handler, Linnekin, and Glassie explain, heritage and tradition are as much about who we want and need to be in the present as who we actually were in the past.

This does not mean that tradition is meaningless—only that it is dynamic and relative, and can be highly individualized. We each put our own spin on things, for tradition shows us what we want to see. Tradition can offer a refuge from toxic modernity, rapid change, and the unfamiliar. Real or imagined, it can ground us in times of uncertainty. It gives us license. And yet this does not necessarily make it fake.

Glassie explains that “Change and tradition are commonly coupled, in chat and chapter titles, as antonyms. But tradition is the opposite of only one kind of change: that in which disruption is so complete that the new cannot be read as an innovative adaptation of the old.”68 Furthermore, he writes, “[... ] when actions are shaped sincerely, tradition will be present.”69 Whether actions are authentic is almost beside the point. Authenticity becomes strands of continuity rather than exact replication, and sometimes reading an action’s motivation is the most meaningful part of all. These folklorists recognize that the highly contentious debate over authenticity can simply be a distraction from the real meaning of an action or belief, hence their position in the more flexible middle ground. Glassie asserts that “More important [than the debate over the nature of tradition and authenticity] is developing an understanding of the concept in the breadth of its semantic extent.”70 What does the application of the word tradition imply?

70 Glassie, “Tradition,” 76.
With such an open position on tradition, one must acknowledge the role of nostalgia. Invariably, when social movements orient themselves to pieces of the past, using words like “heritage” and “tradition,” some degree of nostalgia is guaranteed. Throughout history people have fashioned a narrative of the past that enables them to be what they want to be in the present, tailoring details for clarity, coherence, and a sensible progression of people, places, and events. But is nostalgia always a negative thing? Nostalgia is complicated and tempting to dismiss, yet it is a powerful motivator worthy of consideration. We should respect it for what it is—an indicator of the desire, reasonable or not, for something perceived as absent.

As my interest in tradition has taken shape, so, too, has an interest in revivals and their politics. Observing a cyclical pattern of interest in tradition and cultural heritage, Ann and David Whisnant theorize that when people perceive a cultural crisis of values or lifestyle, they sometimes seek ways to “reorient by the compass of antiquity.” Much like the formulations of place described by Raymond Williams, so, too, are perceptions of culture and values affected by social tensions. In times of economic uncertainty, political outrage, and cultural backlash, people look for alternatives. They turn to tradition and to folk aesthetics for answers, even if they have to craft the right mix to achieve the wholesomeness, cohesiveness, or authenticity they desire. Critically situating the local food movement as a revival of this sort enables us to understand it as a social critique with obvious parallels in the past. Revivals elucidate some of the local food movement’s

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71 The Whisnants’ work on Appalachian culture, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and the work of folklorists and cultural advocates offers fascinating insight into stereotypes, cultural commodification, and tourism, but also public interest in tradition.
ideological heritage, which may not be directly related to food, but to ways of valuing
and relating to the world.

What is happening with the local food movement today, with its socialist /
populist / anarchist bent, follows in the tradition of romantic resistance to the Industrial
Revolution, a la Mary Shelley, John Ruskin, and William Morris, as well as the
seemingly age-old longing for “authentic tradition” embodied in so many folk revivals.72

If the changes brought by encroaching modernity are implicated in leading an entire
society astray--ruining health, land, culture, and satisfaction in life--it is to past practices
that many concerned eaters (or workers) turn. They openly question what progress has
truly yielded us, and what we have yielded to it in return. Warren Belasco writes:

From the agrarian utopias of William Morris in England and Bronson Alcott in
Fruitlands, Massachusetts, it was a pretty straight leap, a hundred years later, to
the hippy communes of Findhorn, Scotland, and Morningstar Ranch, California.
And these communities in turn nurtured the ideas and activism of the sustainable
food movement, the leading edge of the anthropological fix.73

Clearly, the anti-industry critical stance is nothing new, but we continue to update the
politics every few decades. Periodic upwellings of dissatisfaction with modern life have
spawned a series of related utopian or revival movements.74 Belasco draws direct

72 Belasco, *Food: The Key Concepts*, 118-9. I refer in particular to the American folk revivals of the 1930s
through the 1960s. For an excellent musical parallel, see Benjamin Filene’s “Oh Brother, What Next?”
*Southern Cultures* 10.2 (Summer 2004): 50-69. Also, Robert Cantwell’s “When We Were Good: Class and
Rosenberg, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 35-60. Plenty more revivals from throughout
history and around the world fit the bill, of course.

73 Belasco, *Food: The Key Concepts*, 120.

74 In addition to the aforementioned folk revivals, America has a history of food utopias and diet-oriented
movements. Over the years, small groups have responded to rapid change or perceived wrongs in the
mainstream food culture (or simply culture in general) in the United States with various oppositional
movements: the Temperance movement, nineteenth century utopian communities with strict dietary laws
(e.g., Sylvester Graham, Oneida, Shakers), radical farm communes, special diets as a path to spiritual and
or bodily health, et cetera. See Etta M. Madden and Martha L. Finch, eds. *Eating in Eden: Food and
American Utopias* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).
ideological links from the nineteenth century Arts & Crafts movement to the counterculture and folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, when Baby Boomers came of age and questioned the highly industrialized, increasingly synthetic and consumerist post-war culture of their youth.

Robert Cantwell’s extensive work on the folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s offers great insight on the current local food movement. “Diehard revivalists,” he writes, set out to create

a life that might somehow reverberate morally to folk music: a life radically less reliant upon money and the accumulation of it; a life of participatory, not vicarious, recreation, with a recognition of the importance of small community to such enjoyment; a life, above all, that in the personal and domestic realms reflected an awareness of our involvement in the global ecological, economic, and political order. Chickens and goats, cottage crafts, organic gardening, home canning and preserving, wood heating, natural foods, natural fibers, natural childbirth--though inflation undercut most of these experiments, or sent them along commercial routes in exurbia to occupy the weekends of the rich--were the late contributions to American life by young adults for whom folk music had become, in Raymond Williams’s phrase, ‘the site of resistance to the centralization of power.’

Likewise, the local food movement is about much more than just food; it is about broader values and an entire way of being that affects day-to-day activities, but also long-term happiness and identity. Many of the activities, aesthetics, and values Cantwell lists that attracted revivalists in the 1950s and 1960s attract people today, and much of what he describes links directly to Shannon Hayes’s radical homemakers. Today’s movement draws heavily upon the last. When young people see such a cataclysm of crises-- ecological degradation, epidemic degenerative disease, economic instability, crass

consumerism, political gridlock, unwinnable wars, and an uncertain future--their reaction mirrors that of the generation before them.

Indeed, the current trend toward organics and locavorism has much in common with the folk revivals that have come and gone since the industrial revolution began. Today, children and even grandchildren of the Baby Boomers have joined in this critical ideological tradition as they attempt to reform the food system (and broader realms of production and consumption) with a sort of radical regressivism. It is as much a reconsideration of values as of farming techniques and shipping distances. Like the skeptics and radicals and romantic back-to-the-landers before them, today’s locavores and small-scale organic farmers question what is good: abundance and cheapness, or quality and sustainability. Locavorism, which I position as a past-based, future-oriented movement in this vein, shares with these earlier folk movements a vehement rejection of some aspects of “progress,” and a faith, however romantic or inaccurate, in the ways of past.76

76 Referencing to the past may have some practical logic. For instance, some consultants are looking to an era that precedes the environmental problems we now face, though they may or may not recognize that there were also more widespread problems with malnutrition and hunger, or other environmental problems. The Great Depression, which was filled with hunger, and the Dust Bowl, which was a first-rate environmental problem, both predate petrochemical-dependent industrial agriculture.
Chapter 2
Welcome to Carrboro: Place, Taste, and Group

In short, it is a great time to be an eater. And how often do we get to say something as unreservedly upbeat as that? Nowadays, it’s all too common—and alas, valid—to complain that things just aren’t as good as they used to be: movies, music, baseball, political discourse, ladies’ millinery, what have you. But food is one area of American life where things just continue to improve. If we’re cooking at home, we have a greater breadth and higher quality of ingredients available to us. If we’re dining out, we have more options open to us, and greater likelihood than ever that we’ll get a good meal, no matter what the price point. Our culinary elites—the chefs, cookbook authors, cooking-school instructors, purveyors, and food writers who lead the way—are suffused with feelings of boundless possibility, having liberated themselves from the old strictures and prejudices that hemmed in their predecessors. It’s okay for the traditions of peasant cookery to inform those of haute cuisine, and for haute flourishes to inform regular-guy food.”

-David Kamp, *The United States of Arugula*  

While traditionally Red State Carolina may scoff at Chapel Hill and Carrboro’s dubious Southern bona fides, I submit that we have salvaged most of what is good about the Southern way of things and left the unpleasant bits at the curb. Our schools are excellent, and yoga is a local epidemic, yet on a summer night in Carrboro, you need not look far to find porches stocked with people plucking banjos with utmost sincerity. In our downtown, million-dollar green-built condominiums are springing up like kudzu shoots, but we still have springtime eruptions of old-growth azalea and dogwood blossoms to gossmack a Savannahian. Free parking is increasingly hard to come by, but drive three miles to the north or west, and you are in swaying cornscapes and pasturelands comely enough to stop your heart. We have three “progressive” grocery stores and uncountable espresso peddlers, yet we are, to a citizen, people who will clench fists and go red in the face if told there are ways to eat pulled pork other than in a rinse of vinegar and pepper flakes.

-Wells Tower, “Life on the Hill”  

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Once called West End and later Venable, Carrboro was the site of the Alberta cotton mill, built by Tom Lloyd in 1898. By 1913 it was also home to one of the world’s largest hardwood cross-tie markets. In 1914, the town’s name was changed to Carrboro in honor of the Carr family, who purchased the Alberta Mill. Although there was a lengthy hiatus spanning the Great Depression and World War II, mills operated on and off in Carrboro until the early 1960s. The village was largely working class, and its racial makeup largely white with a black minority. By 1977, Carr Mill Mall opened in the rehabilitated former mill building as part of a downtown revitalization effort, and by 1989 the community-owned cooperative grocery, Weaver Street Market, was up and running.

By the twenty-first century, with the old Carr Mill in its second century of use, it is a place where members of a greatly diversified community can congregate for a relaxing weekend brunch or afternoon beer with friends, or stop in for weekday morning coffee before hopping on the bus to campus. On balmy days, Weaver Street Market’s lawn is so packed that people spill over from picnic tables to blankets on the ground, or to the low rock walls surrounding the co-op’s small, quirky fountain sculpture. Bicycles cascade off the overloaded racks. Dogs--mostly adopted mutts--tug at their leashes to explore. Children roam free, squealing as they chase each other and distracting students pretending to study. On less crowded days, one might spot hula-hoopers or meditators taking advantage of the community’s foremost green space. The mill site, still

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79 They can also come by for special events such as Carrboro’s annual Wiener Dog Day, or Weaver Street Market’s annual wine sale.
prominently presiding over the heart of town, is a place of community and leisure rather than work. Carrboro has changed.80

As we seek to understand the changes that have taken place in Carrboro and the people who live there, it becomes about layers of meaning--of the character of a place changing to suit the needs of those who inhabit it, and the powerful, palpable, influential identity that new place takes on in the process. This is hybridized place where not only regions, but religions, occupations, ethnicities, sexual and political orientations, and palates collide, and it is precisely these tensions that give the place its meaning. These forces come to bear on the built environment in a process Kingston Heath terms “cultural weathering.” The accumulation of that weathering over the years becomes the “patina of place.”81 Heath’s descriptive terminology helps us grapple with the human elements of space, place, and change, and perhaps come to an understanding of people’s interconnection with the landscape they inhabit, and I apply his terms more broadly to encompass the changing culture--specifically, food culture--of an area. The ease and frequency of migration in modern life means that place is not simply defined by an organic terroir, but also by those who move in, influence the place and are in turn influenced by it. It is a constant interaction and negotiation of identities for both the people and the place itself. With a quality that is at once earthy and sophisticated, humble and elite, ethical and self-righteous, today’s Carrboro seems at once more rural

80 For historical info, see Elizabeth Shrieve Ryan, Orange County Trio: Histories and Tour Guides, Hillsborough, Chapel Hill and the University of North Carolina, Carrboro (Chapel Hill, NC: Chapel Hill Press, 2004).

81 Heath, The Patina of Place, xxiii.
and more urban than it actually is. Carrboro’s patina—its collective story, really—is visible in repurposed mill houses and industrial structures, but also in food, one of the physical manifestations of culture most intimately connected to daily life.

Today, the food obsession in this former textile town is “something akin to religious fervor.” In October 2008, a Bon Appetit magazine article named the “Durham-Chapel Hill” area “America’s Foodiest Small Town.” 2010 New York Times articles on Durham also included restaurants and chefs from Carrboro, and Garden & Gun magazine covered hotspots and key players from all three towns. With its bustling farmers’ market, community gardens, urban chickens, and restaurants committed to sourcing from nearby farms, Carrboro is a hotspot for locally-produced food, but neither it nor “Durham-Chapel Hill” is entirely exceptional. These kinds of relationships with food are national trends, but they exist in concentrated pockets around the country and have deep roots in countercultural, agricultural, and gourmet traditions.

Americans are turning their attention to food in powerful ways, reexamining and recommitting to quality, health, and taste. A growing number of people are expressing concerns about our national food system, questioning the changes brought by science, technology, and industry. At the same time, a decades-long trend toward gourmet and

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82 Town of Carrboro, NC, “Economic & Community Development: Demographics,” http://www.ci.carrboro.nc.us/ECD/demographics.htm (accessed September 13, 2009. A town of only 17,000, Carrboro nevertheless has the highest population density in the state. On the surface, it is mostly small houses with private yards, though there are small apartment complexes (no high-rises, for instance) and condominiums around town. In other words, despite its demographics, Carrboro looks like a very suburban place, and yet past the town limits the scenery quickly turns pastoral.


86 Tower, “Life on the Hill.”
multicultural cuisines continues, spurred on in recent years by the Food Network, major network television shows such as *Top Chef*, an increase in food journalism, and more widespread availability of international and specialty food products. There is a renewed interest in “good” food, however an individual, a household, or a community defines it. As a result, farmers’ markets, organic and specialty grocers, gourmet dining, and home cooking and gardening are thriving simultaneously, particularly in places such as Carrboro, where there is demand for food that is safe, responsible, delicious and exciting.

My consultants demonstrate a love of cooking and a deep curiosity, as well as a commitment to doing a little more work to have “good” food on the table. But what exactly is “good” food?

Through all the changes of the last century, rather than cultural loss, Carrboro has experienced tremendous cultural gain, and is today home to a multitude of food traditions brought by the diverse people who live in this former mill village. Don Yoder has written, “Viewed historically, each regional and national cuisine is a culinary hybrid, with an elaborate stratigraphy of diverse historical layers combined into a usable and evidently satisfying structure.” If we understand food as an expression of culture, Carrboro’s diversity, as well as its definition of “good” food, is easily visible through its particular mix of cuisines. On Main Street alone, there are restaurants serving sushi, taqueria-style

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87 See Kamp, *The United States of Arugula*.

Mexican, Chinese, pizza, vegetarian and vegan specialties, New South cuisine, and even Brazilian-style juices. Indian, Ethiopian, Korean, Vietnamese, Greek, French, and Moroccan foods are nearby. International dishes appear nightly at dinner tables in private homes. Yet North Carolina’s own culinary traditions--particularly barbecue--have not disappeared, but rather, have been glorified, amended, and incorporated into other culinary traditions. These local traditions remain a powerful force in the contemporary foodways of the area, and their authenticity and uniqueness is only enhanced by their increasingly contrasting surroundings. Carrboro--as a people, as a food culture--is a mélange. Southern food has been for centuries a layering of Native American, European, and African traditions, and in Carrboro, even more ingredients have been added to the mix as the population has continued to grow and diversify.

Interestingly, from this swirl of cultures, opinions, and flavors, emerged a subgroup of people interested in local food--a specific kind of “good” food. Their diversity makes it difficult to define a typical locavore, or to characterize the group

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89 A heavy influx of Latino immigrants have radically altered not only the demographics, but also the food culture of Carrboro and indeed the entire region. In recent years, people from all parts of Latin America have moved to North Carolina to work in agriculture, restaurants, building and cleaning trades. Throughout the Southeast, Mexican restaurants and local tiendas—Hispanic grocery stores—are flourishing. In Carrboro, however, the changes have been much more extensive. Town government signs are now written in both English and Spanish.

In Carrboro, people seek out tacos al pastor, chicken mole, chile verde, lengua, and salsa fresca--el auténtico (“the authentic”). Beyond that, Mexican-inspiration appeals in the cheap and portable categories, too. On menus around town, burritos and tacos easily outnumber old local favorites like hot dogs and pimento cheese sandwiches. Tiendas have taken up residence in Carrboro, and established businesses such as Cliff’s Meat Market tailor their offerings to suit the gustatory needs of Latino clientele with dried beans and chiles, imported candies, and authentic tortillas. Taco trucks set up shop at dinnertime in parking lots around town from Thursday to Sunday every week, including the parking lots of Johnny’s, the hipster coffee shop-cum-chicken ranch that shares a duplex with a small Latino grocer. Significant (possibly even majority) numbers of non-Hispanic customers sustain these businesses, reflecting the deep cultural shifts brought about by one of America’s fastest growing population groups. And of course Spanish has long been spoken in the restaurant kitchens and farms of this and many other part of America.

90 For an extensive discussion of barbecue and its traditions, see John & Dale Reed’s Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).
beyond specific food interests (and even those can vary greatly). “That groups are not homogeneous is the first realization of any scholar doing fieldwork,” Dorothy Noyes writes.\textsuperscript{91} Whatever their differences, Carrboro’s proponents of local food constitute a coherent, discrete group precisely because of their shared interest in a certain kind of food. Noyes explains that a group is a product of interaction rather than a precondition for it,\textsuperscript{92} and it is in this way we must view the people who shop at the Carrboro Farmer’s Market, at the Weaver Street Market Co-op, and even Whole Foods, who garden at home, who mind the seasons, and who learn to make jam and pickles. Regardless of their backgrounds and motivations, or their disagreements over specific visions and finer points of local food, they all support a movement broadly interested in local, fresh food. So, too, do the people completely unengaged in food politics who drop into Weaver Street Market and come out the door with local milk because it was a convenient stop on the way home from work, or those who stroll by the charming farmers’ market and decide they’ll buy some local strawberries on a nice Saturday in May. These people are included in this group because they engage in commerce at venues designed to supports causes they may or may not care about.

The remainder of this chapter considers definitions of local food as good food and how those understandings came to be. It is a study in taste throughout the food chain, from farmers to chefs to home cooks. Within this community’s rules, what is deemed community is desirable, ethical, pleasurable, politically correct, unacceptable, or status-granting? Carrboro’s negotiation of what makes good food gives life and context to the

\textsuperscript{91} Noyes. “Group,” 13.

\textsuperscript{92} Noyes, “Group,” 12.
doctrines of emergent social movements, including “radical homemaking,” Slow Food, locavorism, and biodynamic and organic farming. Whether for pride of place, concern for personal and environmental health, or mindfulness of the human labor involved in food production, the group of Carrboro residents I interviewed choose as often as possible to eat local, seasonal foods produced by people they know and trust. They take personal responsibility for the impact of their food choices and seek the kind of control that a shorter food chain enables. They cook often and well in an age when you can feed yourself at every meal without even an inkling of cooking knowledge. They understand that their food choices have an impact on others. In many ways these kinds of choices externalize personal aesthetics and values, as well as those of the larger group(s) in which they belong.

_Tastemaking: the Why and How of Carrboro’s Food Culture_

Carrboro lies at the geographic and political heart of a largely conservative state and exists for specific reasons, not least of which are the diversity of people brought together by the profusion of colleges, universities, and creative industries located here. Duke University, the University of North Carolina, North Carolina State University, and North Carolina Central University are the major schools in the area, drawing students of all stripes and employing professors in a vast number of specialties. International business titans such as IBM and GlaxoSmithKline inhabit Research Triangle Park (RTP),

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93 Slow Food International, “Our Philosophy,” Slow Food International, http://www.slowfood.com/about_us/eng/philosophy.lasso (accessed April 11, 2010). Slow Food International has formally codified many of these principles, espousing each human being’s right to “good, clean, and fair food” and declaring eaters “co-producers.” Slow Food also encourages the preservation of the diversity of the world’s food traditions, and the savoring of meals in good time and company, framing them as rituals that merit a pause in our busy, convenience-oriented, modern lives.
where dozens of high-tech and biotech industries have taken root since the since RTP’s founding in 1959. These businesses employee highly specialized people from near and far, and because of their global nature, offer opportunities for those employees to shift locales. Only a few miles down the road, Carrboro has become a bedroom community for people working in these industries and institutions, as well as the local farms, bistro, bike shops, and studios that give this place its excellent quality of life. Since the days when its textile mill drew people into town from nearby farms, Carrboro has metamorphosed into a place where native southerners from across the region mingle with a large contingent of new southerners from around the country and the globe.

By the time I arrived in 2005, Carrboro was--and is today--heavily populated by liberal elites, Baby Boomer hippies, hipsters from eighteen north of forty, folk-hipsters (a separate breed), artists, librarians, creative professionals, yoga instructors, massage therapists, and students. Most of them are white. Minorities do live here, along with underprivileged people and working-class tradespeople, too. Carrboro is visibly full of people who seek a so-called “alternative” or “creative” lifestyle--an edgier, hipper, but


95 Town of Carrboro, NC, “Economic & Community Development: Demographics,” http://www.ci.carrboro.nc.us/ECD/demographics.htm (accessed 13 September 2009). Also, United States Census Bureau, “2000 Demographic Profile: Carrboro, NC.” Carrboro has the highest population density in the state, and it also has a median income far below the rest of the Raleigh-Durham metro area. Carrboro’s median household income is $35,273, which comes up short next to the national average. Carrboro’s income statistics may come up short, but statistics on the town’s website show the population to be split evenly between low, middle, and income groups. Richard Florida notes that shifts toward a creative economy increase inequality. In fact, it is highest in creative epicenters, and Raleigh-Durham ranks first on his “Inequality Index” of creative areas of the United States. Florida notes that the creative sector generates an “astounding” amount of wealth--nearly half all wage and salary income in the United States. $1.7 trillion dollars, as much as the manufacturing and service sectors combined. (See Florida, The Rise of the Creative Class, xiv-xvi.). As for the racial and ethnic breakdown of the town, the US Census Bureau shows Carrboro to be 72.7% white, 13.5% African or African-American, 12.3% Hispanic, and 5.1% Asian. It approximated national rates in the year 2000.
still comfortable suburban existence—progressive politics, but with a lawn and a porch swing, perhaps. Like Madison, Wisconsin, Portland, Oregon, Portland, Maine, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and San Francisco and Berkeley, California, it is a place with a strongly rooted tradition of liberal-intellectual values, and like all of these, it is a microcosm of the local, organic, sustainable, and fair food movements around the United States. In addition to excellent food, they also share in common universities, a strong sense of local identity despite a relatively large proportion of transitory residents and transplants, a history of countercultural activity, and creative economies.

Descendants of Tom Lloyd, the founder of Carrboro’s first mill, say the town is no longer a place they recognize. The children and grandchildren of mill employees and their contemporaries still live here, but others have moved out into the country (interestingly, the very places the original mill workers usually fled) or on to other towns and cities with less progressive attitudes. Some profess disgust at what the town has become today, which is, to them, a “hula-hooping, pot-smoking, shaggy-haired bunch of hippie-liberals who eat tofu.” In areas all over the country where warehouse districts, meatpacking districts, mill villages, and docklands are being reclaimed and dressed up, there exists this kind of palpable cultural and geographic tension between the old working class (or perhaps racial or ethnic minority) and the hippies, hipsters, punks, gays, and immigrants who are frequently the first to move in and take over poor, liminal, or

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96 When I first moved to Carrboro, I worked at The North Carolina Subway Group with Cindy Lloyd, wife of Shane Lloyd, who grew up here. I got to know her well during my days at that company, and she told me a lot about this place I had just adopted as my home, and at a time when I wasn’t too sure about the inhabitants of Carrboro myself. After all, I am the granddaughter of mill culture, and those were the people who surrounded me at church as a child. Cindy did not personally hold this critical opinion of Carrboro, but she knew plenty of people who did and was conveying to me things she heard repeatedly. She certainly remembered the days before the town became what it is today, and that was what she wanted me to understand: its neglected history—its other side.
decaying areas. Gentrification sometimes follows, depending on the specific circumstances. While there is something of a post-industrial aesthetic in Atlanta’s Cabbagetown or San Francisco’s Tenderloin or even in neighboring Durham’s American Tobacco Campus and Golden Belt, the changeover is further encouraged by the need for affordable housing in high demand areas, and Carrboro’s housing market gets a significant bump from UNC, Duke, and RTP. In actuality, today’s Carrboro may be inhabited by more laboratory scientists and graduate students than counterculture adherents and mill worker descendants, but all of these disparate elements are present in town, and it is their juxtaposition that makes Carrboro worthy of study.

Indeed, Carrboro is interesting precisely because there is uncertainty about what and who the community is, and where its boundaries and its shared values lie. While these cultural shake-ups can be uncomfortable, they can also open doors. To reiterate Richard Florida’s argument, this jumble of people and cultures frees—and I argue, predisposes—an area to positive change. “Places with looser networks and weaker ties are more open to newcomers and thus promote novel combinations of resources and ideas.”97 Out of discontinuity and interruption come innovation and growth, and out of the class, ethnic, and political changes that have taken place in Carrboro grew a local food system worthy of national recognition. Local food organizations and producers, co-

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ops, natural foods grocers, and farmers’ markets have been growing in strength and number in the Triangle for about thirty years.\footnote{Progressive grocers and the farmers’ market crowds sometimes overlap, but sometimes they are separate. You will not find pre-washed, pre-cut bags of organic lettuces at the farmers’ market, nor frozen organic pizzas, nor the extensive prepared foods sections that a grocer such as Whole Foods or the Weaver Street Market cooperative can offer. As organics have grown, so has the market for organic convenience products. Weaver Street Market and Whole Foods cater to this market of people who have a handle on the issues—or at least a healthy fear—but who lack the time or willingness to do everything from scratch. They also sell items such as rice, coffee, milk, recycled toilet paper, biodegradable cleaning products, and which you can’t get at the farmers’ market. These markets also fill in the gaps between farmers’ market trips, or for people whose schedules do not permit them to patronize the farmers’ market within its limited hours of operation (for Carrboro, every Saturday morning and most Wednesday afternoons of the year). Wellspring, another progressive local grocer that later joined the Whole Foods chain from Austin, Texas, opened in Durham in 1981 expanded with a Chapel Hill store in 1990. The Weaver Street Market cooperative in Carrboro opened in 1988 in Carr Mill Mall and is still owned and operated by the community today, with additional branches at Southern Village and in Hillsborough. Trader Joe’s opened in Chapel Hill in 2007, replacing an Earth Fare that simply could not compete with the nearby Whole Foods. Among those who can afford to, most people shop at some some combination of the above. Students gravitate toward Trader Joe’s because it is cheap and has lots of pre-prepared foods, or toward Weaver Street Market, because it is centrally located and also has lots of prepared foods, as well a good lawn for hanging out.}

The development of Carrboro’s food culture results in part from the area’s broad socioeconomic shifts and in part from the convergence of specific values and tastes in a time and place ripe for their influence. Elsewhere in the state and region, demographic and economic shifts have been less dramatic, making those places less favorable to the kinds of major cultural transitions (and further economic transitions) that have taken place here. For example, the Research Triangle is home to the highest concentration of PhDs in the country, presumably contributing to the affluent, educated market who want and can afford organic,\footnote{I use the term “organic” loosely here rather than in conjunction with USDA certifications. Technically, organic simply means that a farmer is not using synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, and legally, a farmer cannot call his farm or produce organic without paying for an expensive, multi-year certification process. However, many farmers in this area practice organic methods that would pass certification. To boot, local farmers may also add in practices that contribute to long-term soil and water health and sustainability, which the government does not monitor for organic certification. Local critics of government certifications also cite the relatively lenient standards for animal health and welfare. Organics and certifications are discussed at greater length in the next chapter.} sustainable meat and produce, if we give credence to the stereotype.\footnote{Tower, “Life on the Hill.”} Coincidentally, the area is also home to a significant number of farmers...
such as Michael Brinkley and Stanley Hughes who needed to transition to other crops as tobacco market collapsed and demand for local, organic, sustainable meat and produce rose.\textsuperscript{101} It appears a simple case of rising demand and supply, with farmers making an economically wise change in their business as a community’s definition of “good” food was changing. The timing was right.

Markets for organic, sustainable food are created and bolstered by a mix of idealism, skepticism, and disposable income, three things this area has plenty of, but fulfillment of those desires require that local farmers also be on board if the food is to be anything more than bagged, refrigerated, long distance-shipped Cal-Organics. Idealism plays a predictably important role in the switch to small-scale, biodynamic organics--particularly because many of the growers are first generation farmers, choosing rather than inheriting the profession. In the larger agricultural community, however, economics are a powerful force for change--or for stasis, as is the case in many other parts of the state, where industrial farming is still the standard.\textsuperscript{102} The demand has to be there, and the demand comes from non-farmers.

In Ordinary Life, Festival Days, Leslie Prosterman explains how a definition of “good” food emerges among producers and consumers: “Since many people [in Illinois] are involved in the producing, buying, or selling of food, a local vision of a healthy


\textsuperscript{102} Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, “Top 10 Agricultural Commodities Ranked by Cash Receipts (Sales) for Each State and US, in 2008,” United States Department of Agriculture,” October 29, 2009, http://www.ers.usda.gov/Data/FarmIncome/firkdmuXLS.htm (accessed August 1, 2010). North Carolina has long been home to strong agricultural traditions (tobacco, apples, hogs, sweet potatoes). Its temperate climate with four distinct seasons gives it a lengthy growing season, and with geography from mountains to coast, a wide variety of foods can be grown here. Today, North Carolina ranks 10th in the nation for agricultural produce, though the kind of small-scale organics popular in Carrboro are a small minority in the state’s overall production.
economic life incorporates a local understanding of the nature of ‘good’ food and its components.”103 While Carrboro is not solely a farming community, it is nevertheless a place where many people are involved in food production and food service, and unlike sprawling New York City, farms are not far away.104 The town’s market and its restaurants function as hubs for the community’s economic activity, but they are also home to an ongoing dialogue between farmers, chefs, and eaters regarding the nature of “good” food. These relationships constitute a (sub)urban-rural interchange of information as well as money.105 They are pathways for the negotiation of supply and demand.

Chef and activist April McGreger explains that in this area, cooks and farmers develop better working relationships not only through ongoing dialogue, but through cross-training at the sites of food production:


104 Although we may think of Orange County (in which Carrboro is located) as a series of bedroom communities for local universities, 43% of the county is still dedicated to agriculture or forestry. Nearby Alamance, Chatham, and Durham Counties are also home to many farms that serve the Carrboro market. For more information, see North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, “Orange County 2010 Plan of Work,” http://orange.ces.ncsu.edu/index.php?page=about (accessed 31 March 2010).

The unfortunate irony in this area is that what sustains the farmers’ markets and creates demand for small-scale organics also makes farming more difficult. The vibrancy and wealth of this area keeps farmers’ markets humming, but it also means development. Development drives up property values and cost of living. It eats farmland, which is then covered in asphalt and concrete and lawn to become strip malls and new neighborhoods and, less frequently, airports. Despite the wide-ranging initiatives from Central Carolina Community College (CCCC), the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, the Center for Environmental Farming Systems, Slow Food, and the state’s Cooperative Extensive Service, North Carolina lost 500,000 acres of farmland in 2008 alone--the highest rate in country. There are reasons for the presence of these activists and organizations, particularly when there are young people who want to farm, but who have no access to land, and who need vocational agricultural training.

In this area alone, North Carolina is reinvesting in agriculture to ensure its continuation. Institutions such as CCCC (Central Carolina Community College) and PLANT (People Learning Agriculture Now for Tomorrow) at W.C. Breeze Family Farm, part of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, are giving new farmers a start. There are classes on sustainable agriculture, and help with learning the business side of farming too. Would-be farmers can even lease land through the PLANT program on the state’s 269-acre Breeze Farm.

105 It is important to note, however, that urban gardens are becoming increasingly popular in Carrboro and around the world. Urban dwellers are in many cases trying to find--and succeeding at it--ways to feed themselves.
One of the pioneers of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, retired physician Bill Dow, [...] suggests not only that cooks come out and help at the farm, but that farmers get in the kitchen. And, most importantly, he walks the walk. I've seen him wait tables, wash and tear salad greens, and pick thyme. This cross-training creates greater understanding and appreciation for all of our professions and solidifies the feeling that we're all in this together.106

Some go farther than the cross-training that McGreger describes. A handful of area farmers are excellent cooks and do double duty as growers and chefs. Austin Genke, Sam Genke, and Chris McKinly of Boxcarr Farms in Cedar Grove run a mobile food truck. Each Friday night they cook antipasti in the kitchen at 3Cups, an independent coffee, tea, and wine merchant in Chapel Hill.

It is helpful for farmers to know their market—to understand what eaters and chefs want, and what particular produce characteristics produce top-quality eating—but Prosterman explains that restaurant owners in particular must juggle a community’s collective definition of “good” food:

The production and consumption of food as a commercial venture depends on the comprehension of standards on the part of sellers and buyers. When restaurants serve food in the region, much of their menu reflects the people’s opinion of what constitutes good food and how it should taste. [...] Restaurant owners know better than to ignore the expressed views of their customers. They sometimes can alter or add to the community’s criteria to a certain extent. In general, they engage in a process of synthesizing cultural and commercial tastes and the taste that satisfies the eater.107

Prosterman describes tastemaking as a community effort—a negotiation of aesthetics, economics, and—at least in Carrboro—animal and environmental ethics. Similarly, as Ashley et al explain in their definition of “good” food, there are not only social and


107 Prosterman, Ordinary Life, Festival Days, 170-1.
cultural implications, but also aesthetic and moral ones when it comes to taste. How do the community’s chefs and home cooks navigate taste, with its broader influences and implications?

Chefs in particular must comprehend community food preferences in order to be successful. They must juggle food cost, menu prices, competition, and above all, the nature of desirable, enjoyable food. Given this specific food community’s additional rules, they must also contend with food miles, carbon footprints, humane treatment of animals in pasture and at slaughter, seasonal availability of produce, and the additional effort of sourcing from individual farmers and markets. For a restauranteur, using local food requires a commitment of time and money, yet many area chefs are doing so successfully and enthusiastically.

One of the most famous and mostly vocal local chefs in town decided to bring the comparatively exotic traditions of Asia to Franklin Street using local meat, seafood, and produce. Andrea Reusing, the red-headed, rock-n-rolling mastermind of Lantern restaurant and Slow Food poster chef, was one of the first chefs in the area to publicize her partnerships with local farmers and to hold farm-to-table dinners. She was

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108 Ashley et al., *Food and Cultural Studies*, 62.

109 The majority of American restaurants place the burden of food sourcing upon commercial food suppliers, which can deliver consolidated orders of goods from all over the country and the world several times a week. No ingredients are ever out of season because they are simply shipped from distant regions if need be. Chefs who choose to source items locally and individually are often making a significant investment of time and energy, as well as limiting their options. To boot, menus must change with the seasons when local produce is featured.
instrumental in founding the area’s annual Farm-to-Fork fundraiser picnic.\textsuperscript{110} I once asked her what she would say to restauranteurs who think they cannot afford to source locally and seasonally as she does. She replied, “I pass the cost along to my customers, and they must think it’s worth it.”\textsuperscript{111} Her restaurant, which serves up dishes in multiple Asian traditions (Don’t call it fusion!), has made \textit{Gourmet} magazine’s list of the top fifty restaurants in the country, and numerous other publications have featured her work in their pages.\textsuperscript{112} Reusing was nominated for Best Chef in the Southeast by the James Beard Foundation in 2010.

In 2006, Reusing had the honor of addressing the U.S. delegation at Slow Food International’s biannual Terra Madre gathering in Torino, Italy. “Using real ingredients--” she began,

food grown by people with strong connections to their land and community--is the only way a girl from New Jersey could open an Asian restaurant in North Carolina and even approach some idea of authenticity. Farmers keep chefs, (and the rest of us) in the reality-based community where we belong.\textsuperscript{113}

Reusing authenticates her food primarily via its local sources, though in interviews she also says that she attempts to avoid “fusion” in her cooking and instead tries to remain

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\textsuperscript{110} A fundraiser for the W.C. Breeze extension farm and education efforts, Farm-to-Fork is a show of solidarity across the food community. The picnic is a deliberate display of food politics. Triangle area farmers and chefs are symbolically paired to represent real life farm-to-fork business relationships, and with each half donating food and labor to the effort. Farm-to-Fork shows just what is possible with market cooking, done with expert hands and palates utilizing the freshhest possible ingredients. In fact, walking the ring of tents is remarkably similar to a trip to the market, except you drive farther to get there and do none of the food preparation yourself. Attendees just show up, stroll, and eat. It is instant gratification, and with the extra satisfaction of knowing that your pleasure on this particular day supports a good cause. The 2010 Farm-to-Fork picnic raised over $20,000.
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\textsuperscript{111} Andrea Reusing, conversation with the author, February 22, 2008.
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\textsuperscript{112} Most recently, see Matt Goulding, “An Indie Chef’s Greatest Hits,” \textit{Food \& Wine}, September 2010.
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faithful to the Asian cuisines that influence her menu. Reusing is a strong advocate for the continued growth of local food in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro restaurant community, and the remainder of her public remarks at Terra Madre praised the local farmers in attendance with her. She can be found at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market early on Saturday mornings, along with numerous other area chefs, searching for the best and rarest of the area’s offerings. She embodies the chef-farmer partnerships that Slow Food encourages, primarily because good economic relationships with farmers parlay into good news for the land and for agricultural traditions.

Reusing and many others stand on the shoulders of Bill Neal, who was a pioneer of the fresh, local, seasonal food landscape in which she and so many area chefs thrive today. Neal transformed Crook’s Corner from a local watering hole into a legendary institution of Southern food, in large part because he believed passionately in terroir and the dignity and pleasure of his region’s cuisine. Neal took simple, regional ingredients of the a regional diet and turned them into upscale entrees (most notably shrimp and grits). Not only do these ingredients define the character of this place by reminding us of its roots, but their new sophistication also mirrors the direction in which the area has moved. Before it was trendy, Neal sourced locally and cooked seasonally, setting a high standard which many emulate today. Neal’s legacy stretches from Chapel Hill and Carrboro to Durham, Raleigh, Charleston, Asheville, Oxford, Birmingham, and beyond. His trainees (and theirs) are now some of the finest and most lauded chefs in the South, and today
diners across the South benefit from his regional food vision--a commitment to place, season, and the best food possible.\textsuperscript{114}

Neal’s own son, Matt, is among the area’s thriving chefs, though he works in a mostly un-Southern tradition: the delicatessen. Matt and his wife Sheila, former manager of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, run a deli that features local, seasonal ingredients and, in the mornings, transforms into a biscuit paradise serving a hybrid of the deli sandwich and the grab-and-go breakfast sandwich. Witness the pastrami biscuit.\textsuperscript{115} In early 2010, the Neals were featured in two \textit{New York Times} articles in the span of one week, one on the evolution of the Jewish deli tradition and the other on the vibrant food scene of Durham, North Carolina (despite the fact that they are in Carrboro).\textsuperscript{116} Not all of their meat and cheese is local, for the very nature of a classic deli requires ingredients that simply cannot be sourced in this area at the present time, but they keep an excellent selection of fruit and vegetable soups, side dishes, and special sandwiches that change with the area’s harvest schedule. Like Bill Neal before them, Matt and Sheila know that

\textsuperscript{114} Many area chefs follow in Neal’s footsteps today, marrying classic French techniques to fresh, local ingredients. Some worked directly for Bill Neal at La Residence or Crook’s Corner, and others came up through the kitchen of Ben and Karen Barker at Durham’s revered Magnolia Grill. (For a Magnolia Grill history and family tree, see Andrea Weigl, “From two chefs, many,” \textit{Raleigh News and Observer}, April 22, 2010.) Others (chef and food writer Sheri Castle and also Aaron Vandermark of Hillsborough’s Panciuto) have married Southern traditions with Italian ones, noting similar fondness for grits (polenta), beans, greens, and nose-to-tail use of pork.

Today, Crook’s Corner is run by Bill Smith, who worked with Bill and Moreton Neal for many years at both Chapel Hill’s La Residence and Crook’s. Smith describes his own cooking at Crook’s as “seasonal produce-driven” rather than solely southern. He can be seen bicycling around town with vegetables in tow. He picks honeysuckle for his famous sorbet. He blogs and tweets about the seasonal produce that arrives at the kitchen’s back door at Crook’s, but also describes the menu for his father’s birthday celebration back home in New Bern, North Carolina (softshell crabs). Like Reusing, Smith was a James Beard Foundation nominee for Best Chef in the Southeast (2010). The continued popularity and success of Crook’s under Smith’s guidance testifies to the value the community puts on his “seasonal produce-driven” cuisine. See Moreton Neal, \textit{Remembering Bill Neal} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).


well-prepared vegetables are one of the South’s greatest culinary assets, and they love good food from whatever culture it originates. As omnivores of tradition and as chefs, they innovate using the best of what is around them, be it traditional to the region, or something unusual.

April McGreger, proprietor of the Farmer’s Daughter brand, occupies a slightly different role in the food community as a chef whose food sells primarily at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, with a very limited selection at one local upscale retailer. After leaving her job as pastry chef at Reusing’s Lantern, McGreger found her niche in pickling and preserving. “My aim was to create a market for farmers' surplus and slightly imperfect, though perfectly sound, local produce,” she says. Tomato season, for example, is overwhelming for those who do not freeze or preserve, but McGreger takes advantage of the abundance by making tomato jam, tomato chutneys, and green tomato pickles. She approaches local produce with inspiration from Southern traditions, but also using preservation methods and flavors from cultures around the world. The goods on her market table are broadly autobiographical, reflecting Korean and Indian college friends and her Jewish husband, as well as her family roots in a small community in Mississippi and her travels.

Preserving, McGreger says, “fills a gap or a wrong I see in society.” She is troubled by the amount of unnecessarily wasted produce at the farmers’ market, but also by the fading traditional food knowledge that once made possible—even mandated—the preservation of summer and fall abundance for sustenance over the slow, lean months of

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117 McGreger, April. “Recipe for a Vibrant Food Community.”

winter. Canning as a means of preserving was already familiar from her childhood, but
McGreger also became interested in naturally fermented foods such as kimchi and
sauerkraut, which have been dietary staples in their cultures of origin (e.g., Korean,
German, Appalachian) for centuries. Appalachian families, she explains, used to ferment
huge crocks of sauerkraut--fifty gallons or more--to last through the winter. That practice
has mostly ceased, primarily due to the advent of new technology and improved shipping
and shopping options. We no longer have to respect seasonal food rhythms, but
McGreger’s extra work to preserve seasonal produce is a service that, she hopes, helps
ease the need to ship fresh foods over long-distances to fill winter produce gaps.

“There is tremendous cultural knowledge in what our grandparents ate,” she
explains. She is interested in how place-based food knowledge evolved over time and
was once passed down from generation to generation. Survival depended on the
continuity of food traditions (read: food knowledge), and in fact, many traditions are
rooted in survival. McGreger worries over the loss of knowledge and skills, but in her
home and through her business, she is investing in the preservation of old ways. She
eagerly digs up near-forgotten, antique “receipts” to prepare for herself and her
customers. McGreger thinks of these foods--lacto-fermented sauerkraut, spiced
muscadines (the South’s original cranberry sauce, she claims), dilly beans, chestnut
butter, cornbread laced with bacon fat--as one would an endangered species: precious,
inherently valuable, and worth saving. As a result, ingredients and techniques that have
fallen out of favor with mainstream nutrition trends and everyday regional cooking find

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119 April’s pumpkin chip preserves, for instance, come from an 18th century recipe from South Carolina. Also, she presents new takes on Southern classics like chow-chow and pepper jelly, and because she sources locally, emphasizes traditional Southern ingredients like sweet potatoes and muscadines.
an audience again through her kitchen. These include vegetables and fruits listed on Slow Food’s Ark of Taste, such as American persimmons, chestnuts, and traditional sorghum syrup, as well as once-common cooking fats such as lard and bacon grease, and the process of lacto-fermentation.\(^ {120}\) Tellingly, McGreger’s favorite customers are those come to her market table excited to see products that resemble foods their grandmothers made--foods they thought long-lost.\(^ {121}\) These old foods, McGreger believes, give us a better sense of who we are. They have long histories in the region, and they are an obvious place to turn as modern, creative cooks look for variety and excitement, as well as ways to make the most of our local food landscape.

At the same time, tradition is a touchstone and a springboard for McGreger--something she is “in conversation with,” but not bound to. She has thought about it extensively, as any conversation about her food will quickly reveal, and she has come to

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\(^ {120}\) They are, however, very trendy now in restaurant kitchens, which seem to be pro-bacon fat, pro-offal, pro-less desirable cut for both the novelty, the price point, and the flavor. Home cooks seem to be somewhere in between unless they are oriented toward traditional “country cooking” or “soul food” styles, for instance, or imitators of high-end, trendy restaurants. Mainstream cooks no longer use these types of fats to cook, primarily because of the easy availability of cooking oils made from seeds such as canola that grown in distant regions, and also because animal fats were linked early on (and perhaps somewhat inaccurately) to studies of heart disease.

McGreger, however, might as well be a paid spokesperson for lard. How often does she use it? “All the time.” Sometimes she renders her own at home from local pigs, but because farmers know she has a fondness for it, they often give her free of charge more than even she can possibly use. She laughs off the “dedication” it takes to render one’s own lard: “I think it’s so funny how people are always so impressed that someone ‘renders their own lard.’ They’ve so obviously never done it. Um, it’s just melting, people. Not that hard.” But how many people do you know who do it? The result is a local, naturally produced, non-industrial ingredient that southerners relied upon for generations until Crisco, trans fats, and various health scares came along. Despite the national worries over heart disease, obesity, and diabetes, McGreger chooses not to cut out the fat but big industry and its products. Their processed nature worries her, not their fat content. She does not believe the direct linkage between natural fats from healthy animals (read: blood cholesterol) and America’s rise in heart disease, but rather attributes it to new products and additives in the industrial food system as well as Americans’ lifestyle changes in the twentieth century.

On the state of southern food and personal health, McGreger quotes New Orleans chef and self-proclaimed “culinary advocate” Poppy Tooker: “You have to eat it to save it.” In addition to recognizing lard’s value as an alternative to lab-designed, industrially derived fats, McGreger understands its important place in southern culinary history. And “Eat it to save it” is exactly what McGreger does.

\(^ {121}\) April McGreger, interview with the author, Carrboro, NC, April 8, 2009.
the same conclusion as many folklore scholars. As discussed earlier, folklore scholarship suggests that tradition is by its very nature a conversation. Tradition is fluid and adaptable, evolving to remain relevant to the needs of the people connected to it. McGreger’s collection of recipes spans a broad range of time, region, ethnicity, geography, and class, drawing from diverse traditions. As all chefs do, she takes liberties with traditional recipes to improve and refine them, yet she still understands her food as a continuation of specific traditions. Perhaps McGreger is simply doing what chefs do, but like a scholar, she understands the need to balance continuity and relevance where tradition is concerned. Furthermore, she is inspired in large part because she sees herself as a bearer of tradition, and as an activist contributing something valuable to her culture and community rather than just producing delicious food. For McGreger, tradition is more than an abstract inspiration, yet it is not set in stone. She seeks a viable middle ground through her farmers’ market business.

Chefs such as Reusing, McGreger, and the next generation of Neals provide crucial financial support to farmers and promote local food through their restaurants. They are part of a thriving business community with strong ties to a food-centered social movement that prioritizes the local, the ethical, the novel, and the delicious. Inspired by vastly different food traditions, these chefs are successfully synthesizing values and

122 While she recognizes that tapping into tradition does not prohibit change, her sauerkraut is nothing more than cabbage, salt, and juniper berries at the proper ratios for safe fermentation and balanced flavor.


For McGreger’s own characterization of her food activism, see McGreger; “Recipe for a Vibrant Food Community.”
flavors to forge a unique local food culture and to match a place-specific, collectively-defined version of “good” food.

Those who can afford it have easy access to some of the freshest, healthiest, and most sustainable produce and meat in the country, and some of the most talented chefs to work with those ingredients. Home cooks, however, are the ones who really put the money into the local food system. Farmer Betsy Hitt said that she and her husband Alex do not sell much of their produce to restaurants. “Just the ones we like,” she joked.124 Most of their money comes from customers who cook for themselves and their friends and family at home.

April McGreger told me the story of a friend who grew up in suburban Raleigh, North Carolina, (“as if there is any other kind of place in Raleigh,” she quipped) who heated up a TV dinner for herself each night. No one was home to cook for her. Horrified on many levels, we remember aloud that neither of us were allowed to eat TV dinners except as a rare treat. “They were too expensive!” I added. April continued: “And everybody that says they weren’t allowed to have it--‘It was too much sodium,’ or ‘It’s not healthy’--and I’m like, no, it had nothing to do with that. I remember when my mom was on a diet, and she’d get Lean Cuisines, and I was like [whining], ‘Pllleeease, let me have a Lean Cuisine!!’”125 We broke up in laughter at the allure processed foods once held for us. McGreger, a vocal, well-respected proponent of traditional Southern foodways and the woman who introduced me to lard, begging for a plastic-wrapped Lean Cuisine from the freezer section? It was difficult to imagine.


125 April McGreger, interview by the author, Carrboro, NC, March 25, 2009.
“People call things ‘cooking’ today that would roll their grandmother in her grave — heating up a can of soup or microwaving a frozen pizza,” food-marketing researcher Harry Balzer explained to Michael Pollan.\footnote{Michael Pollan, “Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch,” \textit{The New York Times}, August 2, 2009.} Local chef and food writer Sheri Castle said, “Even three years ago, I would have said that cooking from scratch was going the way of sewing,” but people are starting to see it as a necessity again.\footnote{Sheri Castle, interview by the author, Chapel Hill, NC, August 31, 2009.} There are countless reasons for cooking’s rebound in popularity. For one, Castle says, “People are starting to realize that our decision to abdicate responsibility for all of our food was a really bad idea.” Among my consultants in Carrboro, it seems to indicate two things: concern for the healthfulness and broader implications of what they ingest; curiosity and recreation in a globalized, information-packed world.

For a town of only 17,000,\footnote{United States Census Bureau, “Profile of General Demographic Characteristics (DP-1) for Carrboro, North Carolina, 2000,” United States Census Bureau, http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/QTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=16000US3710620&-qr_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_DP1&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_DP1&-lang=en&-redoLog=false (accessed May 13, 2010). The 2000 census shows the population as 16,782, and having grown a whopping 45% since the 1990 census. It also showed that the bulk of the population (44.1%) were between the ages of 20 and 34. It is a growing, youthful town indeed.} Carrboro, North Carolina, is home to a disproportionately large population of food-obsessed people who are full of quirks, contradictions, and curiosity. After carrying their mostly sustainable, frequently local food into the kitchen in reusable tote bags, they demonstrate a degree of skill and dedication in its preparation that proves particularly remarkable in times when convenience and speed dominate most mainstream food marketing. My consultants and many of their friends collect cookbooks and make compost. They browse food blogs and restaurant reviews on their iPhones. They build backyard cob ovens, learn charcuterie for...
fun, and brew their own beer. They render lard. Whether they inherit or willfully
institute such methods in their lives, the most personal and painstaking ways present
attractive options. Whether or not their cooking techniques require great skill and
training, they exhibit an impressive level of understanding and respect for food. It
occupies a place of intimacy and importance in their daily lives. It is not just food--just
fuel for another day; rather, what they eat says something about who they are, who they
aspire to be, and perhaps even what they want the community to be. A meal is an event:
something lovingly prepared, eagerly anticipated, and joyfully taken. Because of its
larger implications for the economy, for labor standards, and for taste, cooking is both
subversive and self-indulgent.

Reveling in regional distinctions and diverse traditions, as well as their own
creativity, my consultants share recipes from around the world at their potlucks, in their
newsletters, and on their listservs and blogs. The result can be quite an eclectic mix.
Jordanian mujadara (lentils with caramelized onions and rice) appears at a holiday party
alongside an iconic southern red velvet cake. In between jam-making and pickle-
packing, a white Mississippian prepares an impromptu lunch of homemade tabouli and
hummos with fresh pita for a South Carolinian. Strangers and friends gather each week
to cook community dinners with an Indian woman in her home-cum-underground
restaurant. Guests bring ingredients like lush, local goat’s milk caramel for a backyard
pizza party around the cob oven, and they also bring their accordions and banjos for a
mix of old time and klezmer music by the fire. Bacon-lovers and vegetarians are happy
housemates, uniting around colorful dishes like collard kimchi-sweet potato pancakes and
summer rolls of mango, carrots, basil, and mint with peanut sauce for dipping. And yes, native and non-natives alike still love a traditional North Carolina-style (vinegar and spices only) pig-pickin’, though vegetarians--of whom there are many--may be left wanting. (Vegetarians and vegans can, however, indulge in the vegetarian barbecue--presumably soy protein in some form--at The Spotted Dog in downtown Carrboro.)

There is an obvious pleasure principle at work amongst these activists and thinkers boosting local food. The local food movement is very much about the good life, which can go hand-in-hand with radicalism and sustainability. The personal is political, but it doesn’t have to be painful. Warren Belasco explains that this was the case from the start among the youthful counterculture in the apocalyptic 1960s with the bomb, Vietnam, environmental catastrophes, and political and race riots:

The counterculture went natural not only for survival but also for fulfillment. Dietary primitivism would purge and protect you, but it would also make you well--even happy. Like most young leftists, ecofreaks saw no reason why radicalism could not be enjoyable. Like most bohemians, they rejected deferred gratification. What kind of new society could come out of joyless self-denial? [...] Part of the fun came in romantically relishing paradoxes. Natural foods were safer and tastier; wild greens were hardscrabble staples and gourmet treats. Ethnic foods were cheap and rich. Vegetarianism seemed ecologically and spiritually sound. Exercise and dieting made you a better street fighter and lover. Fasting confronted the system and made you high. Hip food stores peddled both radical tracts and facial creams, wilderness survival manuals and aphrodisiac teas. Organic gardening was a medium for self-discovery and social integration.129

The local food movement involves a degree of self-discipline, but it also allows for self-indulgence. Many people involved in local food practices are also tied to the world of

129 Belasco, Appetite for Change, 43.
fine cooking and gourmet connoisseurship of all kinds.\textsuperscript{130} The ability to have the best of both worlds is attractive still today.

Indeed, the push for local food is flush with politics, yet the return to farmers’ markets, home gardening, canning, and real cooking is still very much about finding the best ingredients, the best recipes, and the best techniques. It is about superior taste, which is why chefs were some of the earliest proponents of the local food movement. Home cooks are now on board as well. Even in the home, cooks seek to maximize the potential and enjoyment of fruits, vegetables, meats, and grains by carefully balancing flavors and achieving perfect texture, and the first step in cooking is the selection of quality ingredients. Obtaining the freshest and most flavorful ingredients usually means sourcing locally when possible.

Beyond that, this is an age of aspiring gourmets, and very often, the best way is an old or time-consuming way, rather than a modern, corner-cutting way. The connoisseurship of heirloom and heritage varieties, forgotten cuts of meat, and preparation according to traditional, regional cooking styles from here and around the world is prized knowledge. Exploring and indulging in new or obscure foods is a great source of pleasure, and knowing one’s fruits, vegetables, and animals suggests sophistication in the way that knowing fine wines and cheeses and French cooking techniques once did. One’s encyclopedic food knowledge and catalog of experiences might include ramp-hunting, salt-curing, beekeeping, and Asian methods of lacto-fermentation. My consultants want to eat well, and the knowledge and ingredients to do

\textsuperscript{130} These worlds have been extensively democratized since the 1960s, as documented in Kamp’s \textit{The United States of Arugula}. 
so are more accessible than ever before thanks to globalization, the internet, and the
revival of heirloom crops and heritage breeds. To these people, good meals are part of
the good life, which is increasingly based on experiences rather than cash, although
money obviously facilitates access.

There is something bigger going on here: we have the luxury of pulling from the
best of traditions the world over, and so we do. That is perhaps the ultimate
convenience--knowledge and access. Books and travel educate us, and the internet has
drastically aided us in sharing information. International shipping spreads seeds and
finished goods. Today, we are omnivores of tradition. In *Radical Homemakers*, Shannon
Hayes describes people who “draw on historical traditions to craft a more ecologically
viable existence, but their life’s work is to create a new, pleasurable, sustainable and
socially just society, different to any we have known in the last 5000 years.”\footnote{Hayes, *Radical Homemakers*, 17.} These are
my consultants, cobbling together the kind of lifestyle and community they desire.

**The Appeal of the Heirloom, the Pastoral, and the Peasant**

When farm names appear on menus, restaurants introduce diners to local farmers
and artisan producers working with cheese, beer, wine, charcuterie, and more. Even if
diners do not bother to seek out that farm or visit the market, at least they are forced to
recognize that the food came from an actual farm--a real place run by real people. The
food is less abstract, and perhaps more grounded in the realities of the farm and animal
welfare. Or do those menus conjure something else entirely? When chefs insert the
exotic names of heirloom tomatoes and the quaint, authenticating names of local farms, is it an action that creates demand for these items, or is it simply a response to their popularity in the community? Let us consider the appeal of the heirloom tomato, the idea of the local farm and its products, and “traditional” dishes from the consumer’s perspective. Some eaters want their food to have a story--a face, a landscape--even if only imagined.

Heirloom tomatoes are often the most popular item at the farmers’ market when they are in season, and they are highly anticipated once the summer turns hot. Cherokee Purple tomatoes, for instance, are a prime example of a ripe, beautiful, non-Monsanto option with a story more interesting than “scientifically developed to ship well.” One generally buys them from a farmer at the weekly market, which has a strict distance policy to ensure local produce only, or grows them at home from seed or seedlings. Thus, grown in the area and actually allowed to ripen on the vine, their shorter vine-to-table time has yielded a fruit that is superior in taste, texture, and nutrient values to tomatoes one could find in a conventional grocer’s produce section. There, the fruit has likely come from California or Florida and turned red with the help of ethylene gas long after being weaned from the vine. In addition, Cherokee Purples and other heirloom varieties generally have more pleasing, distinct flavor profiles than those “scientifically developed to ship well” tomatoes to begin with. Not insignificantly, this purple and green tomato is novel in appearance as well as taste, beckoning American eyes accustomed to pinkish grocery store offerings. Furthermore, its novelty encourages us to pay more, which we sometimes do at farmers’ markets. Lastly, the unusual nature of its appearance proclaims
to the world that you are particularly food savvy if you can locate and understand this strange-looking fruit.

Another local product with traditional appeal is Maple View Farm’s milk, produced just outside of Carrboro. The milk is sold in glass bottles not far removed from the kind once delivered to American households. This local dairy chooses not to give its cows hormones and antibiotics. The glass milk bottle neither relies upon petroleum nor leaks harsh chemicals into its contents as some plastics do. When customers purchase Maple View milk, they pay a deposit on the glass bottle, and they return it for a refund when it is empty. This is a recycling system apart from the Town of Carrboro’s curbside pickup, requiring extra effort that, in turn, offers a chance to protect the environment. To continue the feel-good vibe for the conscientious consumer, this particular dairy also sells ice cream at its farm store, where from a front porch rocking chair you witness the pastoral beauty and benign nature of the fields and cows where the milk originates. Ice cream is sold in a shop directly across from Weaver Street Market, too, where many Carrboro residents buy Maple View’s milk. From every angle, Maple View seems wholesome. Both the glass-bottled milk and the farmers’ market tomatoes allow consumers to keep money in the local economy. Both heirloom tomatoes and Maple View’s glass-bottled milk have the taste, aesthetic, health, and environmental appeal that characterize many of the goods that sell successfully in the Carrboro area.

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132 Maple View milk can be purchased at the farm shop, at the Weaver Street Market cooperative grocery, at Whole Foods, and at some Harris Teeter (a mainstream but generally more upscale grocer) locations. I have yet to find it at Food Lion, which is, generally speaking, a more budget-oriented mainstream grocer. Grocers tailor their offerings to what they perceive as their target audience in each specific market.
As a final example of traditional appeal in local food culture, consider the renaissance of traditional foods of the South, particularly coarse “peasant” foods like beans and cornbread. Beans and cornbread, a staple in the Southern diet for hundreds of years, are still eaten by people in Carrboro. April McGreger is a big fan. Yet for most Carrborians, beans and cornbread are not the the necessity. Few people here were raised on this cheap, nutritious meal as generations of white and black southerners once were. Susan Kalçik explains that many people abandon the foods of poverty for less stigmatized dishes as soon as they can afford to do so. Convenience and variety also play a role in the displacement of traditional or staple foods. Beans and cornbread have another appeal today. As David Kamp as well as Bob Ashley et al explain, peasant is acceptable—even trendy—now in certain circles. Local chef and food writer Sheri Castle explains that “Americans love peasant food as long as the peasants are from another country.” Today, however, we embrace our own. (Or perhaps as Gary Alan Fine has said, the South truly is “America’s exotic inner colony,” which is basically another country.) Once a dish is de-stigmatized, people have the unburdened opportunity to taste and learn that, in fact, it can be delicious even if it is cheap. Thus, for many eaters, beans and cornbread are being revived, rather than eaten as a food of necessity. Today’s beans and cornbread might feature local, stoneground cornmeal and heirloom beans. With the growth of ethnic foods in the area, the dish has taken on new forms of the classic legumes-and-bread combination: Indian chana (chickpeas) and dal (lentils) with

134 Ashley et al., Food and Cultural Studies, 69. Also, Kamp, The United States of Arugula, xi.
naan, Jordanian mujadara (lentils and caramelized onions and rice) with pita. With changed accents and seasoning profiles, the dish remains a simply produced food of poverty, no matter how cosmopolitan or progressive its consumption may make the eater appear.

Not every tradition appeals. As a contrasting example, Sarah Newton has shown that Jell-O is ingrained in American foodways and family traditions, yet few scholars have shown it respect as the traditional American food that has become since its invention in 1897. Furthermore, no food advocates or enthusiasts I have encountered expressed any romantic or poetic notions about Jell-O. Somehow, Cherokee Purple tomatoes, local milk in glass bottles, and peasant/ethnic dishes become acceptable, desirable traditions, or they at least have some sort of tradition-adjacent appeal. Does simple agrarian charm top actual tradition? Does it have to do with how “natural” something is? Is it a vaguely wholesome essence? Is it a shunning of traditional class markers—even by those who are of the upper class? Is wiggly, brightly colored Jell-O somehow representative of the now-vilified food industry people are fighting? Or is all of this simply a matter of quality and taste? My consultants generally are people who place skillet cornbread in a place of honor alongside Julia Child. They clearly value disparate traditions and popular iterations thereof. What sort of appeal do cornbread and Child share in common that Jell-O does not have? It is not a black and white issue.

136 Sarah E. Newton, “‘The Jell-O Syndrome’: Investigating Popular Culture/Foodways,” *Western Folklore*, Vol. 51, No. 3/4 (Jul. - Oct., 1992), pp. 249-267. Jell-O’s back-of-the-box recipes have become traditional in some families, as have all sorts of other back-of-the-box recipes. Pecan pie is one of the most famous examples.
April McGreger has fond memories and respect for the types of casseroles made from canned soups and vegetables mixed with cheddar cheese, saltines, Ritz crackers, or noodles. These were often back-of-the-box recipes from big food manufacturers, and they almost certainly date to mid-twentieth century cooking. She respects these recipes not because she thinks they are particularly artful food—though they are delicious—but because of her childhood memories and cultural understandings. Casseroles appeared at church and community gatherings, and to express love and support when someone was sick, had died, or a baby was born. She loves them for specific, nostalgic reasons, for they would not appeal to her today with all of their highly processed ingredients. Perhaps Jell-O is in the same position: it cannot match the aesthetic appeal nor inspirational qualities of an heirloom tomato, glass-bottled local milk, or an unfamiliar cuisine in revival. Let us remember, as Newton points out, that Jell-O once was alluring and exciting, but that was when new, convenient, and modern food products were appealing. This community’s contemporary definition of good food, on the other hand, prioritizes natural foods with easily discernible processing and ingredients with clear ties to the land and to older or somehow more “authentic” traditions. Tradition, it seems, is sometimes just what we want to see.

**Conclusion**

In Carrboro, where extreme socioeconomic and cultural changes have taken place in the last century, a community based in a shared definition of “good” food has taken

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shape. The negotiation of “good” food is ongoing, particularly because its definition encompasses the broader and constantly shifting implications of taste (e.g., politics, identity, status), but also because the nature of good food has broader implications for individual and collective quality of life, as well as for the landscape, the culture, and the economy.
Chapter 3

“Better Than Church”: Market and Community Garden as Two Case Studies in Community Food

For the present generation of small-scale, low-input farmers and gardeners, heirloom plants appeal to wider philosophical inclinations that emphasize harmony and sustainability, including new-age ethical and environmental concerns. Gardening with these folk varieties provides a much-needed connection to nature--a placed nature or, as Kant would say, “Nature made specific.” The practice forges a link as well to the community and to the past for young people who, engulfed in the modern malaise of “placelessness,” are questioning the fast-paced, excessive, and disposable lifestyle they have inherited. The same goes for burned-out “baby boomers” who desire more than anything to downsize and slow down. It must not be forgotten, however, that this resurgence of interest and pride, a social movement built upon an enlivening of the senses and a contagion of emotion, is only possible because the seeds have been kept and passed on by unaffiliated seedsavers who took a liking to these old-timey plants and patiently nurtured them in their small plots of land.

- Virginia Nazarea, Heirloom Seeds and Their Keepers

The world has changed. We are now faced with picking up the pieces and trying to put them into shape, document them so the present-day young generation can see what southern food was like. The foundation on which it rested was pure ingredients, open-pollinated seed—planted and replanted for generations—natural fertilizers. We grew the seeds of what we ate, we worked with love and care.

- Edna Lewis, “What Is Southern?”

In his powerful essay, “The Pleasures of Eating,” the farmer-poet-philosopher Wendell Berry writes:

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139 Nazarea, Heirloom Seeds and Their Keepers, 97.

I begin with the proposition that eating is an agricultural act. Eating ends the annual drama of the food economy that begins with planting and birth. Most eaters, however, are not aware that this is true. They think of food as an agricultural product, perhaps, but not of themselves as participants in agriculture.141

The industrial system, he goes on to explain, has divorced us from this biological and economical reality. He continues: “Eaters [...] must understand that eating takes place inescapably in the world, that it is inescapably an agricultural act, and that how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used.” Observers at the popular Carrboro Farmers’ Market will quickly see that people in Carrboro are reconnecting the farm to table.

It is the heart of the community--perhaps not for all the residents of Carrboro, but certainly for a self-selecting community of regular, enthusiastic shoppers.

**The Revival of the Farmers’ Market**

As North Carolina’s textile and tobacco industries have declined, its farmers’ markets have grown. Carrboro and its surrounding towns, cities, and communities are flush with lively markets. The North Carolina Cooperative Extension lists twenty-seven farmers’ markets in an eight-county area as of August 4, 2009, with most concentrated in Orange County. Orange County alone boasts five farmers markets, including Carrboro’s, and those in surrounding counties are also within easy reach. Durham and Saxapahaw have popular markets worth the trip for local food enthusiasts. While the Durham market competes with Carrboro due to similar operating hours and offerings, the Saturday night

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142 Berry, “The Pleasures of Eating,” 324.
market in the former mill village of Saxapahaw entices visitors with free live music and film screenings on the lawn.

Carrboro’s market was begun in 1978. Town leaders sought ways to keep the downtown area lively and active, and local farmers were looking for a steady place to sell their produce. Bill Dow, a Vanderbilt University-trained doctor-turned-farmer, and the first certified organic farmer in the state of North Carolina, had a grant to help link farmers with customers to provide access to fresh, healthy food. Although Carrboro’s farmer-run market has moved several times since its inception, the rest is history. Today, on the average peak summer day, crowds of shoppers often number 5000 or more--a significant figure in a town with a population of only 17,000.¹⁴³

The Carrboro Farmer’s Market is filled with farmers of all stripes. There are first and fifth generation farmers. Some are tie-dyed, bearded, “out there” folks with Long Island accents, like the gregarious John Soehner of Eco Farms, and others show up in cowboy hats with thick North Carolina accents, selling frozen goat meat. There are USDA certified organic farmers, and farmers who still sprinkle Sevin insecticide on their plants. Most simply display “no pesticides” signs rather than opting for the costly and arguably weak government certification of organic methods, and many practice sustainable methods over and above anything the USDA might dream of requiring right now. Longtime market insider Sheri Castle estimates that the farmers are split into thirds: those who grow the old way with pesticides, those who farm to make a contribution or

¹⁴³ Sarah Blacklin, interview by the author, Chapel Hill, NC, June 1, 2010. It is also important to consider that Carrboro is affected by neighboring Chapel Hill’s wealth. Although on the surface Carrboro and Chapel Hill retain relatively distinct personalities, their borders are mostly invisible to the naked eye. The two towns share buses, and the bike routes between them are easy. Some people walk... Or skateboard. Many people from each town spend time in the other, and Carrboro definitely benefits from a population that is not entirely its own.
political/ethical statement, and those who will or won’t spray depending on what will sell. The best way to find out is to ask.

You don’t need a government seal when you know and trust your farmer. “We want everybody to be as close to their farmers as possible,” said Sarah Blacklin, manager of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. “Labels mean we’re not slowing down.” Blacklin characterizes Carrboro as a place of education and community—in essence, one of many community sites where people can learn about eating as an agricultural act—where they can reestablish those connections. Referring to market rules, accountability, and food scares, she explained, “Local is great, but it’s the idea of local and control that makes sense.” Carrboro is known for its strict rules and tough inspections that govern the farmer’s market. Blacklin, who worked on local farms to put herself through college, emphasizes the importance of personal relationships, trust, and education in the food system. Expensive USDA organic certifications are not required, although some vendors pursue this option; instead, Blacklin believes consumers should talk to their farmers and establish relationships of trust—even get to know them as friends, just as she has.

Others in the community share her philosophy and vision. People seek out farms and farmers at regular farm tours, at farm-to-table dinners and farm-to-fork picnics with the area’s best chefs, and at their market stalls each week. Everyone has his or her favorite vendors, but some develop true friendships that extend beyond the economic exchange and pleasantries of the market. Some wind up together at friendly potlucks on

144 Castle interview.


146 Blacklin lecture.
the farm, or walk over to share post-market lunches at delicious sandwich shops, or team up to produce local food events through Slow Food or the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association.

A trusted few get close enough to obtain extralegal access to raw milk, which cannot be sold for human consumption in the state of North Carolina. Some enjoy the taste, and some believe it to be more nutritious if unpasteurized, but you have to be in the know to get yourself a coveted, semi-secret “cow share.” These are relationships of trust. Unpasteurized milk can sicken or kill humans if the cows are sick or the milk is treated carelessly, and farmers can suffer legal consequences if they are caught selling it. One fan of raw milk reasoned that only sick cows produce dangerous milk, so if you trust that your farmer keeps healthy cows, you have nothing to worry about. The sale of raw milk, while common, is not something that is advertised--or done at market. Raw milk sales are strictly word-of-mouth, off-the-record deals.

Some shoppers enjoy asking questions about their food, whether face-to-face or via text, email, facebook, and Twitter. Many of the younger farmers, in particular, are quite technologically savvy, and some keep regular blogs, such as Stuart White and Alice Pruitt of Bluebird Meadows. Some of the best communicators, though, are longtime Carrboro market stalwarts Alex and Betsy Hitt. In addition to teaching, serving on numerous boards, and growing food and flowers, they also manage an impressive website

147 If you are part owner of the cow, you are simply taking milk that is already yours... a dividend of sorts. You are not technically buying the milk itself, so prohibited goods are sold on a technicality. Consultants who discussed raw milk purchases requested that their names not be listed. I have omitted names in deference to my consultants’ wishes.

148 View Stuart White and Alice Pruitt’s Bluebird Meadows blog at http://bluebirdmeadows.blogspot.com/ (accessed July 12, 2010). Also, view the farm’s website at www.bluebirdmeadowsnc.com (accessed July 12, 2010).
Electronic communication was the logical progression from the weekly newsletters the Hitts have mailed to customers for years. At Peregrine Farm, the Hitts’ home since 1981, it’s about food with “a face, a place, and a taste,” and they are eager to communicate about their work. When the Carrboro market or Carrboro-area farmers are featured in the press, it is often the Hitts that reporters turn to.

Some visitors to the farmers’ market, however, feel uncomfortable questioning the farmers. Emily Wallace, a graduate student at UNC, says she has never asked anyone about how they grow their food. It feels accusatory somehow. “There’s this old couple that I love—they are so cute,” she says. “We bought our squash seeds from them—they were the only ones who had them. When you buy something they say [with clasped hands and sincerity and enthusiasm in her voice], ‘Oh, THANK you!’ But I’m like, what are they putting on that stuff?” She has never seen any sort of “no pesticide” sign, but she would hesitate to question even the vendors who know her as a regular customer. In Emily’s case, the desire not to offend precludes the desire for chemical-free food; her social mores, learned in the small Southern town of Smithfield, North Carolina, trump a community food rule: the right to know your food’s origins.

While some shoppers come with exacting standards, others simply want a pleasant, sunny Saturday morning stroll with one of April McGreger’s sunshine buns--a

149 For the Hitts’ website and blog, see Peregrine Farm: Food with a Place, a Face, and a Taste, http://peregrinefarm.net/ (accessed July 12, 2010).


151 Emily Wallace, interview by the author, Chapel Hill, NC, May 26, 2010.
sweet potato sticky bun with brown sugar, cinnamon, and cardamom--in one hand and an iced Counter Culture coffee with chicory and local Maple View milk in the other. Still, most market shoppers interviewed for this project want something more than a pleasant shopping experience. Some want to know a place from the dirt up, or to keep their dollars strictly local when so much of our money goes so far away. Because of her particular perspective as a health professional, holistic psychiatrist and market regular Natalie Sadler wants more than just local, and more than just leisure:

I’m really interested in having farmers who raise nutrient-dense food. I’ll even go a step beyond organic--I want the minerals in the ground. I want as much nutritive value in the soil so the plants will pick it up... I’m coming as a consumer wanting this. [...] We’re not talking about chemical farming, we’re talking about sustainable types of farms that are organic and really produce quality food that has good value to it.  

Emily Wallace expressed less specific, but no less powerful, desires; “Fresh food. My dad had a garden, and that was the kind of food I was used to eating. Before I had my own, that was where I went, and now I supplement my garden there.” With a shrug of her shoulders, she adds softly, “I just... I really like vegetables.”  

Today, local farmers are growing a lot of crops that have nothing to do with this area’s food traditions and agricultural heritage, such as bok choy, tatsoi, snow peas, sugar snaps, Swiss chard, kale, kohlrabi, daikon radishes, and Hakurei turnips. When I asked why they grow so many Asian crops instead of, for example, the iconic field peas or older varieties of turnips grown in the South for centuries, April McGreger offered a three-fold explanation: the market is all about novelty; people are not from here anyway; Asian

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152 Natalie Sadler, interview by the author, Carrboro, NC, February 24, 2008.

153 Wallace interview.
crops grow well in this area.\footnote{April McGreger, conversation with the author, May 21, 2010.} Heirlooms and other strains with intriguing names like “Mortgage-Lifter” or “Cherokee Purple” are also widely grown and in-demand, although farmer Sharon Weatherly expressed mixed feelings about heirloom tomatoes: “I mean, I love them, but they go soft so fast that if I don’t sell them quickly, I’m just throwing them away and losing money. They won’t usually last until the next market.”\footnote{Sharon Weatherly, conversation with the author, Durham, NC, July 24, 2010.}

In the end, most farmers want to grow what works well for them and sells well at market. Thus, in a reflection of the diversity of the market-going crowd, what you find at there today is a mix of the novelty items McGreger described above and southern standards such as sweet potatoes, collards, turnips, tomatoes, and field peas, as well as local pastured meats, eggs, and cheeses. Novelty depends entirely upon the shopper. Some of what may seem new and unusual is just unfamiliar today. Many of the apparently exotic heirloom tomatoes, melons, and squashes simply fell out of popularity with the rise of big agriculture and supermarkets and more reliable varieties, thus, they are a source of excitement today. Furthermore, the industrial food system does not make much accommodation for variety—at least not for fresh foods that are not boxed for long shelf lives. If someone has always eaten a diet filled with processed foods, raw ingredients of any sort are new and bewildering. Newcomers to the state won’t be intimately familiar with sweet potatoes and collards and field peas. Southerners might not recognize bok choy and butternut squash. Odds are no one knows a cushaw or a
Seminole pumpkin.156 And let us not forget the beets with red and white rings like a bull’s-eye and the purple sweet potatoes that most buyers pick up just because they pretty. One thing is for sure, there is something for everyone—as long as it is grown within fifty miles of market and you are looking for it in the appropriate season.157

Market manager Sarah Blacklin explained that eating locally is a process of negotiation: “It’s not like we [the farmers and I] all eat local all the time. It’s more about trying to increase awareness about your food.” Blacklin is not a zealot, which is why she is so well-suited to her job. She exudes a kindness and practicality that make the market less intimidating and more welcoming to newcomers. Blacklin, a rare Carrboro native, nevertheless underwent the Carrboro transformation from processed, convenience foods to real, local, and seasonal food. She manages one of the most vibrant markets in the country, yet she refuses to be judgmental. A convert herself, Sarah is likely to win additional converts because she understands exactly where they are coming from, and she is sympathetic to the growing pains that accompany the shift to eating local, giving up convenience, and learning to cook. Blacklin’s life is also evidence of the “two Carrboros”: the one that eats locally, and the one that doesn’t.

“Better Than Church”: Market as a Community Hub

156 Although Rayna Green and I were probably the sole reason that Seminole pumpkins sold so well in 2008—I think we bought every single one produced by Turtle Run Farms that year—more have appeared at Triangle area markets in the two years since, particularly at the Durham Market in 2010, where I spend more time now.

157 The fifty-mile radius for growers is a Carrboro Farmers’ Market rule, and it automatically enforces seasonality.
For all its politics, rules, and regulations, the market is, to many, a warm, inviting space. Natalie Sadler hit on a key function of the market:

Sometimes I think the farmers market on Saturday morning in the summertime is better than church. There’s a communion with the farmers and with the other people there, and there is such a wonderful kind of spirit in the marketplace... People are greeting each other... You may know somebody from somewhere else and run into them there, so it’s a neat cultural space to be in.\(^{158}\)

It’s not uncommon to hear, “I missed you last week!” or, elsewhere in town, “Missed you at the market this time!” It is a rhythm, and eventually, you expect to see certain people there--kind of like church, just as Sadler says. Around much of the South--including where Natalie Sadler, April McGreger, and I grew up--telling somebody you missed seeing them at church is a common occurrence. It is not only about being friendly, but also a subtle enforcement of community behavioral codes that help maintain a “social safety net,” as McGreger has called it.\(^{159}\) You are expected to be there on a weekly basis as part of the community and as a “good Christian.” The market helps fill that need. Uprootedness and disconnectedness are feelings that people like Sadler and McGreger seek to squelch by investing personally in the market and its community. People root themselves in the weekly and seasonal rhythms involved in regular market shopping. Community and ritual are also recurrent themes. My consultants are nostalgic for the presence of community and ritual.

\(^{158}\) Sadler interview.

\(^{159}\) McGreger interview, March 25, 2009. McGreger and I have had numerous conversations about the role of the church in our home communities. She has called it a form of “social insurance,” for the community rallies to aid people in times of sickness, hardship, and death. That help often comes in the form of prepared meals.
Over a lunch of Ethiopian food at Queen of Sheba, McGreger spoke about moving closer to home because her parents were aging. It is more than a day’s drive between North Carolina and Mississippi. McGreger, who grew up in a highly interconnected community and a strong social network rooted in church, expressed hesitation about moving away from Carrboro, where she has many good friends and a strong market for Farmer’s Daughter, but the first thing she considered was, “What about Alex and Betsy?!” she says. “What about my farmers? The people I sell next to at the market?”

McGreger’s feelings clearly demonstrate that her business network is also a personal one. Personal and professional lines are blurred. She has achieved a sense of community, much like the one enjoyed growing up in Mississippi. Well over a year later, she still has not moved. She has tabled the idea for now.

I asked Claire Brandow, April McGreger’s baking assistant, if she felt part of a community at the market. She said it felt good to talk about the market when people asked what she did with her summer. “It was really important to me to be part of the market community. I don’t know why it was so amazing. April is popular, so it’s easy to meet folks.” Brandow sees the market as educational, and she likes being part of the group that educates people and “watching the public start to get it.” “I wish it could be more educational... The people who pick up the pickles and only see $7 are just shopping,” she says with a sigh. “Buying from April is an example of what these small food economies could be.”

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160 April McGreger, conversation with the author, Chapel Hill, NC, March 25, 2009.
162 Brandow interview.
community when everything is sourced locally.\textsuperscript{163} It is about taking care of one’s neighbors--about the social safety net that is community. In their own ways, Sadler, McGreger, and Brandow--none of whom are from this area--have found a new home in the food community of Carrboro.

Watts Grocery chef-owner Amy Tornquist, who shops regularly at both the Carrboro and Durham markets, echoed this sentiment in a 2009 interview: “Everybody has a role to play to help their neighbor. [...] It’s helping people who know your name, who are your friends. And we are all trying to hold on.”\textsuperscript{164} She talked extensively about community, and about how shopping smartly meant you could still eat locally despite the lean economic times that set in following the financial crisis of 2008. Tornquist grew up in Durham in home that is just a stone’s throw from her nationally-acclaimed restaurant. After traveling to France, she came back home to work in the community she has known and loved all her life.

A strong sense of community does not always mean time for a chat. While a few farmers are renowned for their garrulous nature, farmers and other market vendors don’t necessarily appreciate all the small talk. They feel too pressed for time. Several informed me that they want a line that moves fast, and that they quickly become frustrated with people who want to hang out and have a long conversation. The vendors are at work, and they can’t afford to lose customers to a slow-moving line. “How would they feel if I stopped by their office at 10:30 on a Thursday morning?” one recently

\textsuperscript{163} Some items, such as salt and sugar, are still sourced from distant places. I refer specifically to meat and produce.

complained to me. “I appreciate the sentiment, but I just don’t have time to stand around and talk. I’m working.” On top of that, let’s not forget that some of them—especially the bakers—get up in the middle of the night to prepare for market and are probably exhausted by the time customers reach them. Sarah Blacklin explained it in economic terms. The vendors have twenty Saturdays—approximately 100 hours—to make most of their money for the year, so customers should not be surprised if they do not seem to have much time to chat on those balmy summer mornings. While the market-going experience is social for shoppers, it is very much a business for the farmers. They may be committed to the soil and the community, but they have to make money to continue their work.

The time crunch can work in both directions. Kim and Dan Marston eat local, spending most of their food dollars either at Weaver Street Market or the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. They are not overtly ideological about their food and are not among those of my consultants who sit around and casually discuss food politics, but they cook frequently and enjoy eating out at local restaurants. They socialize primarily with work friends. When I asked about community at the market, Kim said: “I don’t feel a sense of community at all. We pick up our box of food and don’t even really talk to the farmer. We don’t really have time.” She paused, reconsidering. “That’s a hard question. At the same time, we’ll always pick local over the other with restaurants. And maybe we spend more money to keep the market afloat than some people who go to be social--I don’t know. We just don’t have time [to get to know everyone at market].” Indeed, she

165 Blacklin lecture.
166 Kimberly Marston, interview by the author, Carrboro, NC, August 30, 2009.
doesn’t even name her farmer as we discuss her weekly CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) share. As laboratory scientists, they work long hours, and their weekly pre-paid farm box, sourced from one vendor and quickly picked up, provides delicious local food while also saving time. Interestingly, the Marstons regularly make time to cook, even if it means dinner is delayed to 9:00 p.m. or later some weeknights.

Kim remembers the farmers’ market as one of the most attractive things in Carrboro when she looked for places to live near UNC, and while she and her husband remain market enthusiasts, she occasionally finds food politics frustrating and divisive. Speaking bluntly, she expressed anger at judgmental people on both sides of the food debate: those who call local, organic shoppers elitist, as well as holier-than-thou locavores. “Go ahead and eat your red delicious apple from half-way around the world that’s covered in wax, but don’t criticize me for buying an apple for $1.00 from 30 minutes down the road.” Questioned about hypercritical local food advocates, Marston said: “If they are truly dedicated to their principles, they ought to be more intent on educating and persuading people.” Neither of the attitudes that Kim critiques is particularly inclusive, nor do they seem particularly community-oriented. She does not appreciate an aggressive, judgmental stance from any side of the debate. As a relative

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167 As mentioned briefly in the introduction, Community Supported Agriculture is a system some farmers choose to use with customers. Customers can opt-in for a full- or half-share before the first spring harvests begin, paying in advance for a weekly box of produce that generally lasts through early autumn. This setup allows the farmers to begin the season with some cash, as well as guarantees them a market for their produce. Some farms cater exclusively to CSA subscriptions, but others choose to run CSA programs and sell each week at a farmers’ market. In Carrboro, CSA programs generally fill up very quickly, leaving some would-be subscribers to stroll the market and shop for items individually rather than picking up a pre-packed box of food at an appointed location.

168 Marston interview.
newcomer, having turned her attention to local food only after she moved to Carrboro in 2005, perhaps she is still sensitive to both perspectives.

The Marstons also shop frequently at Weaver Street Market, which is near their rented mill cottage and an easy stop on their daily commute to and from campus. As our interview wrapped up, Kim added dryly, “You should probably put in there that we’ve spent at least a million dollars at Weaver Street.” Although Kim is not happy about what things cost, she shrugs her shoulders and concedes, “If you’re going to invest in something, it might as well be yourself,” referring to health.

What does it mean when a farmer could not afford his own food? If people call this local, sustainable, chemical-free food expensive, it is not so because the farmers are getting rich. They are in it for some other reason. George O’Neal of Lil’ Farm (“NEVER WHACK!” according the farm website) is a feisty but kind upstart among the ranks of farmers at market. O’Neal, who sells at Carrboro and Durham, is one of the young, hip, punk farmers that the farm-curious undergraduates gravitate toward. (Lil’ Farm t-shirts with their pegasus logos get you “street cred,” as Claire Brandow put it. It may also get them another kind of “cred.” Brandow herself interned for hog farmer Eliza McLean and received academic credit at UNC for her efforts.)169 An an odd mix of inspiration and disillusionment, O’Neal is charmingly outspoken and unpredictable. Usually sporting a dark fluffy beard or mutton chop sideburns, he is an endless stream of jokes and quips. He speaks bluntly about the financial hardships of being a young farmer on leased land. He cautioned idealistic farming upstarts: “I don’t recommend it unless you have a way to

169 Brandow interview.
get money, because the infrastructure costs a lot. I’m really getting jaded on my quest to find a sugar mama,” he jokes.

When I went to work for O’Neal’s fellow market vendor, Phoebe Lawless of Scratch Artisan Baking in Durham, he undercharged me each time I visited his stall. Vendor-to-vendor discounts at market are common and considered a reciprocal favor to your neighbor, but O’Neal cuts prices by much more than a dollar--a standard amount--and sometimes he just hands me food for nothing--collards, kale, freshly brewed Counter Culture Coffee. “If I was trying to get rich, I’d have been a drug dealer a long time ago,” said O’Neal in a 2009 interview. “I think I made $40 profit last year.”

He tells a story about a customer who said to him at market, “It is my husband’s dearest hope that our son will farm.” George was both flattered and frustrated. He replied in a joking tone, “Hopefully it’s his hope that he’s going to leave the child well-endowed with money.” Privately, he wondered aloud:

My greatest hope is that my kid becomes a farmer? Why not an astronaut or a teacher? You know, why farmer? Because it’s the flavor of the month. I mean, 70% of the world’s population are farmers, and most of them are women, and when you think of farming you’re thinking of a white dude in overalls, which is kind of sad. I mean, that’s the extreme romanticism. Hopefully his other wish for his son is that he’s gonna have a fat-ass trust fund... Because they live in Durham. I mean, where’s he gonna farm? The family land in Blanche, North Carolina? No, no kid wants to live up there. I think it’s gonna have to be redefined. I think once it becomes hip and everyone has a garden again--like, literally everyone, ‘cause you have to--the romanticism is gonna drop, and you’re gonna see that it’s a lot of work. It is appreciated on some levels, but not financially. And most people doing it are gonna get out of it then and put their support behind the people who are doing it successfully. It’s great that all these people start out, see how hard it is, and then become supporters of farms for life. You’re like, man, that shit

George’s frustration is grounded in something very real. Farming does seem to be the flavor of the month, as he says. If, as Benjamin Filene has written about the 1930s folk revival, people view folk culture as “an alternate source of strength in a time of crisis in America—as a counterculture [...],”¹⁷² perhaps the timeless image of the American farmer, presumed since the days of Thomas Jefferson to be noble, honest, independent, and hardworking, has similar appeal today, particularly in local food communities. Let us assume that farmers can be construed as the folk and that this customer is concerned about the state of the world, as indeed are many farmers’ market customers are due to regular nationwide food scares, a reeling economy, two grim overseas conflicts. If this is plausible, Filene’s explanation of music’s appeal suggests similar reasons for the appeal of the American farmer:

People were drawn to those who seemed to exist outside the modern industrial world, able to survive independent of its inhumane economy and not lulled by its superficial luxuries—the outcast, the folk, the impoverished and dispossessed. [...] Outsiders appealed to Americans as symbols of how they wanted to see themselves during the Depression: independent, proud in the face of hardship, straightforward, beholden to no special interests.¹⁷³

Indeed, whether we know him from Jeffersonian ideals, socialist/communist/populist propaganda, Chevrolet truck ads, presidential campaigns from any era, Michael Pollan’s

¹⁷¹ George told me a version of this story at the 2010 Farm-to-Fork picnic (May 23), while I was working for April McGreger, one of four chefs with whom he was paired. This particular transcript of the story comes from an audio documentary project by my colleague and fellow UNC student Emily Hilliard. See Emily Hilliard, Never Whack: George O’Neal of Lil’ Farm, December 14, 2009, iTunes audio podcast, 8:57.


“supermarket pastoral” imagery, or something other source purveying the American family farmer as the essence of his country, America loves the idea of the farmer, no matter how divorced from reality the images may be. He symbolizes something Americans need to believe about themselves. On a very practical level, of course, we need and should respect our farmers--we must eat. We simply need to understand that he is an image--that corporate agribusiness, career-jumping professionals, and stoner hippies are just as often the reality behind the plaid shirt and overalls images on television, or glossy art-portrait coffee table books, or even the smiling faces at market. The farmer is not now--and perhaps never was--simple, agrarian folk.

George’s friend April McGreger, whom he met in a sustainable agriculture class at Central Carolina Community College, has written, “There is no more radical profession in America than that of the small farmer.” Being a small farmer today is a choice to live ideals, and usually to do so at significant personal cost--no company-sponsored health insurance, no company-sponsored pension, hard and dangerous labor, and tough economics to boot. George is not one to spout ideology or rhetoric. Whatever his frustrations and motivations, he cloaks everything in humor. His comments nevertheless show that farming is difficult--not romantic--and that there are plenty of reasons not to continue. And yet George continues.

To be sure, plenty of farmers are better off than O’Neal and making a decent living, but he is the youngest and has the least infrastructure in place. Start-up costs on a

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175 The coffee table book I have in mind is Paul Mobley’s American Farmer (New York: Welcome Books, 2008).

176 April McGreger, “Recipe for a Vibrant Food Community.”
farm are high when you are starting from scratch, as he did three years ago. Instead of chasing profits, many of the farmers believe they are doing something positive for the community and for the land as temporary stewards. At least they are not harming the world. It is about profit on some level—it has to be in America, with its capitalism and free markets—but these are not money-driven people. They like what they do. They must. It is easier to get out farming today than to stay in it. Fortunately, the renewed public interest in farmers’ markets is beginning to help. It is encouraging anyway.

The Carrboro Farmers’ Market does what it can to help with income disparities among its customers and to expand access to fresh, health, local food. They accept EBT cards (Electronic Benefit Transfer, the modern incarnation of food stamps), donate food fresh food to food banks and soup kitchens such as Inter-Faith Council, and are friendly to low-income shoppers. In 2009, the Carrboro Farmers’ Market collected unsold produce farmers wanted to donate, and initiated the “Farmer FoodShare” program, which collected food contributions from market shoppers. According to the market, “The program combats food insecurity and ensures that nothing goes to waste, while raising awareness that a sustainable local food economy must include every member of our community.” The program was a huge success, collecting over 14,264 pounds of food (approximately two tons per month) and $2537 in cash from May thru December to be distributed to “senior centers, community kitchens, drug recovery centers and food banks.”177 The Carrboro market has also received a temporary grant to match federal SNAP funds dollar-for-dollar up to $20 in order to encourage low-income participation in

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the local market. “Our whole goal is to make it an easier way for everyone to come to the market, so it continues to be a community center,” says Blacklin. Food organizations can improve access through charity, but the problems run deeper and require government engagement and broad-scale economic reform. Leaders like Blacklin are clearly aware of who is underserved at the market.

The Carrboro Community Garden: An Educational Space

As even mainstream news coverage has begun to show, gardening is on the rise in America. In light of the country’s recent financial crisis, some people are looking for new ways to save money, and growing one’s own food is a good place to start. Many of those who once paid $3.50 or more per pound for heirloom tomatoes have begun to realize that they can be had for far less if they come from your own piece of dirt instead of Whole Foods or the local farmers’ market.

In Carrboro, many people have taken the leap to start growing some of their own in backyards or community gardens, or even in pots on patios. Herbs, lettuces, tomatoes, and chickens are common first steps. (In Carrboro, chickens are in good legal standing as long as there are fewer than 25.) Even those who do not want to become farmers themselves might take sustainable agriculture classes at Central Carolina Community College, or volunteer for the Crob Mob, which eagerly descends on a new farm each


179 As quoted by Bouloubasis in “Carrboro Farmers’ Market launches new SNAP program.”

week to perform a day’s worth of group labor in exchange for lunch, pastoral recreation, and the warm-fuzzies of volunteerism.  

This kind of do-it-yourself approach means many things. It may testify to the high cost of buying organic—growing organic costs very little monetarily, requiring, instead, an investment of time and knowledge. It also offers the greatest possible level of control for those wary of industrial processes and pesticides. But gardening has much to do with larger trends that encompass all manner of productive, hands-on activities such as knitting and sewing and woodworking, skills that foster self-sufficiency and indulge creativity. These hands-on approaches to life require re-education. Farming, gardening, and cooking skills began to disappear with jaw-dropping speed in the twentieth century as food production specialized and centralized. Consider the disappearance of Home Economics programs in high schools and universities. Critics of industry and corporations argue that the de-skilling of America has allowed corporations and some smaller businesses an opportunity to thrive. The less we are able to produce and do for

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181 The Crop Mob describes itself well in the “About” section of their website  
“Crop mob is primarily a group of young, landless, and wannabe farmers who come together to build and empower communities by working side by side. Crop mob is also a group of experienced farmers and gardeners willing to share their knowledge with their peers and the next generation of agrarians. The membership is dynamic, changing and growing with each new mob event. […]  
While nationwide the number of farms and farmers has dwindled, right now in the Triangle area of North Carolina there is a surge of new sustainable small farms. These farms are growing diversified crops on small acreage, using only low levels of mechanization, and without the use of chemical pesticides or fertilizers. This is a much more labor intensive way of farming that brings back the need for community participation.  
Many crop mobbers are apprentices or interns on these sustainable farms. The need for community participation matches a desire for community among young people interested in getting into farming. The crop mob was conceived as a way of building the community necessary to practice this kind of agriculture and to put the power to muster this group in the hands of our future food producers.  
Any crop mobber can call a crop mob to do the kind of work it takes a community to do. We work together, share a meal, play, talk, and make music. No money is exchanged. This is the stuff that communities are made of.” Crop Mob, “About,” Crop Mob, http://cropmob.org/about (accessed August 1, 2010).  

182 In the national and local news, there has been increased discussion of home gardening and reducing food cost since the realization of the US financial crisis in the autumn of 2008. See Verlyn Klinkenborg, “Sow Those Seeds!” The New York Times, February 14, 2009.
ourselves, the more we must purchase. Americans gladly gave up some responsibilities and skills, associating the idea of progress—a focus of mid-twentieth century American culture—with the entitlement to a lighter workload. Today, individuals and communities disturbed by unsustainable environmental practices seek to reclaim these and other self-sufficiency skills.

Author and radical homemaker Shannon Hayes is interested in precisely this transition, whereby men and women seek to increase their self-sufficiency and decrease the amount of income they need to survive:

[...] Radical Homemakers use life skills and relationships as a replacement for gold [money], on the premise that he or she who doesn’t need the gold can change the rules. The greater our domestic skill, be they to plant a garden, grow tomatoes on an apartment balcony, mend a shirt, repair an appliance, provide for our own entertainment, cook and preserve a local harvest or care for our children and loved ones, the less dependent we are on the gold.  

In essence, Hayes calls for the dismantling of a specialized, centralized economy that allegedly leads to maximum productivity and efficiency—and profit. But profit for whom? She challenges our national assumption that the health of corporations translates to the well-being of all citizens. Acknowledging that the way of life she depicts would require massive revisions to modern life and perhaps feminist thought, she instead argues for long-term stability and personal satisfaction over profit margins.

One of Carrboro’s best examples of the do-it-yourself, community-building spirit is the Carrboro Community Garden, which operates on public land with a few donations of cash and equipment and a whole lot of time and energy from its members. Anyone can join. The garden is a space for education, where anyone can come at any time to learn

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new skills from the more experienced gardeners. In this garden, where new faces appear almost every week, success depends on members’ ability to teach each other and collaborate.

Dr. Natalie Sadler is a holistic psychiatrist and lifetime gardener. Born and raised in Alabama, Natalie is the child of gardeners who never adapted to pesticide use even during its mid-twentieth century heyday, and they were organic before it was popular.

Today, Sadler sees gardening as a basic life skill:

It’s the idea that you can grow your own food... It’s empowering. When you think about it, if you can’t grow your own food, you’re dependent on somebody else. I think sustainable agriculture ought to be as much a part of every school curriculum as reading, writing, and arithmetic. I think it is a basic knowledge that everybody--even if you don’t choose to do it--everybody needs to know how.184

April McGreger agrees. These are not skills most of us learn at school or from our families, so those who do have this knowledge have a responsibility to educate others.

The Carrboro Community Garden is a place where people can learn--and eventually shop--for free. McGreger sees the garden as “a big missing link” in the food system. “We can’t all be farmers,” she says, “but we need a little more knowledge about what it takes to grow our food, which will give us a greater appreciation for it.” Founded by members of that same anarchist/punk set, including McGreger and Sammy Slade, from its very inception the garden was designed as an educational space, where people of all generations and walks of life could gather and share skills and talents. First-time gardeners were encouraged.

184 Sadler interview.
So were pro-community, anti-industrial politics. McGreger describes the CCGC as “grassroots” and “populist.” “There’s this weird thing that happens when you get people and land—I’d say public land—together and everyone has their hands in the dirt.” Sadler, a grandmother rather than a punk, describes the garden as counterrevolutionary to boot:

I sort of feel like what we’re doing is circumventing conventional agriculture and conventional foods—all the processed foods—all the things that have been brought about to sell people—to really control what you eat—and your health. In a way, I see us as counterrevolutionary. Look at the name of the group! I didn’t form that, but it’s the Carrboro Community Garden Coalition. Well, in the ‘60s when I was in college, a coalition was like the Black Panthers... It was a real, way-out, we’re-gonna-overthrow-the-government kind of thing... Not that I’m advocating overthrowing the government, but I sure do think some changes need to be made, and I think it has to be a grassroots effort. I think people have to say, “No, we don’t want this.”

Interestingly, the garden’s ideological roots stretch to 1960s anti-consumerist radicalism, described so aptly in Warren Belasco’s *Appetite for Change*. Like the counterculture before them, the gardeners are creating other options for themselves, stepping out of the mainstream not just ideologically, but also in terms of what and how they consume. They are building community by growing fresh, healthy, biodynamic food.

Interestingly, the politics of gardening have never been more visible on the national scale, and gardens are entering mainstream dialogue. As one of their earliest and most powerful statements after Barack Obama was sworn in as president of the United States, the Obamas broke ground on a White House garden. As early as 1991,

185 April McGreger, interview by the author, Chapel Hill, NC, April 3, 2008.

186 Sadler interview.

journalist and food politics superstar Michael Pollan was calling for the White House lawn to be ripped up to make a garden.\(^{188}\) New Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack took a jackhammer to the concrete outside the USDA in downtown Washington to create a “people’s garden,” and the USDA has long had a small Friday farmers’ market on its grounds.\(^{189}\) Not everyone has the space in which to garden, however, and as a result—as well as people’s demands that their federal, state, and local governments be more involved in this food revolution—community gardens on shared land, public or private, have begun to meet the need for dirt. There are several in this area, and the Carrboro Community Garden is situated on land owned by the Town of Carrboro.

**Community Gardeners: A Diverse Bunch**

CCGC is a diverse bunch, especially with weekly newcomers, an average or prototypical gardener does not exist. The garden is populated by an ever-evolving cast of characters. Their motivations are complex, multi-layered, ideologically-driven, and highly personal. Perhaps the one thing they all have in common is a deep skepticism of the mainstream food system. It is some combination of world politics, environmentalism, and health concerns. Many have read Michael Pollan’s seminal book *The Ominvore’s Dilemma*, and all are wary of petrochemicals, factory farms, and lab-derived foods. Not everyone has bowed out of America’s increasingly vilified industrial food system completely, but some gardeners subvert it entirely. Between the community garden, the farmers market, and careful shopping at Weaver Street Market, some eat only local,


seasonal, organic food. These people are part of the international rising tide of locavores who do not want to have their money shipped out of and their food shipped into the local community.

Despite its overtly political roots, for Natalie Sadler, the community garden is also about simple pleasure:

I love being able to garden and pull weeds and have six people around the bed talking. I just think that is so much fun. I’ve gone out there and pulled weeds by myself--it takes a lot longer and isn’t as much fun, but I like being in the garden. Some days, especially if I’ve been on the computer for a while, oh, I really just need to get out and get my hands in the dirt and be in nature.

When I was a garden regular, I felt the same way. Struggling with theory and too much time at my laptop during my first year of graduate school, gardening anchored me to something concrete and let my mind wander from its constant strain and focus. At the time, in 2008, I wrote in my fieldnotes:

The garden is full of small, manageable tasks that can actually be completed. Raking, hoeing, weeding, digging, planting, watering, and mulching a bed to perfection in the span of a few hours gives me a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment I can’t seem to find anywhere else just now. The ability to act and affect is powerful and reassuring in a world that is so often overwhelming to me these days. [...] Some come to the garden to grow affordable, organic food for themselves, some to make a political statement, some to teach children and neighbors, some to see friends, and some for the simple love of gardening, but I am here for my sanity.

For April McGreger, the garden was a way to root herself. She once wrote to me that the garden is supposed to be something different for everybody. All the weird, necessary, powerful, but rare feelings that we have as adults in this cement-covered universe. I [...] could not find my groove in this town or state for that matter because I literally did not know the dirt here. Having only lived in one place and known
only one dirt my entire life, I knew that place intimately. I felt like a newly transplanted, shallow rooted, fussy non-native perennial.\textsuperscript{190}

With an appropriate plant analogy, McGreger expresses how out-of-place she felt here in Carrboro after a lifetime in a small town in Mississippi where she was surrounded by a large extended family and active church community. Unsurprisingly, McGreger loves the book \textit{Ecology of a Cracker Childhood} by Janisse Ray, about human connections and disconnections to their native landscapes.\textsuperscript{191} To know the dirt is obviously important to a woman like McGreger, and the community garden gave her a way to do that.

The garden is a social space, where people stop by to see friends even if they never put their hands in the dirt. It is also a place where new friends are made. Some people are content to be friends in this only space, but others attend classes and parties together, and some even work together. The garden is a place where people can usually depend on seeing one another at the same time and same place each week, and in that sense it functions almost like a church. People cluster at the beginning and the end of the work session, engaging in a range of talk that, frankly, has been fascinating to overhear. Usually, it is about mutual friends, hunting for mushrooms in the woods, raving about--or sometimes critiquing--new cookbooks, discussing water catchment systems or fire ants or crabgrass or--very often--the weather. They talk about garden-related things because they might be all they have in common, but more often, they talk about them because they are what is in front of us, and the garden where that want to be right now. It does not really matter all that much what they talk about, but the act of talking reaffirms their community

\textsuperscript{190} April McGreger, email to the author, April 3, 2008.

\textsuperscript{191} Janisse Ray, \textit{Ecology of a Cracker Childhood} (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2000).
bonds. Carrboro is a town of transplants after all. It is rare to come across someone who is actually from here. People who live here feel very strongly about the town nonetheless, and perhaps that is why they have chosen to create community to replace the intricate network families and neighbors they left when they came here.

The community aspect of the garden also allows it to function as a safety net for those who love to grow things but find themselves too busy to guarantee a personal garden the time it requires. Natalie explains that it makes gardening possible for people who do not always have the time to do it independently. If she needs to leave town for a while, she can rest assured that her vegetables will not die while she is away—her fellow gardeners are there weeding and watering in her absence because they know that she will eventually do the same for them. The garden is not necessarily the kind of community in which everybody knows everybody else, but it is a community of mutual responsibility and trust. They take care of shared resources and take pains to ensure nothing is overlooked. Sometimes it is a blind investment with an assumption of return. From start to finish, it is a cooperative endeavor.

Conclusion

The Carrboro Farmers’ Market and the Carrboro Community Garden Coalition reveal how local eaters are intimately connected to the sources of their food, and the ways in which they find community through food. Both the garden and the market are discrete, self-selecting food communities within the larger community of the Town of Carrboro, and even within the larger “eat local” community. There is some overlap between the
groups that frequent these places, but often, motivations are distinct. Both the market and the community garden are sites where progressive politics and idealism find physical manifestation--in place and person, and of course in the food itself. Values might be outspoken or they might be implied, but one thing is certain--in the end, they are always edible.
Chapter 4

Conclusion

Today’s Carrboro, where my consultants enjoy excellent local food and high quality of life, rose out of a confluence of factors, including specific socioeconomic changes and a few coincidences. People still have swaying cornscapes left to look at as they cycle by on $2000 road bikes. The land has yet to be developed into something more concrete and industrial. Neither is it insignificant that a mill closed and left a nice little town next door to a growing university and down the road from a high-tech epicenter. A rich and storied regional food culture existed here, and the area is just cosmopolitan and curious enough to embrace and embellish the new types of food that came with people from other parts of the country and the world. It matters that tobacco-farming families needed to change crops and were receptive to growing organics. Carrboro’s unique circumstances made it a place ripe for good food and for good quality of life. The bones of a strong community remained, and have risen anew as something wholly different.

In her book exploring questions of authenticity Regina Bendix asserts that “[...] cultures do not die, at best they change, along with those who live in them and thus constitute them.”\textsuperscript{192} Much like Kingston Heath’s conceptualization of the built environment, the cultural landscape is flexible and adaptable, with each wave of new

\textsuperscript{192} Regina Bendix, \textit{In Search of Authenticity} (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 9.
inhabitants and change leaving their mark. Both the landscape and the local culture remain authentic through changes precisely because they are dynamic, retaining relevancy and utility for the people who occupy them. Carrboro is not Southern; rather, it is a prime example of the multicultural, cosmopolitan, globalized South. On the leading edge of the twenty-first century, Carrboro is very much alive and changing. Whereas the mill once brought the hope of progress and prosperity, so now do the farmers’ market and growing number of small farms. Whatever changes may come to Carrboro in the coming years, food will tell that story, too.
**Epilogue**

Toward the end of my research, I felt drawn toward the energy and enthusiasm of the youngest, most creative, and most ideological of Carrboro’s local food community. People like April McGreger, Sarah Blacklin, and George O’Neal are powerful personalities with many talents who have chosen to make their livings in some part of the food chain.

For the youthful members of the “eat local” movements growing around the country, there is a respect for intense, laborious, manual toil that creates, and it translates to any number of media. Among them (and their wider social network), creativity is widespread and powerful, and often, it is hands-on work that offers the chance to employ their creativity and live their politics. One person may dabble in disparate creative realms and have personal ties to individuals who connect to still more. April McGreger is an old-time musician and a chef married to an artist/musician/librarian; Kieren Ionescu, who appears with farmer George O’Neal at the Durham Farmers’ Market, is a shoemaker and former coffee roaster; Sarah Blacklin sews, has worked in 3D sculpture and on farms, manages the Carrboro market, and has a strong interest in film production.

Collectively, these consultants expressed a desire for something more than industrially manufactured culture, goods, foods, and careers. They believe that something essentially human is lost in the consumption of mass-produced, anonymous goods, and in the pursuit of careers that pay in dollars but not necessarily satisfaction.
They seek creative outlets and individuality, but also the chance to explore new worlds. They are curious, and they want something beyond cubicles and conference calls. Many of them have found something better in food and farming.

Youthful enthusiasm for local food is part of something much bigger—a fascinating and growing movement that encompasses manual labor, craftsmanship, and a preoccupation with quality that I wish I could tackle here. It deserves its own space—perhaps in a future project.
Bibliography


------. Interview by the author. Chapel Hill, NC. June 1, 2010.


