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RE-PRINT
The "Food Justice" Movement:
Trying To Break the Food Chains
by Mark Winston Griffith

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One of the great, often unspoken, forms of oppression that low- and moderate-income communities suffer through is the lack of access to healthy food. When I moved back to Central Brooklyn in 1985, I was struck by its barren nutritional landscape. It wasn't just that options like fresh produce and organic foods were hard to come by. But the storefront food provision systems themselves – "bullet-proof" fast food joints, poorly stocked and over-crowded supermarkets, cruddy, stomach-curdling bodegas – seemed to represent a level of self-destruction and dietary corruption that went well beyond my inability to buy tofu on Nostrand Avenue. While most residents and activists look at conditions such as public safety, housing availability, public education, environmental concerns and economic opportunities when taking on community development issues, seldom do we consider one of the most basic elements – how an area feeds itself – as a sign of neighborhood well being.

Recently I stumbled upon a growing movement of activists who have coined a phrase – "food justice" – that I think places how and what a community eats squarely in the context of community building and social change. Up to now "[food security](#)" has been a more common term used to describe a similar, if not broader, area of social concern. While government bureaucrats and international non-governmental organizations alike have been using food security to call attention to a whole host of agriculture- and hunger-related issues, activists have also used it to focus on creating community-based ways of producing food in an affordable, sustainable and environmentally-friendly manner. Along the way they have sought to create local jobs, promote good health and stress the importance of small, local farmers.

New Language and Icons

With the use of the term "food justice" this activism hasn't changed so much as it has taken on fresh new political energy. In an increasing number of grassroots

efforts in New York, local people are re-imagining their collective relationship to food. According to Bryant Terry, the founder of the youth-based, not-for profit [B-Healthy](#), food justice starts from the conviction that access to healthy food is a human rights issue and that the "lack of access to food in a community is an indicator of material deprivation." Food justice, Bryant suggests, goes beyond advocacy and direct service. It calls for organized responses to food security problems, responses that are locally driven and owned.

For its part, B-Healthy tries to offset the dominance of processed foods and fast food advertising in the lives of young people with political education and a sort of counter-insurgency culinary training. With a curriculum that includes books like [Fast Food Nation](#), [Diet for a Small Planet](#) and [Food Fight](#), B-Healthy offers everything from cooking classes to tips on how to shop for pesticide-free, non-genetically modified foods.

With a Black founding director and a youth-of-color constituency, many of whom are immigrants, B-Healthy has implicitly challenged the popular image of health food consciousness as being the strict domain of WASPy vegans who listen to public radio and shop at the Park Slope Food Co-Op. And rather than try to introduce 'culturally inappropriate' foods into the lives of families, B-Healthy works with foods and seasonings that are familiar to them

Food System Alternatives

Education is perhaps the first line of offense in the long fight to change eating patterns and food distribution in any given neighborhood. But as most food justice advocates will tell you, this education has to be coupled with action – the creation of viable alternatives.

[Just Food](#), which has integrated a social justice mission into its name, has been the catalyst for the establishment of 30 CSAs – Community Supported Agriculture – throughout the city, some in areas like Harlem, Bushwick and East New York. CSAs are arrangements in which people living in a given area purchase "shares" of organically-grown produce directly from local sources. CSAs provide urban families with more healthy eating choices, while also supporting family-run farms. Just as importantly, CSAs, like other local food systems, eliminate a neighborhood's dependence on far-flung corporate growers and a host of intervening processors, handlers, distributors, transporters and other middle people who have made the business of connecting urban America to food inefficient and environmentally taxing.

Just Food also works with a small number of community gardeners who are learning to market and distribute their produce in local settings. In most cases, local food justice efforts not only provide food, but often help strengthen neighborhood economies, provide employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for youth and offer innovative ways to utilize open space.

One text book example of a project that seeks to address a range of community needs through food activism has recently taken root in Red Hook, a mostly low-income neighborhood with a food terrain that is decidedly user-hostile. According to Ian Marvy, co-director of [Added Value](#), Red Hook has only one full-service, sit-down restaurant and no major grocery store, but is otherwise replete with bodegas, steam line eateries, pizza shops and fried chicken shops. On real estate that is being eyed by hungry developers seeking new water front opportunities, Added Value and a cadre of young people from the surrounding area maintain a modest farm with other local farmers and run a market where young people sell the farm's collective harvest, as well as beef, chicken and fish from other local farms. Added Value is also making plans to build a green house and harvest fish itself.

Marvy is clear about what distinguishes his work and that of his colleagues. "Food security is more about analyzing problems, ameliorating issues and providing answers... Food Justice... involves local people from seed to sale. It educates, organizes and mobilizes new social relations around food. It touches hands, hearts and pockets."

Bold New World

Efforts like B-Healthy, Just Food, Added Value and New York-based CSAs are all relatively young. And right now they are all looking to achieve justice through education and feeding, rather than agitation and confrontation. Ruth Katz, executive director of Just Food, is intent on rebuilding a demand for healthy foods and envisions a return to a time in our nation's history when, in the midst of food shortages in the 1940s, forty percent of the nation's food was supplied locally.

Still, some are hinting at a slightly more aggressive march towards progress. Terry sees the young people he works with as one day creating community organizing campaigns. He looks to take on the perpetrators of structural, food-based racism that, he feels, has kept areas like Red Hook and Central Brooklyn flooded with toxic foods and empty of choices. Of course, these days, racism is often easier to feel than prove. And while the economic development and food distribution visions of Terry and his peers are clear, a strategy of what public policies would be targeted by food-centered, grassroots organizing campaigns is far less so. Any way you look at it, America's appetites for fast food and corporate farming – both defining aspects of American culture – are not retreating anytime soon.

But then again I still believe that one day I will help start a black-run food cooperative in Bed-Stuy; and that affordable, family-style, locally-owned restaurants will spring up while liquor stores and Burger Kings die a certain death; and that a loud chorus of my neighbors will compel my community board,

City Council representative and Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce to establish a farmers market on local abandoned property.

New social realities always begin here, as somebody's seemingly far-fetched dreams. In the meantime, I'm itching for a food fight.

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