# California Cuisine and Just Food

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# Foreword

*California Cuisine and Just Food* takes a deep and comprehensive look at past and new efforts to bring tastier, healthier, locally grown, and ethically produced food to San Francisco Bay Area eaters, poor and rich. The story is inspiring. The authors of this collectively written account, cautious academics as they must be, describe the development of the Bay Area food scene as a "district" rather than as a social movement. But I have no such compunctions. It looks like a social movement to me. This book is about how the Bay Area food movement evolved to what it is today: a vibrant community of highly diverse groups working on highly diverse ways to produce better-quality food and promote a more just, healthful, and sustainable food system—for everyone along the entire system of what it takes to produce, transport, sell, prepare, serve, and consume food.

That much of today's rapidly expanding food movement began in the Bay Area is well recognized, not least because of its rock stars: Alice Waters whose restaurant, Chez Panisse, celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 2010; Eric Schlosser, whose *Fast Food Nation* brought the contradictions of industrial agriculture to public attention; and Michael Pollan, whose *Omnivore's Dilemma* catapulted food system issues into the mainstream. But as this book makes clear, "California cuisine"—generally agreed to encompass local, fresh, seasonal, and utterly delicious food—has never been only about how it tastes. California cuisine also has been and is about politics, and particularly the politics of inequities in how, where, and by whom food is produced and consumed. Some of the political history recounted here will be familiar to anyone engaged in food issues during the past few years, but much of what this book covers is fresh, fascinating, and often surprising. That California is the

birthplace of the alternative food movement is ironic in light of that state's preeminence in conventional agriculture. I knew that Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* launched food safety legislation in the United States in 1906, but had no idea that he lost a campaign for governor of California in 1934 on a platform of ending poverty. And it's good to be reminded of or to discover the century-long efforts of early-twentieth-century hiking clubs and much later environmental groups to rescue critical parts of the Bay Area agricultural landscape from housing developers, and to find out how the Diggers, Black Panthers, and the Berkeley Co-op made food such a central focus of their activities.

My personal experience with the Bay Area food movement began when I was a student at Berkeley in the 1950s. We all knew that something unusually interesting was happening at Hank Rubin's restaurants, the Pot Luck and Cruchon's. When Rubin, arguably the Father of the Berkeley food revolution, died in 2011, his obituaries singled out his accomplishments in both indulgence and innovation. Yes, the food was good—sometimes marvelously so—but his restaurants were also the first in the Bay Area to be fully integrated by race and gender.

More than half a century later, we have come to expect innovations along with indulgence. The Bay Area food scene encompasses everything from the classiest of restaurants to hospitals and schools with organic gardens. It includes urban farms and community-based grocery stores, countless groups working to improve food access and food self-sufficiency for low-income residents, and countless others devoted to improving working conditions and wages for farm and restaurant workers. The activities of these private, nonprofit, and often unsung enterprises, this book maintains, constitute a community whose collective mission is to provide meaningful alternatives to conventional food.

But do such diverse activities constitute a movement? I think so, but a more cautious answer is that it is too soon to tell. The signs are promising, but far more work remains to be done.

I say this because a few years ago, New York University's sociology department offered me an appointment as an affiliated member. Out of respect for that honor, I thought it would be useful to teach a graduate class in food sociology that focused on food as a social movement. At the precise moment I realized I had bitten off far more than I could chew (an appropriate metaphor at this point), a card-carrying sociologist and

expert on social movements, Troy Duster, came to the rescue and suggested we coteach the course. And so we did. But this book would have made the experience a lot easier.

The food movement, Duster explained, differs from classic social movements—the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, the women's movement—in having so many goals and such diverse constituencies. And because the purpose of social movements is to change society, it is possible to judge their effectiveness only in retrospect. Did they succeed in changing society? How and to what degree? The need for academic caution became clear.

The fundamental structure of today's society may seem immutable, but it should be obvious to everyone that the food environment in the United States has changed in recent years, and much for the better. In my New York City neighborhood, I have ready access to sources of local food, humanely raised meat, and eggs from free-range chickens. I can buy organic milk and produce not only from the local farmers' market but from almost any nearby grocery. In many city schools, public and private, food is fresher and healthier than in even the recent past. I can easily observe the effects of government programs, limited as they may be, that support organic producers, farm-to-school programs, and young farmers. And it is increasingly evident that public discussion about obesity, formerly focused exclusively on parental and personal responsibility, has now shifted markedly to focusing on analyzing how the existing food system encourages overeating and what to do about it.

Signs of the food movement are evident in the avalanche of books, films, and videos about the failures of our current industrial food system and the work of pioneers in developing alternative ways of producing and distributing foods. Universities all over the country are developing food programs within academic disciplines. My own institution, New York University, not only houses my department's innovative food studies programs (founded in 1996), but also offers closely related programs in environmental studies and animal studies. All teach students to critically analyze problems inherent in industrial food production and to create alternatives that are healthier for people, farm animals, and the planet.

But as this book repeatedly emphasizes, improvements in the food system are most likely to benefit the relatively rich and well educated and trickle down slowly, if at all, to the poor. Many groups described

here are working to redress this imbalance, meaning that they are trying to make fundamental changes in society. No wonder they encounter opposition. The food movement's focus on finding more equitable alternatives to current production systems constitutes an explicit critique of those systems. Food production and food service together are worth more than a trillion dollars a year in sales, just in this country. Vast sums are at stake for everyone producing, marketing, and consuming food.

If this book has one overriding message, it is this: changing the food system is hard work but worth every bit of that effort. Recently a student asked me for advice about how she could become involved in food system work when she felt such despair about her powerlessness to change the system. I told her about the signs of positive change that I see everywhere I look. I'm heartened by how the Occupy Wall Street movement has made so many people aware of income inequities, and how NYU food studies students have come up with their own version, Occupy Against Big Food, and its light-hearted slogan, "Lettuce beet the system."

We won't know the results of current efforts for a long time. In the meantime, there is much work to be done. If young people do not join these efforts, nothing will change. So I say: Get busy. Join the movement. Make change happen. And read this book for inspiration.

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