

The high cost of cheap food

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I used to find Flaming Hot Cheetos, bagged pickles, and the occasional plate of fried chicken in my classroom when I taught Senior English in Louisiana.

I allowed some of my students to eat at their desks after lunch. I had to; there were three pregnant seniors in my fourth period.

Shayna, who was in her third trimester during her last semester of high school, mostly snacked on packets of those horribly orange peanut butter crackers. Over half of my class was obese. After pizza or macaroni or hamburgers from the cafeteria, they'd fall asleep against their will, come to, apologize, then nod off again.

My students were kids who carried iPhones and wore brand-name shoes. Eighty percent were black, 98 percent were low-income. They'd been raised to look as good as they could, but eat as cheaply as possible.

For awhile, you can ignore poverty in schools, outbreaks of cookie dough E. coli, and the fact that 27 percent of our country's children are obese. But they're all connected — and these layers of bad news will eventually weigh one down.

I found this statistic a little harder to overlook: For the first time in 200 years, today's children have a lower life expectancy than their parents.

Unhealthy school lunches are certainly one reason. Here's another: Most of our food comes from huge factory farms that are government-subsidized to produce food products quickly but not nutritiously.

A partial list of Health and Human Service's recalled foods so far this summer include:

- Lewis Laboratories' chocolate flavor nutrition drink;
- C.F. Sauer gravies and sauce mixes;
- Publix Brand chocolate and vanilla whey protein;
- Certain Malt-O-Meal single-serve packets of Maple & Brown Sugar Instant Oatmeal; and
- Three types of seasonings from Kroger.

There aren't any unfamiliar family names up there because smaller, organic farms abide by the rules of nature: You are stewards of your stock; you allow the soil to regenerate; and you don't add dry milk and MSG to everything, then recall it a month later. You learn the names of the plants you're eating, and you connect a chicken sandwich to a living thing with feathers — something the fifth- grade students I worked with couldn't do. The bigger farms are the ones responsible for the litany of gone-wrong products.

The most recent "good news" is that the FDA is pushing for "preventative process controls" through the Food Safety Modernization Act of 2009 (HR 875) and the Food Safety Enhancement Act (HR 2749), in order "to protect the public health by preventing food-borne illness and ensuring the safety of food." Problem is, the process controls the government will deem as necessary will likely be too expensive for small organic farmers who are doing more to keep this country healthy than the huge agribusiness companies (Tyson, Sedexho, Hormel) who can buy bigger freezers and continue to sell nicely wrapped crap.

What the passing of HR 875 and 2749 could mean is a loss of organic, small-farm options and a reduction of both the shopper's autonomy and the good things that are happening in the food world today.

Endangered are farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture, and programs like the Farm to Cafeteria initiative, which fills cafeterias with fresh heads of lettuce and teaches kids that accountability can mean nurturing little green lives. These programs banish the resentment often extended toward the gourmet, neo-hippie organic movement. Supplying cafeterias with

local organic food isn't fancy; it's cheaper than skipping lunch. In the long run, our tax dollars wouldn't subsidize the petroleum that keep factories surging, trucks transporting our tomatoes, and our health insurance bills skyrocketing.

In the long run, I would like for Shayna's little girl to have a banana when she's hungry in the afternoon and dirty fingernails from digging in a garden, not a chin covered in garish orange crumbs.

Are these aspirations likely? One in three children today will develop Type 2 diabetes (one in two if they're black or Hispanic). It's partly because we aren't eating diversified foods anymore, and the FDA's new plans to protect factory farms will ensure that we continue to eat a fairly homogenized diet of refined sugars.

According to Vandana Shiva, an Indian crop ecologist quoted in Barbara Kingsolver's book "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle," over the course of history, humans have consumed over 80,000 plant species. That number has now been reduced to eight species, with a continuous honing in on modified canola, corn and soy.

When Kingsolver wrote the book in 2007, only six companies controlled 98 percent of the world's seed sales (Monsanto, Syngenta, DuPont, Mitsui, Aventis, and Dow), and they continue to desecrate land. Juggernauts like Monsanto send 330 small farm operators off their land a week.

In a nutshell, government regulations will soon favor genetically modified (or GMO) seeds over organic seeds, and organic seeds might eventually become illegal.

Hand-planted kale and preservative-less poultry might be things of the past. The FDA says requiring eggs to be kept at 45 degrees will make us healthier, but I've owned chickens, and their eggs are like silk when it's 60 and sunny.

The standard that food providers should be held to is purity of process and intent. We don't need to add bad things to our food. Agribusiness doesn't promote food safety, it swells with immoral shortcuts (a thousand chickens in a bedroom- sized space, soil made prematurely infertile, etc.).

What we need to do is take a good, hard look at what "safe" means.

Take a garden. Plant what grows best in your sun. Water the leaves, the roots. Walk through your rows. (If you don't have a yard, that's what urban gardens are for.)

Now take another garden. Grow it long and wide, cutting away the ecosystems along its edges. Decimate the birds and the bugs. Spray it with regulatory chemicals to ward off the changes provided by the wind and the rain, the nutrient highways for our food.

Which one would you call "safe"?

I tried to teach my kids how to write, but I also told them what I'd learned: that an adult needs eight hours of sleep, that homemade bread and hand-written letters are second to none. That, as Annie Dillard said, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our years."

On a more human level, the current statistics mean that less of our kids' days are spent learning, whisk in hand, how their grandma's wrist turned yolks in a bowl. We are unaccustomed to bugs in our lettuce, fish with heads, berries covered in the harvest's dust.

The situation here is honest food; the deeper story is our respect for human life. Lose the first, and you lose the second, too.

I might not have much to hand down to my kids (when I have them). But I do have a recipe for sweet potato bread and a dad whose knees are muddy all summer long from gardening. I'd like to give my children shiny vegetables, basil that leans into the sun, and teach them how to smell a crust that's done. If the worsening economy means our kids might inherit less, then we should be giving them longer lives to live.