

CORPS HIJACK "ORGANIC"

Organic food, once scoffed at by the corporate food giants, is now the fastest-growing segment of the food industry, topping \$15 billion in sales last year, so the giants have gone from scoffing to co-opting.

Philip Morris, Kellogg, General Mills, PepsiCo, Dean Foods, and Coca-Cola have all taken over popular organic brands in the last few years, though they're careful not to put their own conglomerate names on the goods.

Now they're perverting the very meaning of the word "organic." After a herculean effort, the small farmers, marketers, and consumers who are the essence of the burgeoning organic movement won a federal consumer-protection label in 2002. Last October, however, corporate lobbyists got eight Republican senators to sneak through an amendment (in the middle of the night) that allows the food giants to add nonorganic ingredients, synthetic additives, antibiotics, and other impurities to processed food, yet still label it organic. Bam! It was done—no hearing, no discussion, no vote.

Then, last December, George W appointed Katrina Heinze to be the consumer representative on the national organic standards board, which is supposed to protect the purity of the federal government's organic label. Guess what our consumer representative does for a living? She's the manager of global regulatory affairs for General Mills.

The Organic Consumers Association (218-226-4164) is working to restore the integrity to the label.

BUSH'S IRS GOES AFTER POOR FOLKS

You've gotta love the consistency of the Bushites. When they ram through tax "reforms," it's the superrich and corporations that gain. And when they unleash their IRS to look into tax cheating,

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The



LOWDOWN

■ Edited by Jim Hightower and Phillip Frazer ■ Vol. 8 No. 03 ■ March 2006

Join the Upchuck Rebellion against corporate crap-food **No-fat? Low-carbs? Baloney!** **Go for the no-junk diet!**

Even though winter still has its frigid grip on most of the land, I'm already thinking out-of-season, looking ahead to one special thing: fresh, ripe, right-out-of-the-soil, good-and-good-for-you summer tomatoes. Oh, I can taste them now! And eggplant, too. And peppers. And all kinds of other edible wonders.

I'm a food guy. I've got a small but richly composted garden plot in my backyard, I'm a regular at several farmers' markets, and I frequent a number of great restaurants here in Austin. I love poking around food stores of any variety, I like to browse through seed catalogs and cooking magazines, and I always try to sample the local specialties as I travel around the country. I enjoy friendships with quite a few chefs and restaurateurs, and I love visiting with farmers and food artisans who're doing creative things. Though it still pisses off the corporate establishment, I was once the agricultural commissioner of Texas.

I know firsthand about the phenomenal cornucopia of good, fresh, nutritious, and delicious food that our country is capable of producing. That's why it knocks me whopperjawed to see the stuff that dominates too many American diets—an array of industrialized, conglomerated, globalized products that have lost any connection to our good earth. This stuff is saturated with fats, sugars, artificial flavors, chemical

additives, pesticide residues, bacterial contaminants, genetically altered organisms, and who knows what else? Plus, the major factor driving prices is not the cost of any actual food that might still be in these products, but the cost of packaging, advertising, and long-distance shipping.

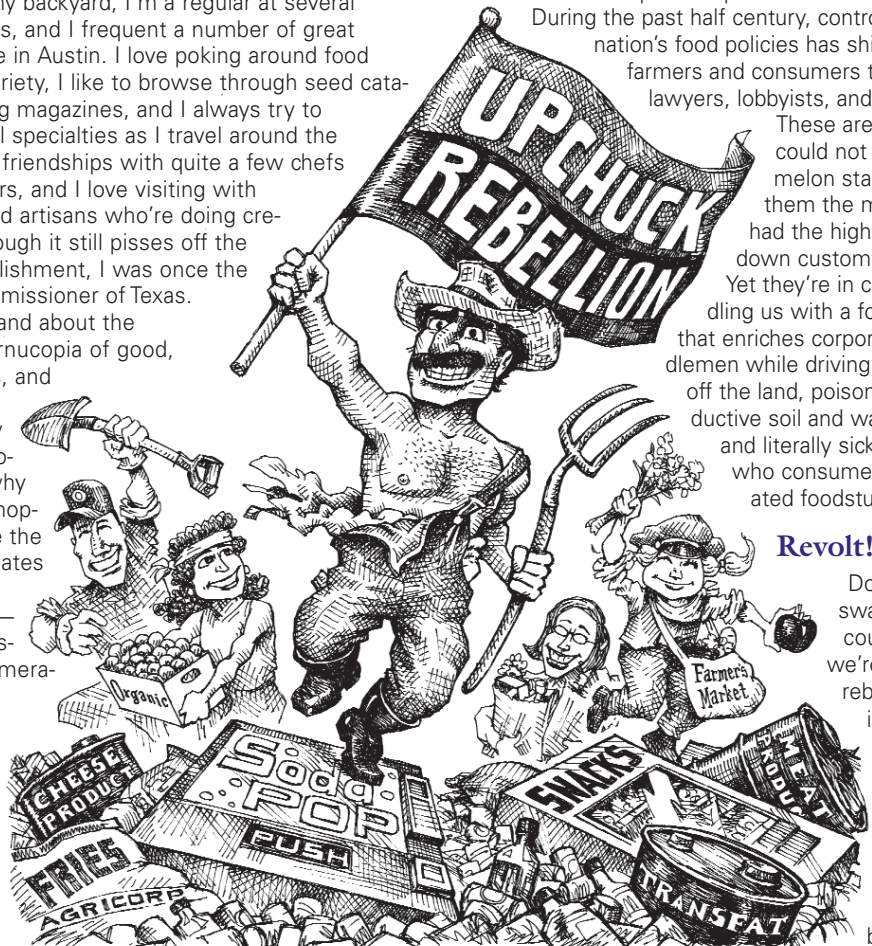
What has caused us to stray so far from the farm, so far from the essential and wonderful sustenance provided by nature itself? The answer, of course, is that the brute force of corporate power has been applied both in politics and the marketplace to pervert our food economy.

During the past half century, control over our nation's food policies has shifted from farmers and consumers to corporate lawyers, lobbyists, and economists.

These are people who could not run a watermelon stand if we gave them the melons and had the highway patrol flag down customers for them! Yet they're in charge, saddling us with a food system that enriches corporate middlemen while driving good farmers off the land, poisoning our productive soil and water supplies, and literally sickening those who consume these adulterated foodstuffs.

Revolt!

Do we have to swallow this? Of course not—we're Americans, rebellious mavericks—and the revolt is on! For the past few years, a grassroots movement has quietly but rapidly been spreading



they don't probe the tax shelters of millionaires or the multibillion-dollar offshore tax havens of corporate financiers. Instead, they go after the working poor. Some 1.6 million low-income workers have not only had their tax refunds frozen in the past five years but also have had their tax filings officially labeled "fraudulent" by the IRS. This crackdown on the poor has allowed Bush to claim that, by golly, he's tough on tax fraud.

But the IRS's own in-house taxpayer advocate, Nina Olson, says that two-thirds of those folks were entitled either to the tax credit they sought or to even more money. Another 14% were due at least a partial refund, and of the remaining 20%, almost none had committed fraud. They had simply been confused by the complicated tax forms and made honest errors.

By the way, the average income of these supposed tax deadbeats was only \$13,000. The great majority were working parents who were using the earned-income tax credit, which was first advocated by the laissez-faire guru Milton Friedman and first implemented by Ronnie Reagan.

"SUNTAN JOHNNY" BOEHNER

John Boehner, the newly elected House majority leader, says he's a reformer. So we can rest easy now, knowing that he'll put a stop to all that corrupt coziness between Congress and corporate lobbyists, right?

Sure, Pollyanna—until you take a hard squint at the man known as "Suntan Johnny." This Ohio Congress critter maintains a perpetual tan as a result of spending an uncommon amount of time on Florida beaches and golf courses. Lobbyists line up corporate jets to fly him to the Sunshine State for lavish beach parties with corporate donors.

"Yes, I am cozy with lobbyists," John candidly confides, "but I have never done

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Vending machine wars

Coke, Pepsi, and other junk-food purveyors go school board to school board dangling hundreds of thousands of dollars in "educational contributions" in front of each one. Essentially, these are bribes, enticing a board to give the company an exclusive contract to put its vending machines in all of the district's schools. Hundreds of school boards have taken the bribe.

But parents, health-care advocates, and students have been waging fiery counterattacks to rid their schools of those obesity machines. In Los Angeles, for example, a creative bunch of mad-as-hellers sent every school-board member a Mason jar of sugar to represent what the average teenager was ingesting from the soda machines every day. They won a district-wide ban on the sale of sodas.

On another front, Gary Hirshberg was stunned when his teenage son told him he'd had pizza and Skittles for lunch at his school in New Hampshire. Luckily, Hirshberg was in a position to do something—he's the top executive of Stonyfield Farm, America's largest organic yogurt maker. Stonyfield is now sponsoring a program to put "healthy vending machines" in schools free of charge.

Food suppliers offer discounts so the snacks are affordable to all students. The healthy vending machines are now in school districts in California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington State.

throughout the country. I call it *The Upchuck Rebellion*: a growing number of people fed up with the destructive power of industrialized food are declaring that they're not going to take it anymore.

More than declaring...they're taking action. Part of this effort is political, trying to get the industrializers and globalizers to clean up their act. At another level, however, America's food rebels are taking on the idea of industrialization itself by creating their own alternative food economies. These are based on local farmers, seasonal consumption, organic and sustainable production, local food processors and artisans, and local markets. The goals are (1) to build a system that delivers tastier, healthier food; (2) to keep a community's food dollars in the local economy; and (3) to treat food not as a corporate commodity, but as a centerpiece of our culture.

Naturally, the Powers That Be

have howled in derision at these efforts, sneering that local farmers, consumers, entrepreneurs, chefs, marketers, gardeners, environmentalists, workers, churches, co-ops, community organizers, and just plain citizens simply don't have the savvy to create and run any kind of significant food system. However, my friend John Dromgoole, who runs a successful natural gardening and composting center in Austin, has a snappy retort to these elites: "Those who say it can't be done should not interrupt those who are doing it."

This is a movement that has antecedents going back generations—both J.H. Kellogg and C.V. Post, for example, were health-food visionaries more than a century ago (and both would be appalled by the products now bearing their names)—but the modern-day movement is barely 20 years old. In this short time, however, these innovative doers have made astonishing gains. Just in terms of raw

numbers, today's "Good Food" movement is impressive:

- Organic food topped \$15 billion in sales in 2004—triple what they were only seven years earlier. Sales are increasing by roughly 20% a year (compared to only about 2% for all other foods) and are expected to reach \$30 billion four years from now.
- Nearly two thirds of American shoppers bought some organic foods last year—up from about half the year before. About 40% of consumers now say that they regularly buy some organic foods.
- There are now more than 8,000 organic farmers, with thousands more trying to make the transition from industrialized production to organic (a rigorous and costly process that should be assisted and funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which instead remains either indifferent or hostile).
- From white tablecloth restaurants to barbeque joints, chefs have been in the lead in introducing organic food to the public and in creating the fast-growing market for locally produced, seasonal foods.
- The growth and popularity of farmers' markets has mushroomed in recent years, popping up in practically every city and most towns. Some 4,000 of these bustling, vibrant markets now exist, bringing local farmers and artisans together with customers at all economic levels. Likewise, the community-supported agriculture movement is fast spreading. These CSAs allow consumers to buy "shares" in the production of a local farm or group of farms, giving the farmers a defined and reliable cash market and the consumers

Do something!

A wealth of information, experience, expertise, and hands-on help are available for those wanting to take charge of their food. Here are some groups to contact:

■ **Organic Consumers Association**
www.organicconsumers.org
218-226-4164

■ **National Farm to School Program Office**
www.farmtoschool.org
530-756-8518, ext. 32

■ **Food Security Learning Center**
www.worldhungeryear.org
212-629-8850

■ **Research, Education, Action and Policy on Food Group**
www.reapfoodgroup.org

■ **Eat Local Foods Coalition of Maine**
www.eatlocalfoods.org

■ **Stonyfield Farm**
www.stonyfield.com
1-800-PRO-COWS

■ **Slow Food USA**
www.slowfoodusa.org
718-260-8000

■ **To find Farmers Markets**
www.localharvest.org
www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets

■ **Saving the American family farmer**
Organic Valley Family of Farms
http://organicvalley.coop
1-888-444-6455

a weekly share of the crops. In addition, the food co-op movement (once the rather funky domain of hippies) is thriving. About 300 of them are in cities across the country, doing some \$750 million a year in business and providing local producers another way around the corporate distribution system.

- The demand for organic and locally produced food has become so mainstream that major supermarket chains and such national food wholesalers as SYSCO have had to alter their once-rigid procurement practices to make some of their purchases from organic and local producers.

By eliminating the corporate middlemen (with their voracious profit demands, bloated executive salaries, advertising budgets, bureaucracies, lobbyists, lawyers, and so forth), this localized marketing system links farms directly to forks. The results are salutary—small farmers get a fair price that lets them and their families keep going, and we consumers get food that is what it's supposed to be: tasty and nutritious. In the bargain, our food dollars stay at home, generating more economic activity in our communities.

Yes, say opponents, but the food is extravagantly expensive. No, it's not. In season, organic tomatoes from a local farm can be cheaper than the industrial tomato at the supermarket. And as organic production has increased, overall prices are coming in line with nonorganic. In Portland, Oregon, for example, a small chain of grocery stores called New Seasons features locally-produced foods, and about 75% of its stock is organic. A monthly price survey of Portland-area supermarkets shows that prices at New Seasons

do not vary more than 3% either way from those at the national chains.

But even when organic food costs more, it's important to consider what you get for your money. Price is not the same as value—as one farmer says, "You can get a day's worth of calories for 99 cents at a 7-Eleven, but not a day's worth of nutrition." Or of flavor.

Plus, Washington spends billions of our tax dollars to subsidize corporate-produced food, and the food industrialists also are allowed to escape paying for the extensive pollution, soaring health costs, and ecological damage that are direct results of their methods. Rather than paying for these enormous costs when we buy corporate food at Wal-Mart or Burger King, we pay for them in our tax bills...or by suffering illnesses.

Another strong force propelling the good-food movement is cultural connection. People are realizing that our corporatized world is out of control—empty, vapid, phony, valueless. One place where folks sense that they might be able to get a grip again is food. By linking directly with small farmers, cheesemakers, and other homegrown producers, we reclaim our place, our cultural identities, our values, our *humanness*. Food, after all, is not merely fuel, but culture. It's in our art, songs, and literature. It's in our memories—tastes, smells, sounds, visuals, and feelings. It's in our souls, giving us shared experiences with family, friends, co-workers, and community. By taking charge of what goes on our plates and how it gets there, we begin taking charge of our lives.

What's for lunch?

It's a cliché to say that our children are our society's future, but it happens to be true. So, what are we teaching them about food? In class,

they get lessons on the five components of a good nutritional lunch, then the bell rings...and they go face the reality of their school lunch.

Very few lyric poems have ever been written in praise of the "mystery meat" and blah veggies of school lunch, but lately this midday repast has gone from merely being bad...to being bad for you. In today's schools, the idea of lunch has been reduced to corporate-delivered sugars, fats, and calories, helping produce a growing epidemic of childhood obesity and gross ignorance of what food should be.

School cafeterias are eliminating cooks and even kitchens, for their "meals" come prepackaged from food-service corporations or are contracted out to McDonald's, Domino's, and other fast-food chains. Two-thirds of America's middle schools and high schools sell sodas and junk-food snacks, usually under exclusive contracts that bring big corporate money to the school system. Rather than viewing school "food" as a natural resource for nurturing and educating kids, administrators have turned it into a money-making, corporate-branded commodity.

But a big change is coming.

With little fanfare, a grassroots "farm-to-cafeteria" movement has been spreading from school to school. More than 400 school districts and 200 university cafeterias are now building their menus (and, in many places, their educational curricula) around fresh, local ingredients, much of which is organic. In nearly every case, the change has come because some parent, farmer, nutritionist, or other individual rose up to ask, "What the hell is going on here?"

Vanessa Ruddy was one of them. In 2002, her son, Grant, enrolled at Lincoln Elementary School in

anything unethical." Oh? How about this? In the mid-1990s, Boehner was caught doling out checks from tobacco lobbyists to lawmakers on the House floor while tobacco legislation was being considered!

Or this? His biggest campaign funder is SLM Corporation, the giant marketer of loans to college students. Guess who chairs the committee overseeing much of the legislation that benefits SLM? "Suntan Johnny," that's who! And guess who has been a frequent flyer on SLM's jet, going golfing in Florida with the chairman of SLM's board? Yep, that would be Mrs. Boehner's boy, John.

And how about this? Supersleeze lobbyist Jack Abramoff funneled \$30,000 to our new "reformer"—and Boehner has refused to return any of the tainted money, even as the Abramoff scandal spreads. Here's another one: Boehner rents his Washington apartment from a lobbyist whose clients need legislative favors from Boehner's committee.

Boehner says there should be no outright ban on lobbyists paying for trips and gifts for lawmakers. With "Suntan Johnny," it's going to be business as usual.

Meanwhile, Rick Santorum, the far-right-wing senator from Pennsylvania who shaped the Republicans' "K-Street Project" with Abramoff and Tom DeLay, has dressed himself up as the born-again Caped Crusader for Ethics Reform! Rick, you might have guessed, faces a tough re-election campaign. When Democrats proposed a reform package just like Rick's last year, Santorum showed no interest in it at all. For the record, Rick the Reformer received more campaign money from lobbyists in this election cycle than any other member of Congress.

CONSERVATIVES CHASTISE BUSH

George W insists that he has supreme power as commander-in-chief to spy on American citizens without

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following any stinking due process of law. Dick Cheney snarls that anyone who disagrees is a terrorist-coddler. Karl Rove snaps that Democrats who oppose Bush's spy operation are Osama lovers. Alberto "See No Evil" Gonzales told Congress that the president can by-damn make his own rules in wartime.

Wow—like hormone-addled 14-year-olds, these guys are doing a high strut in hopes of intimidating their political enemies. But wait—while the Bushites are looking to their left, look who's coming at them from the right. Bush's assertion of autocratic executive power is hardly a conservative principle, and a growing number of prominent right-wingers are howling that Bush & Gang are desecrating their movement.

"My criteria for judging this stuff is what would a President Hillary do with these same powers," says Paul Weyrich, the influential head of a right-wing think tank. And here's Repub-guru Grover Norquist, who hates big government: "There is no excuse for violating the rule of law...Not to [get warrants before spying] appears to be an expression of contempt," he says.

David Keene, head of the American Conservative Union, is even more blunt: "Their argument is extremely dangerous in the long term, because it can be used to justify all kinds of things that I'm sure [neither] the president nor the attorney general has thought about. The American system was set up on the assumption that you can't rely on the good will of people with power."

Bruce Fein, a top legal official with Ronald Reagan, chimes in, "Bush's defenders are embracing the most liberal and utopian view of human nature with their 'trust me' argument. A view that would cause the Founding Fathers to weep."

On this one, mark me down as siding with the conservatives.

Olympia, Washington, and when she took a look at the lunch menu, she did not like what she saw. While this school had long shown an interest in good food (it had an organic garden, a children's activity kitchen, and a harvest festival in the fall), the lunch program at Lincoln was definitely old school.

At the bottom of the menu was the name of Paul Flock, the school district's child-nutrition supervisor, and Ruddy decided to call him. She put it off for a month, however, for she assumed he'd be a typical bureaucrat, and she dreaded having to make a big fuss and wrestle with the bureaucracy. Lo and behold, though, Flock welcomed her call and was open to improving the menu.

Ruddy enlisted other parents to join her for a meeting in Flock's office, and he asked what she wanted. "Organic Food" was her response. Thus began an organizing process to get teachers, cafeteria staff, the kids, farmers and other relevant parties involved and working together. Sure enough, in October 2002, Lincoln Elementary opened its "Organic Choices" salad bar, with a colorful and flavorful array of fresh, organic, locally produced fruits and veggies. Ruddy said that the school's cook told her, "You would have thought it was Christmas! You should have seen the kids' eyes light up."

The chief concern was cost. For example, while the romaine, arugula, and mustard leaf have far superior nutrient content, this mix of organic greens costs four times more than iceberg lettuce's price tag of 72 cents a pound. But the team of parents and others overseeing the development of Organic Choices found savings elsewhere, primarily by one simple act: eliminating

desserts from the lunch offerings (a move enthusiastically applauded by teachers and parents). Lincoln actually has cut its per-meal lunch cost by 2 cents, and the lunch program even started making money, for teachers and parents are eating lunch at the school.

Since 2002, the salad bar has become a full-meal option, with cheeses, beans, eggs, whole-grain breads, etc. Today, all elementary schools in Olympia have some version of Organic Choice in their cafeterias. "It's all about a long-term investment in the health of our children," says Lincoln Elementary's principal. "We are the responsible adults. We can do this."

Meanwhile, Ruddy has become a Johnny Appleseed for the farm-to-cafeteria movement, speaking to others around the country about bringing it to their schools. She offers two major tips: Get active. Don't feel powerless.

The power of the table

This grassroots movement is not out simply to change some cafeterias, but to change the corporate culture of food. And where better to start than with our children? Why shouldn't every school have an Organic Choices program, a school garden and kitchen to give them the hands-on experience of growing and preparing the food they eat, regular trips to farms and farmers' markets, and a curriculum that connects them both to nature and to their local community?

As school after school is finding, it's an awakening for kids to learn that they have a relationship with food that is deeper, richer, and far more exciting than a Happy Meal at McDonald's. Alice Waters, the wonderful pioneer of America's good-food movement

who has created her own "edible schoolyard" and "edible classroom" programs, is a tireless promoter of this educational awakening. She says, "Students can learn fundamental truths about where food comes from, about actions and consequences, about the importance of stewardship of the land, and the civilizing and socializing effect of the table."

The farm-to-cafeteria movement has now had an abundance of experience in all sorts of school systems and is willing to assist others who want to give it a go (see DO SOMETHING box). They have learned a few universal keys to success:

- It takes a great deal of effort to break through the entrenched food-procurement system.
- Start with the right school, where parents, administrators, and food-service personnel are open to the idea.
- Begin small, proceed slowly, and build on success.
- Reach out—be inclusive and transparent.
- Be understanding of the realities faced by both the food-service staff and your local farming community.
- Contact everyone who has expertise, funds, connections, and other resources to assist you.
- Involve students in all phases of the process.
- Build a strong curriculum component into the project from the start.
- Make it fun—have community tastings, festivals, food art projects, etc.

It's not easy to recapture power from an entrenched corporate culture, but it is doable—and the prize most definitely is worth the effort.

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