

DOES SUSTAINABILITY MEAN MORE THAN AGRICULTURE?

BY DERRICK SCHNEIDER

Sustainable. Organic. Local. Ethical. This is the idealized diet of the Bay Area foodie. We worship our pantheon, Alice Waters and Michael Pollan among them, and religiously attend our farmers' markets, those nomadic temples of the movement that hold services every day of the week. We vote with our dollars to ensure a food supply that has never passed through the poisoned and self-destructive bowels of industrial agriculture.

When I wrote about Chinatown for the last issue of *Edible East Bay*, a number of readers wondered how a magazine focused on sustainability could even mention shark fin dumpling. Fishermen get shark fin, said the letters, by lopping the fins off a living shark and then tossing the rest of the fish back.

I understand the concern, but shark fin, to my mind, isn't the worst ingredient in Chinatown's food. As I walk into the tiny, steamy dim sum shops that speckle the neighborhood, I notice the constant presence of pork: ground for su mi dumplings, shredded and stuffed inside sticky balls of white dough, pigs hanging from a hook in the ceiling.

I don't read Chinese, but I doubt that any of the cross-hatch symbols sketched onto signs and menus means "Niman Ranch." I imagine the pigs came through the worst of industrial agriculture's scenery: windowless buildings where pigs live from birth to death, tight-fitting cages that prevent them from moving, tsunamis of filth that course through the nation's waterways and pollute everything in their path.

The Chez Panisse staff, hub of all things sustainable in the East Bay, doesn't know of any Chinatown restaurant that shares the Alice Waters vision. My Chinese American friends tell me that the subject just doesn't come up in the community.

By all rights, I shouldn't spend my dollars in this little section of downtown Oakland, shouldn't divert my walk to work so that I can indulge in baked pork buns, shouldn't go for jook on Sunday mornings. I spend my money on sustainable food, and Chinatown doesn't have it.

But culture and community should have a place in our conversations about food. Meals are more than the sum of the nuts and bolts of production. Chinatown's businesses often cook the traditional food of the owners' native land, keeping a cultural connection alive between homeland and new home. The restaurants are also meeting places: Go to Gum Kuo on a Sunday morning, and you'll see families crowded around the communal tables, ladling spoonfuls of hot rice porridge into their bowls, catching up on the week's events, dispensing advice, and teaching the children.

Could a sustainable Chinese restaurant—the Chez Panisse of 8th and Webster, perhaps—survive in a field of inexpensive alternatives? A lot of Bay Area foodies go to Chinatown expressly for cheap, good food, the same way that many of us go to taco trucks and other ethnic restaurants. However, it's easy to imagine the other type of East Bay foodie, the one who seeks out menus that sport the names of farms, flocking to downtown Oakland the way they swarm toward North Berkeley now. But for the moment, only an ethical gray area stands in for such a restaurant.

It's not just our plants and animals that need to be sustained; it's our communities and the people in them. We can't shut out our neighbors because they don't share our beliefs; we need to start the dialog that doesn't yet exist. Should we all go out and eat shark fin dumplings? Maybe not. But we should be okay with eating traditional food from a local businessperson, even if it's made with industrial ingredients. Only by sharing meals can we ask the questions about how things are done and how they might change. ▶

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