



Looking Ahead: The Next Decade of Southcoast Agriculture and Beyond

Agricultural Aperture Introduction

January 5, 2011

Words and ideas are perennial crops, perhaps biennials, rarely annuals.

Ideas take time to develop, mature, ripen. They shift over time, pulsing throughout their sporadic growth... periods of dormancy oft exposed during the busy rhythms of summer. In early 2010, as Katie and I awaited the blessed addition of a child to our family, I spent a few fleeting moments recording thoughts of the future, pondering the realities of the world our child will grow up in. With the arrival of our daughter Mariah Grace in May 2010 and the beginning of harvest season shortly thereafter time for reflection was set aside. Set upon by long days, bountiful crops, and the flow of the season, the moments of summer called us brilliantly.

In the revealing quiet of the long winter nights I've decided to take a bit of time to consider and share some of the factors which flare most dramatically in my mind as we ponder the future of agriculture and food on the Southcoast.

The winter is a special time for us, the shorter days allow for a relaxed schedule, more time in the kitchen, board games and winter walks, but it also provides the space for further consideration of our place in the foodsystem and development of our guiding philosophies. Rudolf Steiner placed special emphasis on the wintertime; in the period when our fields are frozen and snowcovered our soils and souls are given an opportunity to listen with ease to the energies which get drowned out by the hum and buzz present during the growing season.

So let us introduce you to the beginning of a new essay series – Agricultural Aperture. Over the coming year we'll explore topics which give us greatest pause, concern, and hope as we look to the future of agriculture on the Southcoast of Massachusetts. Anticipated topics in the series:

- Impact of Peak Oil on Agriculture
- Land, Resources, and Climate Change
- Exposing Externalities – Ag. Economics
- Reversing the Trend of Nutrient Decline
- Return of Vibrant Local Foodsheds
- Labor and Agriculture – Who and What
- Seeds and Technology
- Soils – Foundation of Health
- Diversity as a Necessary Strength
- Developing New Knowledge and Skills
- Wealth and Capital Investments
- Celebrating Community Connections

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End of the “Cheap Food” Era

Today’s story in the Financial Times, “Global Food Prices Hit Record High” reminds us that despite the ongoing slump to the economy, the realities of peak oil, climate change, and a broad array of factors will likely result in higher food prices not only this year, but for the foreseeable future.

From local foodsheds to globally exported commodities, our longstanding era of cheap food is rapidly coming to a close and in the coming years food prices will serve as a constant reminder of our interdependence as a community, region, nation, and world.

In my estimation our era of cheap food has not served us well. The drive for lower prices, and the reliance upon technology and toxic chemistry laid the foundation for a tremendous abuse of our natural resources. Not only our soils which we depend upon for nourishment but our global waterways, rivers and oceans which form the kitchen sink for our fertilizers and chemicals.

The era of cheap food also brought us declining health; obesity, heart disease and diabetes in developed nations while poorer communities continue struggling to access healthy diets.

Unfortunately as a society we haven’t created a food system which can stand up against coming crises. Making matters worse, the recent economic downturn (which we are only slowly becoming aware of its long term impact) will limit the capacity of consumers to cope with the reality of rising food costs. In the Northeast we are particularly susceptible to the impact of rising energy costs impacting not only our food prices (trucking mileage rates in the third quarter of 2010 were narrowly shy of their peak), but also profoundly impacting us through increased gas prices and greater home heating costs.

Focusing on the future, the time has come to make strategic choices as individuals and society to become more resilient as a community. These choices include expansion of gardening, reinvesting in our agricultural lands, and creating stronger marketing relationships between local farmers and consumers. It is my hope that this series will serve as a catalyst for our community to consider, engage, and create a more sustainable and just Southcoast foodshed; while considering the interconnected nature of our global food systems.

Dig Deeper

Agricultural Aperture Series
<http://www.brixbounty.com/>

Food and Agricultural Organization of the
United Nations
<http://www.fao.org/>

Food First – Institute for Food&Dev Policy
<http://www.foodfirst.org/>

Coming Next: We will begin to briefly examine peak oil’s impact on food & agriculture in Southeastern Massachusetts.