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**“LOCAL” – A word worth saving!**

By Mike Callicrate

In the newly released food film, *Fresh*, Russ Kremer proudly proclaims, “They [consumers] want my pigs…they want my product!” Russ is a long time hog farmer who decided that doing what is best for the hogs, as well as the people who eat his pork, is what matters, even though it’s more work and more costly.  The day that someone discovers the difference between the pork Russ produces from his family farm in Missouri, considered to be the ultimate in hog heaven, and the industrial factory farms of Smithfield, is a day to celebrate. It has been a long time coming. Since 1980, the struggles have been enormous with more than 90% of our hog farmers and more than 40% of our cattle operations being stomped out of business under the heavy foot of big factory farm conglomerates like Smithfield, Cargill and Tyson and their retail partners.

These global corporations externalize enormous costs onto the public. With their abusive market power they buy livestock far below the cost of production. They don’t pay a living wage to their workers. They use our land and water as an industrial sewer. Farmers and ranchers who care about the land, animals, food quality and the communities they live in can’t compete on price because they pay the true cost of production.

Today, thanks to valuable books like *Fast Food Nation* and *Omnivore’s Dilemma* along with compelling and inspirational films such as *Food Inc.* and *Fresh*, many more people are making the discovery that good food from real farmers, who they actually know, can make a huge difference in their lives and communities.

More and more people are voting with their forks to support a better food system, and even though the food they are eating costs more than the factory food, it is also more valuable. The food tastes better, is more satisfying and healthier.  Also, they can know and trust the farmers and ranchers who grew it.

Of course, the professional marketers for the industrial food companies are working to co-opt the new terms and messages. The multinationals have already stolen, misused and redefined words and phrases like natural, sustainable, organic, family farm and humanely-raised.  Attempts to bring better food to the table have been frustrated and bankrupted by the power of big agribusiness, big food service and big retail. From the clean Colorado beef of Mel Coleman to the high quality, humanely raised pork of Bill Niman, to the independent produce growers of Colorado’s Arkansas Valley, all such attempts to differentiate the better quality local food are attacked with false and misleading marketing. The only thing that remains of the once authentic and trustworthy brands of Coleman and Niman are their names — the conscientious and devoted ranchers who launched these companies are no longer connected in any way. These “zombie” brands are a ghost of what they once stood for.

These corporations are now trying to do the same with LOCAL. They simply repackage and dress up the same old products and sell them at cut-rate prices to deceived but excited buyers. Some of these disillusioned consumers will revert back to the same old factory food, and others will continue searching in hopes of finding food they can trust.  It is time to put an end to the dishonesty that drives the industrial food system.

**Looking Local, Buying Global**

From Wendy’s “Better than Fast Food” to Chipotle’s “Food with Integrity” to Whole Foods “I’m A Local,” eaters are being played for fools and family farmers and ranchers with better and healthier food alternatives can’t find A FAIR MARKET. When the educated consumer starts demanding “local,” the corporate marketing departments change the words on the packaging, but the inflexible, ravenous supply chain continues to get its low cost industrialized food from wherever in the world it is the cheapest. Without access to a fair market, family farmers sell what they can at local farmers markets — generating far less than what is needed to make a living.

Local food is even kept out of locally owned restaurants. Francisco Chavez, who works with Ranch Foods Direct and local growers to deliver meat and produce to Colorado Springs restaurants, watches the passing stream of much bigger corporate food service trucks and observes: “Sysco delivers cheap food from somewhere else and hauls the money away.” This has always been true of chain restaurants, but national distributors like Sysco and U.S. Foods prevent local food from entering even independent restaurants.

Locally owned eateries, best positioned to accommodate local suppliers with their advantages of on-site decision making, flexible menus, portion control management and pricing, have been trained too long to only consider one thing — price. Most don’t realize how dramatically food quality has declined under the industrial food system. They, too, often hide behind the false and misleading marketing provided by their food service company. They are persuaded with complimentary trips to fancy food shows where special offers are made, if they will commit to long-term exclusive deals — a move intended to eliminate competition and the possibility that local suppliers will claim more of the market. Attractive labels, catchy family farm slogans, clean sounding names like Emerald Valley, the too-many-to-mention but essentially meaningless Angus beef brands, and local sounding, seemingly trustworthy names like Harris Ranch Beef, are misleading restaurants into buying the same old stuff in a new and prettier box. Food service companies certainly don’t reveal what they are really doing — feeding people junk while they gut the community. There is little difference in economic and social impact between a chain restaurant and a locally owned restaurant that buys everything out of the back of a Sysco or U.S. Foods truck.

**Controlling the market, mixing the message and confusing the eater**

The desire to buy local, know your farmer, and know where your food comes from, is the best opportunity yet to make meaningful improvements in our food system. So how does Big Food take advantage of “LOCAL” while blocking competition and the access needed by local farmers and ranchers to market to independently owned restaurants and retail food stores? One recent illustration is the actions of a major food service company doing business in Colorado. They are buying a token amount of local produce in Colorado and selling it below cost to their restaurant customers. Of course these full-line companies control the pricing of the many items they provide and are able to adjust to maximize profits. This is an unfair market-distorting practice. To some, this may look like a benevolent act, but it is purely a move to control the market. Shouldn’t people who eat decide the winners and losers in the marketplace, rather than global corporations?

Big retailers like Wal-Mart and Whole Foods know the marketing benefit of using local family farmers to enhance their image while they continue to sell cheap food and drive down prices paid to farmers. Supply and demand signals are being blocked. Consumers are unable to make good choices based on origin, quality and price. Family farmers are shut out of the local market while their picture hangs above the imported meat and produce. The new local and regional food systems we so desperately need will continue to die in their infancy unless fairness, transparency and truth in advertising are restored to the marketplace. It should be impossible for an establishment to proclaim itself “LOCAL” when serving farmed Asian seafood, Tyson chicken, beef from Brazilian corporate giant JBS, Mexican produce and Chinese garlic.

**Hope may have finally arrived**

A predatory marketplace, with powerful global corporations placing profits over ethics and integrity, has blocked family farmers and ranchers from connecting with local eaters for too long. This could change with U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack’s launching of USDA’s new “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” initiative. Secretary Vilsack says that rebuilding rural America is his number one priority. A big job, considering after the last 50 years of pillage by big agribusiness, rural America in many respects resembles the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina.

Perhaps Mr. Vilsack recognizes the enormous wealth-creating potential and critical food security benefits of local food from our own family farms and ranches. I know that Dudley Butler does. He is a long time independent cattleman and defender of fair and open markets. Mr. Butler was recently appointed to the potentially powerful position of administrator for GIPSA (Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration), the agency within USDA charged with protecting competition in the marketplace – a job left unattended for decades.

Mr. Butler said recently, “Corporations are like sharks, they swim and eat. That’s what they do.” Perhaps Mr. Vilsack and Mr. Butler, in acknowledging the need to regulate the shark-infested waters of our food system, will work with other agencies in the administration, from Health and Human Services to the Justice Department and the Federal Trade Commission, to create a healthier, more sustainable food system with good food from local family farms. I hope so. We desperately need a new close-to-home food model that eaters can trust and that better serves the economic, nutritional and health interests of our communities and our nation. But, we are going to need some industrial strength shark cages! Secretary Vilsack and Butler will also need protection from the aggressive and bloodthirsty DC sharks, known as corporate lobbyists, who intend to keep things the same.

*Mike Callicrate is an independent cattle producer, business entrepreneur and political activist, particularly outspoken in addressing the rural and social impacts of current economic trends.*