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Farmed Forces

From mega-mart mindlessness to farm-fresh moderation. By Bobbie Willis

In a kinder, gentler world, the eating public would not insist on such succulent meat at such cheap prices, demands that fuel intensive commercial farming practices.

— Kelly Stewart of the UC Davis Anthropology Department as written in *The Davis Enterprise*.

The store-brand chicken I just bought from the supermarket for dinner smells awful. After tearing open the plastic wrap, a combination of sharp and sour along with some terrible, heavier undertone hits me square on. The colored plastic wrap was obscuring more than a bit of yellow discoloration around the edges of the pink flesh. I suppress my gag reflex, wrap it all up, double-bag it and drive back to the store.

A lazy consumer I am at times, and only at this point do the questions I should have asked before buying the chicken start to cross my mind: Where did this stuff come from? How long has it been since it was processed? How long has it been sitting in the grocery store? Is that why it was on sale?

A lot of the trance of being in the grocery store is that hardly anything looks like what it's actually supposed to be. Loaves of bread are wrapped in brightly colored plastic sleeves; ears of corn are processed and sealed in tin cans with paper labels; apples and potatoes are abstracted into pyramids of endless produce; rump roasts get tucked prettily into Styrofoam trays with cellophane pulled tight and shiny, completely disguising their not-so-distant past as cow butt muscles.

At customer service, the clerk smiles at

me. "Hi," I say. "I need to return this package of chicken ..." I hand her the bag. "It just smells awful."

She peeks into the bag, doesn't seem too surprised by my dilemma. "OK!" she says brightly. "I'll take care of this. Why don't you just go on back and pick out another one for yourself."

I think about the terrible stink, wonder how much better another package might be, and say, "Um, no thanks. Can you just refund my money?" She does so without missing a beat, and I return home thinking macaroni and cheese sounds like a much better idea for dinner that night.

It's autumn in Lane County farmland: Territorial Highway is a black ripple of east-west ribbon, clear for miles in either direction. Farm houses and wood barns with tin roofs sit snug against an evergreen backdrop with gold-yellow-orange in the pockets of turning leaves. The sky is clear, drenched in sunlight rich and viscous as honey. The quiet out here is just about perfect; you almost can't help but break it by laughing out loud, if only to be a part of the whole joyful, autumnal shebang.

I'm standing in the gravel driveway of Laughing Stock Farm talking to proprietor and farmer Paul Atkinson about Wendell Berry, philosopher, poet and essayist. Atkinson is an ardent proponent of creating and sustaining a local economy, where a community takes care of its land and feeds and cares for itself before exporting any goods or services too far from home. Berry's writings embody much of what Atkinson sees as a sort of life philosophy.

As a consumer, and a consumer raised in a suburban, working class household, my reflex has always been to shop first for price, second for quality — and to shop not amidst these

farmlands, but in the modern grocery stores that tout "convenience" and "value."

But bad chicken stink has me wondering about these qualities. In the essay "The Idea of a Local Economy," Berry describes the consumer like me as one who "does not know the history of the products that [she] uses. Where, exactly, did they come from? Who produced them? What toxins were used in their production? What were the human and ecological costs of producing them and then disposing of them?"

I confess, I have not always thought these questions through. Only in the last five or six years of living in grocery-progressive Eugene have I learned the ins and outs of tofu and tempeh, organic and non-organic, locally grown and shipped in from Timbuktu. But I still buck a little at cost. And because of this, Berry reasons, I am complicit in the chicken stink. In my complacency and desire for "more, cheaper," I concede to industrial farming practices; I give my A-OK, to the overproduction and unavoidable abuse therein of commercially farmed birds; to having these birds processed and shipped miles and miles to be held in hopefully-cold-enough storage

The idea of a local economy rests upon only two principles: neighborhood and subsistence. In a viable neighborhood, neighbors ask themselves what they can do or provide for one another, and they find answers that they and their place can afford. This, and nothing else, is the practice of neighborhood. This practice must be, in part, charitable, but it must also be economic, and the economic part must be equitable ...

A viable neighborhood is a community; and a viable community is made up of neighbors who cherish and protect what they have in common.

— Wendell Berry, "The Idea of a Local Economy"