



Reality Bites

Safeway-sponsored "Bite of Oregon" event not entirely homegrown.

When I wandered into the "Bite of Oregon" festival at Portland's McCall Waterfront Park in mid-August, I anticipated an agricultural dreamland. As a longtime organic farmer and devotee of the field-to-table chef Alice Waters, I was thrilled by the prospect of an event that celebrated local products, even boasting itself as "the premier showcase of the epicurean bounty and the unmatched beauty of the state of Oregon."

The profits benefited another good cause, the Special Olympics. And as the flagship event of the "Brand Oregon" campaign — a state marketing initiative aimed at promoting Oregon's agricultural products — it seemed to encourage dreamers like me, promulgating the catch-phrase "Oregon. We love dreamers." I imagined a rally of farmers who'd arrive with the Oregon soil tattooed into the cracks of their work-worn hands, of chefs who create cuisines with regional accents. For the weekend of Aug 13-15, we'd occupy a dreamland devoid of Subway sandwiches and seven-layer burritos from who-knows-where.

But as I wandered among the festival tents scattered along the waterfront, the homegrown utopia I'd imagined was replaced by something decidedly more corporate. Granted, Oregon's small wineries were well represented and there was a nice array of Oregon restaurants. Mo's was serving up clam chowder from Newport; Geppetto's was sharing cheese wontons from Ashland. And this year's event, with its representation of five of Oregon's geographic regions, was an improvement over years past, when it was more Portland-focused.

Still, prominent booths belonged to the big dogs like Budweiser, which justified its presence with a banner that read, "American-brewed with Willamette Valley hops." And then there was the event's title sponsor, Safeway, selling wine from California and serving sandwiches on bread that seemed less-than-artisan.

Isn't Oregon known for its many micro-breweries? And isn't Safeway considered one of the least-supportive grocery chains when it comes to merchandising local products? In fact, just down the row from the Safeway booth sat Judd Pindell of Ashland, selling his Pyramid juice — a product he tried unsuccessfully to get onto Ashland's Safeway store shelves.

I sat down with Craig Benthin, Safeway's

corporate brands manager, hoping he could make sense of these apparent contradictions. He was a nice guy, unsentimental about food but with a feisty interest in marketing nuances like product positioning and food displays. I asked him how he thought the Safeway booth fit into the "Bite of Oregon" theme. His answer: "Well, we make all of our Signature Sandwiches at our delis. These are all things you can buy at Safeway."

His second explanation proved more compelling: Safeway paid for the vast majority of event's advertising, purchasing airtime on the radio and providing space on its newspaper ad inserts that reach 1.7 million people. So, in a very real way, Safeway helped to make the event a success. Of course, with its big "S" logo printed on all the "Bite of Oregon" brochures and banners, Safeway stood to benefit as well.

The reality is that someone has to fund these events, and the big corporations have the money to do it. But by luring consumers with dirt-cheap prices and never-out-of-season produce, national stores like Safeway actually undermine the local economy that "Bite of Oregon" is trying to promote. Maybe I'm a dreamer, but aren't there other ways to fund the event?

Over the weekend, it became clear to me that trying to define what "local" means is a challenge in a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected. Is an Oregon microbrewery that uses hops from Germany more "local" than big old Budweiser with its Oregon hops? Is it where a product is assembled or where it is grown that counts?

In the end, "Bite of Oregon" was a microcosm of the modern food industry: purveyors of local products struggling under the scepter of big business. While it was easy for Safeway to provide the resources to participate, many small local businesses that could have enhanced the event were missing. Still, the idea behind the "Bite of Oregon" is a good one, and the event is still evolving.

If we want to really transform the Oregon agricultural economy, we can't leave it to a "Brand Oregon" campaign or Safeway to make it happen. In a market-driven economy, it's ultimately up to individual consumers to radically rethink their purchasing habits and to realize that the simple act of eating is political. Until then, the dream of sustainable and locally-based economy for Oregon will remain just a dream.

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