

THINK GLOBALLY, EAT LOCALLY

Two food conferences grow connections BY VANESSA SALVIA

Let's face it: Local food is fashionable right now. Following a high tide in recent years of books and graphic documentaries about food and how it's made, people are more aware than ever of what they put into their mouths. We want to know who raised the meat we eat, and how far that parsnip shipped.

Two conferences about food are imminent: One, held at Lane Community College, focuses on making it easy for local farmers to find buyers for their crops; another, the Food Justice conference held at Wayne Morse Center for Law & Politics at UO, connects international and local food scholars with food activists. And while the two conferences do have some overlapping goals, Food Justice ultimately challenges many of the dominant paradigms of the buy local movement.

CREATING FOOD CONNECTIONS

As wholesome and fresh as local food is, without buyers for the produce farmers grow, a local food system is less than practical. Now in its fifth year, the LCC Local Food Connection conference aims to establish and strengthen connections between food producers and food buyers. At the conference will be representatives of K-12 schools, colleges, hospitals, wholesale buyers (restaurants, natural food stores and food distributors such as Hummingbird Wholesale) as well as ranchers, fishers and farmers that grow fruits and veggies, eggs, beans and grains. Consumers at any level are welcome to come and learn more.

"The goal really is to make the local food supply system stronger," says event organizer Willow Cordain. "What that means is, for example, you have somebody who is starting to grow beans. If there's a local buyer, that's a circular thing, so then the farmer can put that money into growing more beans and promoting more and different avenues of distribution."

Eugene-based Willamette Farm and Food Coalition will present information in a couple of workshops, one on sourcing local beans, grains and flours, and another on local food economics. Megan Kemple, Farm to School Program Coordinator for WFFC, says that we need healthy farms and farmers that can afford to keep farming or there will be no one to grow food for our community.

"We're working really hard to make sure that consumers know where to find local food, and that institutions such as K-12 schools are able to buy as much local produce

as possible," she says. From 2008 to 2009, WFFC helped to double the amount of local food purchased by schools, and the doubling happened again in 2010. "The Local Food Connection is a wonderful opportunity for farms and food buyers to connect directly," Kemple says.

Café Yumm! is an example of that successful networking. The owners of Café Yumm! didn't know they could access a local producer large enough to supply their beans. At last year's conference, they sat next to a representative of Hummingbird Wholesale, and through this connection they now have a supplier of local beans for their popular restaurants.

"Our business is based on sustainable values, and so we try to look at all aspects of sustainability in the business," says Julie Tilt, Hummingbird's president and co-owner. "A big part of that is encouraging organically grown foods and trying to find locally grown foods. We want our food grown here. I think most people don't realize that if the trucks stopped running up and down I-5 for some reason, the food stores would run out of food in three days."

PROTECTING SMALL-SCALE FARMS

Kitchen gardens are touted as the way to self-sufficiency, and subsistence farmers in other countries are often encouraged to increase their own food production as a means to keep their communities strong. But what happens to the community when that farmer is essentially forced to buy seeds from a large multinational agri-corporation, losing their indigenous food identity in the process?

How realistic is a local food system in the grip of winter? How far afield can you look for additional resources and still fit with your locavore philosophy? "Sometimes the local food movement and particularly the locavore does neglect how inter-connected our food system is, for good and bad," says Allison Carruth, the organizer of Food Justice. "We should think about food regions in the way that ecologists think about watershed regions. In order for the Willamette Valley to become sustainable it may be necessary to foster connections with other food regions."

Regionalism, says Carruth, is an important bridge between local and global. "It doesn't really get enough attention in the food movement around the country," she explains. "It offers a framework to really challenge the local food system and build on its strength."

This inaugural Food Justice conference builds on an event Carruth organized in February 2009 while a postdoctoral fellow at UC Santa Barbara, called Food Sustainability + Food Security. Carruth proposed the Food Justice conference last year when she applied to be a fellow at Wayne Morse Center. "We're hopeful this might become a biannual event which will bring scholars together with community groups as well as international activists," she says. Scholars on topics from environmental law to literature to cultural geography and anthropology will present information. "It's an incredibly rich set of scholars who are going to be talking across traditional boundaries," Carruth adds.

Margaret Hallock, director of the Wayne Morse Center, says the tremendous changes in the past 30, 40 years in food production



Allison Carruth, organizer of Food Justice

and distribution have created trade opportunities for some indigenous people as they shift from producing for themselves to producing for export markets. But trade doesn't provide food security, or food sovereignty.

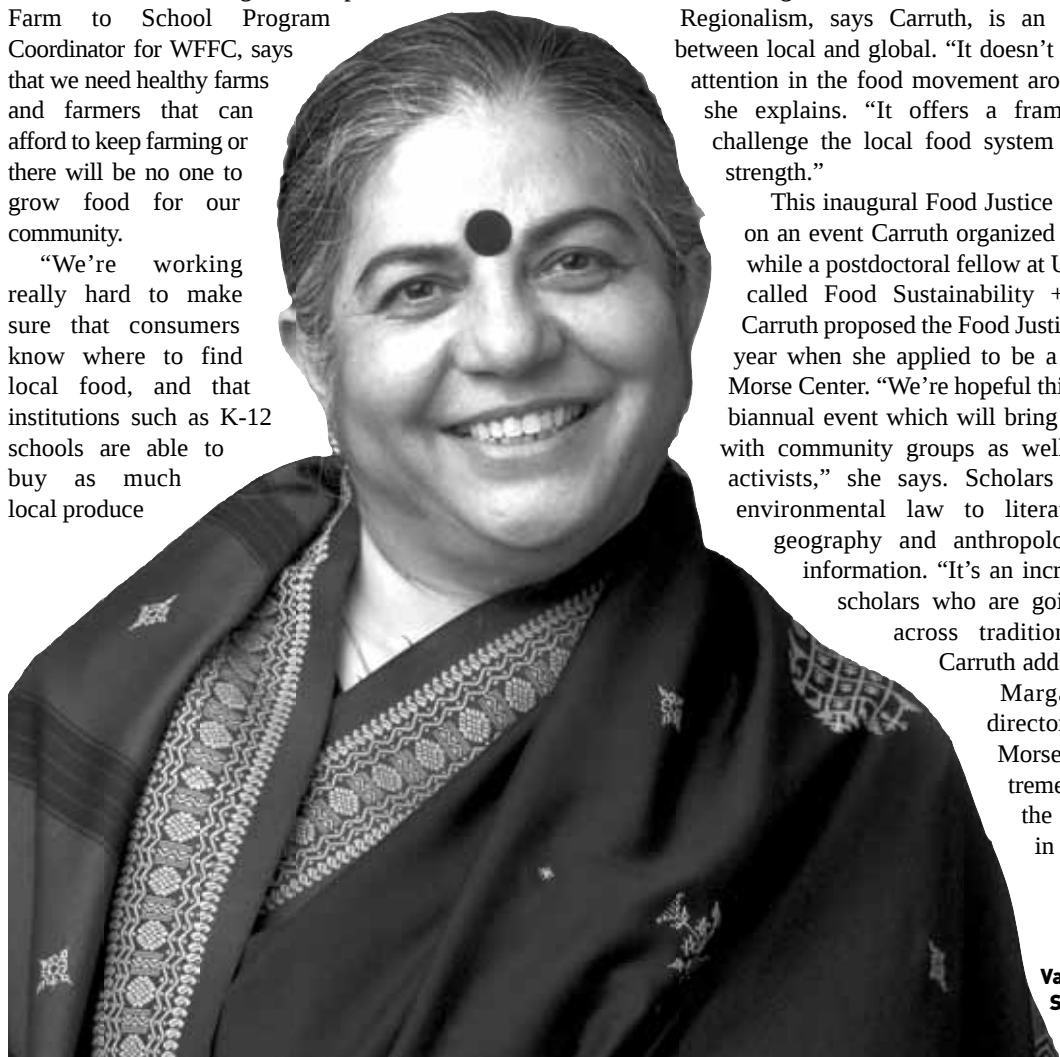
"We want to boost scholarship by highlighting this issue as a key issue, and connect the scholars with local activists," says Hallock, "so they have access to the scholarship but also create new lines of inquiry and connect these communities to move forward on better food policies."

Among those speaking at the conference will be Vandana Shiva, who mobilizes communities in India to reclaim their power over food from agri-business and biotech corporations, and Darra Goldstein, founder of the journal *Gastronomica*. "Darra is an eloquent and dynamic speaker who will reflect on the journal's tenth anniversary," says Carruth, "but also on the bigger conversation about why food really matters as a subject for both research and scholarship, and also political action."

The work of human ecologist David Cleveland, an environmental studies professor at UC Santa Barbara, focuses on small-scale, sustainable agriculture. His panel presentation will translate some of the research findings into creating sustainable agriculture and genetically engineered plants. "Organizations that are dealing with the food crisis always emphasize the need for more production," he says, "because they are so embedded in the mainstream economic system which is ideologically committed to perpetual growth. So the idea that we could help solve the food crisis and address the issue of food injustice by changing distribution patterns is anathema to the establishment."

Simply telling hungry people to grow more food means, in effect, telling them to increase production through modernizing techniques and eliminating subsistence farming. "The people who are at the short end of the food and agriculture stick may have more food but they will have even less power," Cleveland asserts. "Helping small scale farmers becomes the cool thing to say, but you have to really then do your homework. That's what they're saying, but what does it really mean?"

Within the mainstream, supply side food system, Cleveland says, transgenic crop varieties (plants with inserted genes derived from another species) are controlled by a handful of multi-national corporations presiding over the genetically engineered crop industry. "There's a misrepresentation by the people who are promoting genetically engineered varieties," he says. "They claim to be trying to address issues of food injustice and hunger by helping small-scale farmers. Maybe they do really want to help them, but the way they are going to help them is by eliminating them. That's something that needs to be talked about." ■



Vandana Shiva