

Food and the City: Urban Agriculture and the New Food Revolution

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Overview

Food is an indispensable part of our daily life and always associates with social, culture and environment. Consumers nowadays pay attention not only to the taste of the foods but also to where they come from and how they are made. Process of food production has been changing continuously throughout the history of mankind. In the past century, the majority of foods was originated from industrialized farming in remote area. However, a new trend has emerged where food is made in an urban area. In “Food and The City: Urban Agriculture and the New Food Revolution”, Jennifer Cockrall-King take us through the journey to understand why and how people grow their food in the city.

The book begins with the attempt to explain the reasons why many people are interesting in growing food in their urban home. Large scale industrial food production in the rural area enables cheap foods with impacts on social and environment. Synthetic agricultural chemicals were heavily used along the farming process to produce food. Transportation of these foods to consumers in urban areas requires huge amount of fossil fuels. It has been shown that foods in general grocery store travel approximately 1,500 miles from their production site to our table. Those who aware about these facts start “food movement” in which the ethical,

safety and environmental issues become a significant part of consumer’s decision to buy foods.

Chapter 1-5 elaborate the current situation of industrial the food chain. Supermarket has become a tool of industrial food producer to increase consumption. With myriad of products to choose, constantly new product launches and low price promotion, consumers are prone to spend more on foods than they actually want. As a consequence, we eat too much meat and carbohydrate every day and in a hurry.

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Same thing happens with livestock. Animals are raised in a very limited space and fed with high calorie food to maximize speed of growth. Animals grown in this system require lots of antibiotics which accounts for 70% of antibiotic used in the United States. Foods are produced in fairway poor countries to reduce cost of land use making the food chain rely heavily on transportation. This is why food price is directly depended on oil markets that any change of oil price will inevitably change the cost of food. Climate change also play a key role in making fluctuation of food price. As the weather become less predictable, food production is at risk. These factors will contribute to the food crisis that may occur anytime in the future.

In chapter 6- 14, the author describes the journey through many cities which have farming in the urban area. Starting with Paris, a city with a long history of urban gardening. The author describes about the groups of people who are active in planting food gardens and bee keeping using abandoned sites and rooftop of the building. Next is London. Here, there is a non-profit enterprise called “Vertical Veg” which supports those who want to grow food in the small space such as balcony and rooftop. The author tells a story of an interesting grocery store where the rooftop is transformed into a food

garden. I’m very surprised to know that there is a company called “urban wine company” which specializes in making wine by using grape produced from backyard gardens in London.

Then, in Chapter 8, the author takes us to California, one of the most productive state in US in terms of agricultural production. Although there seems to be plenty of urban farming project in this state in the past, most of them are not sustainable due to the fact that growth of city which requires land for infrastructure settlement rather than agriculture. However, there are two remarkable cases, Fairview Garden Farm and South Central Farms. The author goes through the history, characteristics and struggle of these two farms. This gives us clear views of the battle between capitalism and the community on land use in urban area.

Chapter 9 and 10 are the story of urban farming of two cities in Canada, Vancouver and Toronto. Vancouver city supports urban farming by providing special tax privilege to land and property owners who have urban farm space. Many rooftop and community gardens exist in the city and all of these are registered with city official. Apart from food production, community garden is also used to dissolve cultural barriers among many different immigrant groups.

An interesting farming model called “SPIN” (stand for Small Plot Intensive), involving application of efficient cultivation methods and cost reduction strategies to overcome limitation of land and capital among urban farmers, has been described in chapter 9. Similar to Vancouver, Toronto city also has many urban farmers as there are data showing that 40% of residents grow vegetables at home. The author describes about two organizations involving urban farming and food allotment residing in Toronto, namely, Foodshare and The Stop Community Food Centre. These organizations support low-income people and food security of the city.

Chapter 11-13 explore the urban farming in US. Starting with Milwaukee in Chapter 11, this city has a remarkable organization, Growing Power, Inc., founded by Will Allen, one of the most famous urban farmers. The author explains Allen’s background and how he became to be interesting in urban agriculture. Growing Power Inc. goes beyond just produce food in an urban area to help educate people and revitalizes communities in all aspects. Chapter 12 is about Detroit. Detroit used to be an industrial city but after 1970s the city suffered economic recession and a high crime

rate. Then, the city population decreased rapidly while infrastructures and lands were abandoned. Again, urban farming was used as a tool to bring life back to the city. Non-profit organization played a critical role in converting empty land in Detroit to become a garden which can provide cheap and healthy foods for people. In 2010, there were approximately 1,300 gardens spreading throughout the city. Chapter 13 focuses on a vertical farm “The Plant” in Chicago. The plant is a four story building farm filled with various projects of food production system such as mushroom beds, tilapia tanks, tea brewery and hydroponic plant growing system. The plant is operated in a building that used to be a meat processing factory and, therefore, one of the most challenging things is how to efficiently modify or use the old infrastructure for farming purposes.

Chapter 14 describes an outstanding model of urban farming, Cuba. During 1950-1980, Cuba agriculture relied on industrialized and monocrop farming model where heavy machine, chemical fertilizer and pesticide were intensively used to produce food, especially sugar, in rural areas. These were achieved because of the partnership with the Soviet Union and other communist countries.

Cuba largely exports sugar and imports oil but after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, everything changes swiftly. Industrialized agriculture model is no longer make sense without oil and chemicals. The author elaborates clearly how such difficult situation turns Cuba agriculture to an urban farming model which relies on organic input.

Overall, “Food and the City” is excellent for those who are interested in not only just

urban agriculture but also travelling, food and social development. The author did a great job covering the multiple aspects and implications of urban agriculture. I personally think that this book will be better if there are more figures of the sites where the author visited. Anyway, the book is very informative and is written in a way that anyone, even high school students, can easily understand. In summary, I strongly recommend this book.