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Growing Maine's Foodscape, Growing Maine's Future

by Laura Lindenfeld

Linda Silka



Maine is experiencing a culinary renaissance. Creativity and entrepreneurship linked with culture and tradition are making Maine a food destination and a unique "foodscape." Laura Lindenfeld and Linda Silka explore this convergence and its potential to create jobs, protect assets, and support community values. 🐞

In recent years, Maine has experienced something of a culinary renaissance. Building on deep, local traditions, contemporary food culture in Maine has received attention from food writers across the country. According to *Maine Food & Lifestyle*, Corby Kummer, author and reviewer for *Boston Magazine* and *Atlantic Monthly* has said: “Maine is where you find the food action in New England” (mainefoodandlifestyle.com/about.htm). Maine’s contemporary food culture grows out of history, a strong sense of place, and an interest in evolving traditional foods through new ideas. These elements work together to position Maine as a unique and important foodscape, a concept that Yasmeen defines as “spatialization of foodways and the interconnections between people, food, and places” (1996: 527). Food-studies scholars have long recognized the key role that food plays in forming a place-based identity and that food is deeply connected to culture (Counihan and Van Esterik 2008; Mintz 1996).

Particular to Maine as a foodscape is its blend of traditional and innovative practices. Traditional food culture in Maine ranges from the Wabanaki tribes’ rich and diverse history of hunting, fishing, planting, and gathering, to Acadian food traditions that prominently feature Maine-grown potatoes, to the practice of gathering together for bean suppers with brown bread, red hotdogs, and homemade pies, to the state’s long-standing tradition of aquaculture and fishing. New immigrants to the state have contributed their food cultures and traditions, and Maine’s farmers have developed impressive practices for cultivating remarkable produce in a relatively short growing season.

More recently, Maine’s culinary culture has experienced growth and expansion that food writer R. W. Apple describes in a July 10, 2002, article in *The New York Times*, as “a regional, seasonal Maine haute cuisine.” Maine has emerged as a culinary leader, and the greater Portland area, in particular, has received significant attention from national media. Articles in the September 15, 2009, *New York Times* by Julia Moskin and the July 16, 2010, *Maine Sunday Telegram* by Beth Quimby highlight Portland’s success as a national model for the “farm-to-table” movement and its investment in local, sustainable seafood. The Portland restaurant and culinary scene continually receive praise in the culinary media. Television series

such as the Food Network’s show *Diners, Drive-ins and Dives*, and the Travel Channel’s *No Reservations* with Anthony Bourdain that feature restaurants and food culture in the state have brought increased attention to Maine as a site for interesting and important food. (See article about Portland by Hilary Nangle, this issue).

Interest in Maine’s foodways has helped the state to become something of a culinary destination. Events such as Maine Restaurant Week, Maine Fare in Camden, and numerous food-related festivals draw visitors from near and far. Innovative chefs such as Rob Evans of Hugo’s in Portland (the 2009 James Beard Foundation Awards winner for Northeast Chef) and Melissa Kelly of Primo in Rockland (the 1999 James Beard Foundation Awards winner of the American Express Best Chef, Northeast Award) have brought greater attention to Maine’s role in U.S. culinary culture.

Throughout Maine, producers and preparers of food strive to create economically sustainable, place-based models to support Maine’s communities, its economy, and its beloved way of life. Maine has witnessed the emergence of a robust set of organizations such as Eat Local Foods Coalition of Maine, the Downeast Fisheries Trail, Get Real. Get Maine!, and the Fish Locally Collaborative that provide infrastructure for collaboration across the state. A small, community-supported bakery in West Brooksville, Tinder Hearth, embodies a new generation of culinary entrepreneurialism and creativity that harkens back to the state’s traditions of craftsmanship and locally based food production (see sidebar).

Innovative models for harvesting and distributing seafood in Maine pay tribute to the state’s heritage and culture. The Port Clyde Fresh Catch (PCFC) fishermen’s collaborative builds on the agricultural model of community-supported agriculture (CSA) to provide community-supported fishery (CSF) shares to customers across New England. High-end restaurants such as Café Miranda in Rockland and shops such as Megunticook Market in Camden have had great



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Tinder Hearth

Tinder Hearth, created by the Larsson/Semler family, relies on local food systems and strives to benefit the local community. The bakery's description on its web site makes clear that food, as Sidney Mintz writes, "is never simply eaten; its consumption is always conditioned by meaning." (Mintz 1996: 7) The Tinder Hearth family attempts, with wild hopefulness and in-the-dirt gusto, to revive a youthful possibility that can feed strange-looking old seeds with never-before-seen dances and bad jokes, unexpected suggestions, stories of failed attempts, neighborhood songs, and long-winded research projects, so that the beautiful mysteries that hold our lives can be fed and danced in our shiny pursuit of staying put.

With its weekly open mics, educational opportunities for the local community, and commitment to sustainable, local foodways, Tinder Hearth represents but one of many efforts to maintain and grow the distinctive regional qualities of Maine's resources and history.

success in featuring seafood from PCFC and other local, fresh products.

CULINARY MOMENTUM: ACTING ON CURRENT OPPORTUNITIES

Many scholars have described Julia Child's first MTV appearance in February 1963 as the beginning of the "foodie" revolution. Since Julia's presence first graced small screens across the country, the U.S. has undergone a food revolution that has helped to situate food at the core of cultural experiences. Concepts like "culinary tourism" circulate broadly in policy development and scholarly conversations. Food consumption has become a form of entertainment for many Americans, a concept that Finkelstein terms "foodainment" (Finkelstein 1999). Representations of food pervade across a range of media. Steve Chagollan, writing in the July 9, 2009, issue of *The New York Times*, describes the U.S. as being "in the midst of a feeding frenzy... The Food Network holds 65 million monthly viewers in its thrall, and sales of gourmet foods and beverages are expected to top \$53 billion next year." The multimillion dollar Food Network, and

its recent spin-off station, The Cooking Channel, and an ever growing number of food films and food magazines illustrate the tremendous nationwide interest in food and culture.

Within the state, magazines such as *Maine Food & Lifestyle*, *Downeast*, and *Maine* explore and feature Maine foodways. Numerous food columnists, such as Meredith Goad from the *Portland Press Herald*, and food blogs, such as *Maine Food & Lifestyle's Plating Up* provide narrative context that document and help to shape Maine as a foodscape. The *chowmaineguide.com* provides restaurant reviews and information on dining. Travel sites such as *mainetravel-maven.com* celebrate food tourism, a mode of tourism that is predominantly motivated by food, which has demonstrated the capacity to lead to greater long-term economic stability and community benefit in rural areas, particular in regions that link culinary tourism with local heritage. Cookbook writers such as Kathy Gunst contribute to conversations about food in *Downeast Magazine*. Portland even hosts a foodie bookstore, *Rabelais*, which regularly hosts author appearances, book fairs, exhibition openings and food-related events. Among the growing interest in food film festivals across the U.S. is the *Food + Farm Film Festival* in Portland that features documentary and short films.

Maine adds unique and important assets to the U.S.'s broader food culture, and has frameworks that bring together various food assets from across the state. *By Land and By Sea*, led by a wide range of project partners,¹ aims to strengthen the state's local food system through collaboration across Maine's farming and fishing communities. (See article by Amanda Beal, this issue.)

Economic Development

Across the nation, a movement to integrate food into core economic development has emerged. Following the thread of food and culture provides both opportunities for division and for collaboration. In Lowell, Massachusetts, for example—a community that has transformed itself from an old mill town to a vibrant immigrant community—the shared interest in fish and fishing has brought diverse groups together around food and culture. Newly arrived families from

Cambodia, Brazil, and Sierra Leone have come together with families whose ancestors arrived in Lowell many generations ago from Ireland and Italy, and these groups have begun to share fish recipes as a way to explore cultural traditions. This initiative is part of recognizing common concerns about ensuring that Lowell's Merrimack River is clean enough for the fish to serve as a food resource for all. Such discussions have become opportunities for the community to explore links between food, culture, and environmental justice.

Towns such as Hardwick, Vermont, renowned for revitalizing its local economy and community through food and food culture, can serve as a model for supporting communities in Maine. As Hewitt, author of a book on Hardwick's renewal writes,

Over the past three years, this little hard-luck burg with a median income 25 percent below the state average and an unemployment rate of nearly 40 percent higher has embarked on a quest to create the most comprehensive, functional, and downright vibrant local food system in North America.... Hardwick, Vermont, just may prove what advocates of a decentralized food system have been saying for years: that a healthy agriculture system can be the basis of communal strength, economic vitality, food security, and general resilience in uncertain times (Hewitt 2009: 2).

Hardwick provides an interesting case study for many communities in Maine to consider. Acting on Maine's increased culinary strength and capacity is timely and important, and it provides a means for helping Maine to restore jobs, support community, and provide increased security.

Key to supporting Maine's growth in and through food culture is developing a model that takes local needs and assets into consideration to pull together various threads of strength that already exist across the state. Maine already possesses great capacity in its various food-related businesses and industries, but the state lacks broader coordination of these disparate efforts. Understanding the range of activities in which communities already have established strength and to which they are already committed is key. These assets range from community gardens, to youth involvement

Port Clyde Fresh Catch

Emphasizing healthy fishing communities and healthy ecosystems through "a return to the traditions of America's past," the Port Clyde Fresh Catch collaborative uses environmentally conscious fishing methods to provide local, fresh, HACCP-certified (hazard analysis critical control point) fish and shrimp directly to customers through their model of a community-supported fishery. As their web site emphasizes, "Port Clyde Fresh Catch is a return to the traditions of America's past—fresh, wild-caught seafood that our customers can trace to the source" (www.portclydefreshcatch.com). Even more than the sustainably harvested seafood, PCFC evokes the history of fishing and fishing communities and pays important tribute to unique Maine heritage when they write: "In the village of Port Clyde, the church bell has started ringing again, calling workers to our new processing facility. We invite you to try our seafood. You'll savor the quality and freshness, knowing that you are also helping protect healthy fisheries and the communities that depend on them."

in agriculture and culinary arts to the development of Downeast community kitchens aimed at providing a shared location where community members can teach each other about lost cooking practices as a way to improve nutritional practices in culturally appropriate ways. Efforts in CSAs, CSFs, and community-supported bakeries such as Tinder Hearth already exist and are strong assets for Maine. Hardwick, Vermont's model of the community-supported restaurant (CSR) provides tantalizing food for thought.

MAINE'S CULINARY FUTURE, MAINE'S CULINARY PAST

Maine's culinary success is linked to its ability to bridge its culinary heritage with the state's contemporary food assets. The role of culture has been central to the state's development of its culinary reputation. Food experiments and endeavors are springing up in almost every corner, and there are important opportunities to build infrastructure across the state that highlight and support Maine's quality of life, while providing interesting avenues for sustainable economic and cultural development. Culinary tourism is just one

example that offers an innovative way for the state to link its strongest industry—tourism—with one of its most significant and endearing assets: food culture. 🐟

ENDNOTE

1. These include Penobscot East Resource Center, Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance, Island Institute, Food for Maine's Future, Portland Maine Permaculture, Cultivating Community, Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA), Maine Department of Agriculture, Maine Farmland Trust, Maine Council of Churches, Belfast Co-op, Maine Sea Grant, New England Environmental Finance Center, and Muskie School of Public Service. See eatmainefoods.ning.com/page/by-land-and-by-sea for more details.

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Linda Silka directs the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center and is a professor in the University of Maine School of Economics. Her research focuses on community-university partnerships. Previously, she directed the Center for Family,

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