



Preface

New York City, like many American cities, is in the midst of an agricultural awakening. Farmers' markets, community gardens, farm-to-chef collaborations, and urban agriculture are popular and financially successful. New Yorkers are taking more of a personal stake in how their food is grown and city officials are considering how they can sustain their agricultural hinterlands. For a city that once ruthlessly devoured its market gardens in Brooklyn and Queens at the turn of the twentieth century to make way for a growing urban population, it seems that now, one hundred years later, New Yorkers are thinking more carefully about their food supply.

Since its early colonial days, New York has never been an isolated state. It was a colony built on trade. Meat, lard, and grains from the New York environs made their way from New York Harbor to the British plantations of the Caribbean in exchange for sugar. Throughout the nineteenth century, canals and rails connected the eastern port city to the interior and the south of the United States, and Manhattan imported much of its food supply. The steady stream of immigrants from the mid-1800s on contributed to a rapid urbanization of the greater New York region and to the decline of agriculture.

One of the smaller groups of immigrants of the late 1800s, the Chinese, began provisioning their own foods. The Chinese enclave in Manhattan grew in population throughout the 1900s to become the largest concentration of Chinese immigrants in the United States. Today Manhattan's Chinatown remains iconic of New York's immigration history. It is also an iconic food destination, where tourists and New Yorkers alike go to eat and

shop. There is no other marketplace like it in New York City. What is less known about Chinatown is its food system. At a moment in time when more and more people are interested in how food is produced and distributed, there are many questions to ask about Chinatown's food system. This marketplace is strikingly different from that of the average supermarket and the myriad fruits and vegetables sold here are not sold anywhere else in the city. Where does all the food come from and how does it get here? Is there something fundamentally different about the way that Chinatown's produce is grown and supplied? What are the livelihoods and rural transitions associated with agricultural bounty for sale in Chinatown's markets?

This book tells the untold stories of how the food system of New York's oldest and most famous ethnic enclave has developed. I consider how Chinatown's food network continues to operate amid the citywide push to centralize food distribution and the nationwide trend in the vertical integration of food production, processing, and retail that have transformed the way that food is grown and sold. I describe how the street-level produce markets of Chinatown have survived in the wake of the consolidation of the grocery retail sector and the city's removal of pushcart and wholesale produce vendors; how and why farmers from New York, Florida, and Honduras choose to grow niche Asian fruits and vegetables that carry no price premiums and have no mainstream market; and how risk-taking entrepreneurs orchestrate a dynamic and flexible global network of trade without the use of mergers and acquisitions to keep Chinatown's shelves bountiful.

CHINATOWN may be a unique ethnic enclave, but it is by no means isolated. Chinatown is part of the global economy. Produce markets in Chinatown have no doubt been shaped by free trade and liberalized American immigration policies that characterize global economic integration. Yet Chinatown's produce markets also display characteristics that are alternative, or contradictory, to globalization. The retail and wholesale sectors are small and fragmented. The wholesale, not retail, sector sets prices. Asian immigrants and their descendants continue to consume ethnic foods, resisting acculturation and the mainstreaming of Asian diets into American ones. Chinese food in New York's Chinese restaurants continues to change with shifting immigration trends from China and urban trends in eating, reflecting current tastes and ideas about dining.

Chinatown's agricultural reach is also global in scope. The purchasing power of the area's shoppers provides livelihoods to small and large farmers struggling to stay afloat in the United States as well as in less developed nations. But instead of fostering monocropping and one industry-wide style of farming, the farms that grow Chinatown's produce use crop diversity and other practices that reflect cultural and biophysical specificity. Chinese vegetable growers in the United States today, with few exceptions, are members of multigenerational and new immigrant families who choose to grow and sell the ethnic foods of their people. The styles of agriculture that immigrant farmers bring from their homelands are often overlooked in discussions of food and agriculture, again seen as operative in spite of global capitalism instead of a viable economic form in themselves. The Honduran farmers that are part of Chinatown's food system are very much in need of good market opportunities. They report that Asian vegetables are the most stable market they can participate in. They have made small steps in improving their relations with export firms without explicit labor organization or the formation of grower cooperatives.

The way that Chinatown procures food demonstrates another kind of globalization, one that does not threaten regional agricultural economies, is not homogenizing cultures, and is not controlled by mega corporations. Rather, Chinatown's food system embodies a global economic network that is constructed by people who may have been marginalized but instead are carving out their own global niche in an economic network based in the cultural and biological specificities of the people and places involved. Although this particular network may persist only as long as Asian immigrants keep coming to the United States and eating diets filled with tropical, subtropical, and temperate fruits and vegetables, it is an adaptable model that connects farmers to market, one that can persist within the highly dynamic global environment.

The story of Chinatown's food network is one of interdependence between the local and global, the rural and urban realms. If we take local and urban in this story to be synonymous as representative terms for New York City-based produce markets, then these particular Asian markets don't conform to theories about other local, urban markets. Chinatown markets are dependent on neither a social movement, such as the push for local food, nor the "quality turn" in local markets that enables the price premiums garnered in farmers' markets or for organically certified foods. Unlike other markets for local food, there are no political dictates about which farmers can participate in Chinatown's markets (dictates such as New York City's Greenmarket program's definition of the radius in which farmers must live). New York City-based produce wholesalers set prices and quality standards but display flexibility in their relations with farmers. Thus it becomes the will of the farmer (the rural dweller) as much as the will of the produce broker (the urban dweller) to define this spatial relationship. There are lessons that can be drawn from Chinatown's food system that have significance for urban planning and politics. Ethnic neighborhoods should be analyzed for the means by which they provide culturally specific foods to their residents. It may seem novel that today New Yorkers are claiming more and more of a stake not just in purchasing and consuming food but in procuring and producing it as well. Chinatown residents have been doing this since they formed their Manhattan enclave in the 1800s. I would hypothesize that the development of culturally specific food networks are integral to the formation of immigrant neighborhoods. New York City celebrates its ethnic restaurants; why not learn how they are maintained? In Chinatown, the decentralization of produce distribution and the proximity of food-related businesses, from produce wholesalers to restaurant menu printers, are vital to the success of Chinatown's food industry cluster. Policies that support upscale real estate development and centralization of wholesale food distribution threaten Chinatown's vibrant food economy. The business and culture of ushering food from farm to table has won the hearts and minds of many talented entrepreneurs and enthusiastic eaters across the nation. But the media about food and farm culture is so focused on building and defining the "local food movement" that it is missing an array of issues that are equally as important, both socially and ecologically. The role of ethnicity in shaping food systems and the intersections between alternative and conventional economies and dichotomous spatial realms (urban/rural and local/global) are critical issues that this book takes up. Part of the allure of reading, writing, and caring about food is that eating is a shared experience. Eating is something that everyone participates in and something that connects each of us to other people, to other places. We need to be concerned about the United States' eroding agrarian base and need to promote the inclusion of more diverse whole foods in the nation's diet, but supporting one's regional food economy, contrary to what is often purported, is not the only way to address these concerns. The singular focus on local foods to achieve the goals of strengthened economies, environmental stewardship, and public health obscures other means of achieving those same goals. The true test for the future is whether we will be able to balance global and local food systems; account for the needs of culturally diverse groups; and maintain interdependence with other peoples, places, and climates. After all, the way each of us eats and thinks about food is fundamentally quite different. Chinese immigrants in the United States have long prided themselves on creating their own jobs—and the business of supplying culturally specific foods is no exception. Chinese and Southeast Asian Americans have started farms all over the United States. They have used their personal connections abroad to source Asian fruits and vegetables from many other locales. Many people assume that since Chinatown's produce is so cheap and not certified organic, it must represent the worst ills of industrial agriculture—the food must be pesticide laden, leading to soil erosion, and grown by exploited laborers and under-paid farmers while brokers are rolling in dough—when really, price isn't always the best gauge for food quality and labeling doesn't account for all methods of production. Despite a flood of recent books about food in the United States, consumers simply do not know where or how ethnic produce sold in New York is grown.

Conclusion

Chinatown's food network is a result of global and local processes. The produce brokers who supply Chinatown have been building connections between markets in New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia to production points around the northeastern metropolises and the year-round growing climates of Florida, California, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. But who makes whom in this network of exchange? Do urban markets determine the production practices and economic opportunities of farmers in whatever far-flung place they exist? Or does the place of production—its particular geography—shape the make up of the urban market?

The relationship between cities and their ever more distant hinterlands has always been complex. Cities are economic powerhouses whose markets are desired by rural producers of all kinds, not just agriculturalists. Labor and land costs, trade agreements, and market opportunities shape what is grown where. Yet how agriculture is organized in any place is very much attributable to geography.

When an urban consumer picks up a bunch of litchis, a Chinese eggplant, or a bag of baby bok choy in Chinatown, that consumer benefits from a supply network that shapes agriculture in distant places. Supply networks are also shaped by the particular places they connect. The land use histories, labor relations, real estate markets, and capital investments of agricultural production sites influence what is grown and how, and who the growers are. If it weren't for immigration from Asia to New York City, and the work of ethnic restaurants to popularize Asian foods, the Floridian and Honduran farmers would not be growing tat soi or fuzzy squash. Likewise, if it weren't for the drained Everglades or the irrigation canals built off the Rio Humuya and the Pan-American Highway in Comayagua, those Floridian and Honduran farmers would not be growing anything for New York City, or any other, markets. This is how the particularities of a place and global processes are mutually constitutive—they influence each other.

We can gain insight into a global network of trade by following the commodity chain from the vendor at the corner of Canal and Mulberry Streets to a backyard homegarden outside Miami or to a small farm in the Comayagua Valley of Honduras. We should ask how this network of trade challenges ideas about what constitutes a global food system. Aspects of it are what one might expect of a global food system, as prescribed by neoliberal reforms: chemical-intensive production practices, contract farming, cutthroat brokers, and long-distance transport from farm to market. Not coincidentally, these conventions of a global food system represent the very aspects of food systems that are seen as problematic and in need of reform by its critics. What about the unexpected features of Chinatown's food system: the use of crop diversity on farms, the inclusion of small farmers and home gardeners, the socially embedded relations between farmers and brokers, the small steps of resistance of Honduran contract farmers to improve their contracts with exporters, and the bustling food economy of Chinatown? Are these also representative of a global food system, and if they are, might they be worth perpetuating?

There are over two hundred fresh fruits and vegetables for sale in Manhattan's Chinatown year round. Old and new Chinese immigrants, as well as Vietnamese, Thai, Malaysian, Cambodian, Laotian immigrants, make a living within Chinatown's food system. Countless other first-, second-, and multi-generation Americans patronize Chinatown's shops, street vendors, and restaurants. The cultural heterogeneity of the system is iconic of New York City. The makeup of the cosmopolitan dining experience depends on ethnic diversity of foods and their producers. The abundance, freshness, and cost of produce in Chinatown are unrivaled in the city. Where else can you get a pound of baby bok choy or Chinese eggplant for a dollar?

Chinatown markets offer an outstanding variety of good-quality products for outrageously low prices. In order for a marketplace that comprises many small vendors and a great diversity of products to be steadily supplied throughout the year, a dynamic, flexible network of production and distribution must be in place. The marketing channels that deliver the variety and volume of products to Chinatown are constantly growing and changing.

Entrepreneurs continually enter and leave the system and continually look for new suppliers and products. Because of this dynamism and competition, successful farmers and brokers are constantly experimenting with new products and new places. In this era when offshore sourcing of produce is the dominant trend, Chinatown brokers do not shy away from global trade. Instead they use their social networks to develop new trade relations. The globalization of Chinatown's food system has resulted from the actions of multiple individuals, in a bottom-up rather than a top-down fashion.

Chinatown's food system exemplifies an alternative form of globalization that some scholars call globalization from below, globalization from the margins, and transnational urbanism (Glick Schiller 1999; Basch et al. 1994; Appadurai 1996; Smith 2001). As a process it is not something extrinsic to daily life, or imposed by regulatory bodies, but rather is a result of new spatial arrangements made by individuals. Globalization, in this sense, is the means of conducting business over widening distances and distended social relations. As Smith points out, "Specific collectivities—local households, kin networks, elite fractions, and other emergent local formations—actively pursue such strategies as transnational migration, transnational social movements or transnational economic or cultural entrepreneurship to sustain or transform resources, including cultural resources, in the face of the neoliberal storm" 2001, 167.

Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs have indeed transformed their cultural and economic resources in a way that has led to globally distended networks of trade. What remains exceptional is that they have done so in a way that mimics and interacts with dominant systems of food trade, while also remaining outside of them.

Ethnic Entrepreneurship in the Global Marketplace

There are several contributing factors that begin to explain Chinatown's food system as it exists today. Overseas Chinese have seen entrepreneurship as a traditional path to success (Kwong 1996). Chinese Americans dominate the Chinese food sector in New York City, from the supply of ingredients to preparation and service. The ethnic character of the food products, as well as the community in which they are sold (Chinatown), characterize the system as separate from society at large. "Ethnicity" shields these businesses from takeover by American agribusiness and grocery corporations. Because Cantonese- and Mandarin-language skills and Chinese identity are needed within Chinatown to supply the retail end of this system, Chinese brokers control market access. Non-Chinese are involved at other points along the commodity chain, such as in farming and exporting from Florida and Latin America, but trustworthy relationships with Chinatown brokers are necessary for long-term success. Relationships were formed through shared ethnicity and kinship and through friendship. People found partners through business associations, community and religious organizations, and former employment.

Extreme competition, particularly on the retail end, keeps companies within the system from getting too big. It also keeps quality high but prices low. In Manhattan's Chinatown alone there are ninety produce vendors and twelve wholesalers. In a race to keep up with competition, wholesalers look for ways to expand and make new contacts. Many "new" entrepreneurs have got their start by working for others in the system and have learned the business through an informal structure of apprenticeship. Other entrepreneurs are family members who opened an independent branch of the family business at a different point in the commodity chain, or are children who have inherited the family business. Still other entrepreneurs look to friends and associates for potential business partners. Seventy-one percent of the actors in the network of trade between Honduras, Florida, and New York came into the network through a social contact, and 61 percent of the actors in the network trade with people with whom they have a social tie. Trust can be very elusive, however; it is not guaranteed through shared ethnicity or the other types of social relations we have seen. Successful farmers and distribution firms are

constantly negotiating their business relationships, extending and intertwining the social networks that unite those involved in Chinatown's food system.

The social networking aspect of Chinatown's food system is critical to its success, and while business relations are not bound by shared ethnicities, a range of East and Southeast Asian ethnicities that become lumped into the category Asian by non-Asians, has become a definitive feature of the system to people outside it. Insiders use the perception of ethnicity, language, and the barriers created by defining ethnic differences to keep control of their industry.

One outcome of seeking out new trade partners and keeping up with global economics is the inclusion of new production locations in the system. Disparate natural and political environments have become subject to the same economic fluctuations as a result of participating in the global marketplace. The mixing of people in very different political-economic situations through global markets often perpetuates social inequities and creates winners and losers. In Chinatown's food system the same entrepreneurs manage various production locales, leading to some complementary rather than antagonistic practices between farmers. The crops produced in Florida complement the seasons in the New York area, and the crops produced in Honduras complement the Florida crops. Small farmers benefit from the marketing infrastructure that exists because of the volume of produce imported and supplied by large growers. The small, highly diverse farmers in Florida (the Southeast Asian home gardeners) do not survive in spite of large area growers and international growers; they survive because of them. One of the main reasons why small farms cannot survive as markets grow more distant is that they have to "get big or get out." But Chinatowns across the United States and Canada, the main markets of these farmers, are home to a diverse mix of Asian immigrants from cultures that typically eat many types of fruits and vegetables. The market itself is so varied that there is room for all sorts of specialty growers.

Crop Diversity in the Global Marketplace

The research for this book has shown that the vast diversity of products sold in Chinatown present many opportunities for crop diversity to be used. My market study in Chinatown reveals that the over two hundred fresh fruits and vegetables are sold in low frequencies across the marketplace. Consumers want a small volume of a great variety of products. In order to serve this market, distributors in Chinatown's food system deal in a varied assortment of fruits and vegetables, and they like to source their inventories through a few farmers. Both large and small growers in Florida have told me that their buyers want to be able to buy an entire inventory of products from one farm. The preference of buyers for "one-stop shopping" forces farmers to maintain diverse crop inventories.

While agricultural research and extension today generally dismiss biodiverse agriculture and the trend around the world has been crop specialization and monocropping with increased commercialization, the farmers studied for this book have shown that diversity can be used for economic gain and that it is worthwhile to maintain noncommercial crops on the farm for other ecological, social, and cultural benefits. These farmers prefer growing multiple crops because diversity gives them more economic stability and reduces pest pressures. Because prices are always fluctuating, some crops may turn out to be less or more profitable than expected. Also, pest and disease outbreaks, extreme weather events, and shifting consumer demands can quickly lead to crop failures. Maintaining a diverse inventory helps minimize overall loss.

The importance of the flexibility that comes with dealing in smaller volumes of many crops rather than larger volumes of fewer crops is a factor that has led exporters in Honduras to contract small growers rather than use the model of a plantation-style farm managed by the export company. One exporter told me that he works with small growers because "the agronomic risks of farming are so high that it is better to manage smaller parcels of land so that if there is damage, the entire plantation is not damaged." In the Comayagua Valley there were many booms and busts in export agriculture caused by overproduction and pest and disease epidemics. But for the

decade and a half that Asian vegetables have been produced there, production has been stable. The introduction of Asian vegetables to the valley has provided over four hundred farmers with a reliable income and has led to better agronomic practices there. The stability of Asian vegetables developed into a project worthy of investment by national and international agencies. Hondurans are proud of what they have accomplished with the production and export of Asian vegetables and they have held international workshops to present their case as a development model for other Central American countries. There is still much work to be done to improve the production of Asian vegetables in Comayagua, but its successes cannot be overlooked.

Power in the Global Marketplace

The final finding revealed in the book is that spatial expansion of agricultural trade networks alone does not result in the concentration of power along commodity chains. While Chinatown's food system has become increasingly international in scope, expansion is not due to consolidation or buyout of enterprises at the level of production or distribution. Social ties are used to form trade alliances, but firms are individually owned and operated. Competition causes firms to continually enter and leave the system, and it also drives innovation in the system. As we can see from the discussion above, there is room for many types of farmers as well as varied approaches to producing Asian fruits and vegetables.

All the actors in the system echoed the difficulty of dependency on global markets: they are unsure of what the future will bring. This sentiment is encapsulated in the greeting that Johnny Li gave me on my second visit to his farm in Florida. He said, "Good thing you came to visit us this year. We might not be here next year." Anxiety about the future seems to be a prerequisite of farming, but relying on markets subject to great political and economic fluctuations that are out of one's control exacerbates anxieties. Being part of a global system of trade means that one needs to constantly negotiate one's situation and learn to overcome new challenges. Astute monitoring of the market, using the tools at hand, and thinking innovatively are necessary skills for success in global markets. These are the skills that I have identified in the successful farmers and distributors I interviewed for this book. The only way to cope with change is to embrace it.

Chinatown's food system is largely dependent on emigration from East Asia to the United States. Few fruits and vegetables have mainstream appeal, even with the success of Americanized Chinese dishes like chop suey and chow mein. Since the 1960s immigration rates have been steadily increasing, so that Chinese immigrants are one of the fastest-growing groups in New York City. But with China's rapid economic growth and slowing outmigration it is uncertain what the immigration rates of the future will be and how the production of Asian vegetables in the Americas will be affected. While the supply of Asian fruits and vegetables to ethnic restaurants is clearly important in the construction of public ethnic identities and the production of food cultures, we simply do not know the material importance that restaurants have in Chinatown's food network. How much food do they purchase, and what types? Who dines in these restaurants and what do they order? These questions would make for an excellent basis for more research.

The contested, global agro-food systems controlled by a handful of powerful multinational corporations and institutions may dominate food sales (Burch and Lawrence 2007; Magdoff et al. 2000; Weis 2007). They are not the only global food systems, however; alternatives exist. Certain forms of global trade, rather than leading to simplification and loss of diversity, can help preserve traditions as well as foster innovation. Small-scale firms can thrive without inevitable cooptation or appropriation by larger, more powerful global giants. Variety and diversity can exist in a food system at competitive prices, without the sophisticated rhetoric and added value of popular forms of alternative food networks, such as organic and fair trade, that many people are unaware of, disenfranchised from, or completely skeptical of. Chinatown's food network shows us that alternatives can be

found in the everyday lived experience of people leveraging the capital and skills that they have to create new economies.

Far from leading to consolidation of ownership and homogenization of practice, Chinatown's food network shows that the interstices of the dominant global food system are filled with diversity and dynamism. Alternative economic practices can exist as practices in their own right, not only as relics of a past era (McCarthy 2006; Goodman et al. 2012). The very nature of how food is produced and supplied to consumers is so varied and complex that we cannot presume to know all its manifestations. Chinatown's food network shows us that alternatives may be present within existing markets and distribution networks, that they don't need to be created from scratch.

Immigrant food systems that have not been explored in this context might have more to show. The contribution of immigrants to the economy and culture of their host countries, as well as abroad, cannot be underestimated. The innovations they bring to globally complex systems, such as those of food, deserve attention from researchers and policy makers. Immigrant food systems remind us that there is no monolithic global food system, and that globally distended networks of trade can also be locally embedded, blurring the lines between dichotomies such as local and global and conventional and alternative agriculture.

FROM: Imbruce, Valerie. *From Farm to Canal Street*. Cornell University Press. Kindle Edition.