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Food and the Counterculture: A Story of Bread and Politics

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Throughout North America and Western Europe, the neo-bohemian youth movement known as the counterculture turned to natural and organic foods in the late 1960s. While this “countercuisine” is still associated with mass-mediated stereotypes of forlorn hippies scratching away in weedy communal gardens (“Easy Rider,” 1969) and of dubious New Age repasts of mashed yeast with alfalfa sprouts (“Annie Hall,” 1977), it is my argument that the countercuisine represented a serious and largely unprecedented attempt to reverse the direction of dietary modernization and thereby align personal consumption with perceived global needs. If there was a paradigm animating countercultural foodways, it was nicely expressed in the triad of nonsense “laws” propounded in The Whole Earth Catalog in 1968:

Everything’s connected to everything.
Everything’s got to go somewhere.
There’s no such thing as a free lunch.¹

For the more conscientious advocates of the countercuisine, food was a way of integrating the world, seeing the social consequences of private actions, and reminding us of our moral responsibilities. Or, as one Berkeley community gardener put it in 1969, food was an “edible dynamic” – a visceral, lived daily link between the personal and the political.²

Thirty years after my first brown-rice-with-tofu experience, I still maintain this holistic world view in my food research and teaching. Thus in my courses, “American Food,” and “The American Food Chain,” I tell students that eating is more than a private, physiological act. It connects us to people and places all over the world – past, present, and future. As an example, I invite them to think about the simple act of toasting and eating a slice of packaged white bread. Growing that wheat helped some Midwestern farmers pay their bills while also polluting their water supply with fertilizers and pesticides, eroding their soil, and, if they used irrigation, lowering
their region’s water table. The land used to grow the wheat had been acquired— or seized— long ago from other living creatures, human and otherwise, and converted to growing a grass that had originated as a weed in the Middle East and had been gradually domesticated and improved by countless generations of gatherers, peasants, farmers, and, only just recently, scientists. Turning the wheat into bread required the coordinated efforts of numerous companies specializing in food transportation, storage, processing, and marketing, as well as others involved in manufacturing and selling farm equipment.

By extending the bread’s shelf life, the plastic wrapping lowered costs and increased profits for corporate processors, distributors, and supermarkets. That packaging also helped to put thousands of neighborhood bakers out of business. Making the plastic from petrochemicals may have helped to foul Cancer Alley in Louisiana and, if the oil came from the Middle East, may have helped to pay for the reconstruction of Kuwait, which was destroyed several years ago by an Iraqi army also financed by petrochemical bread wrappers. The copper in the toaster and electrical wiring may have been mined during the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile or Mobutu’s Zaire or Bruce Babbitt’s Arizona. The electricity itself probably came from a power plant burning coal, a source of black lung, acid rain, and global warming. And so on... All of this—and more—was involved in making toast. And we have not even mentioned the butter and jam.

Since my students already tend to patronize me as a quaint 1960s relic, I do not tell them that my interdisciplinary, global interest in food did in fact originate in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when I was a student at the University of Michigan. This perspective came not so much from my coursework—historians rarely look at food back then—but from what I was doing off campus. It was in that period that I, like several million other young people, was discovering the political implications of paying with our food. At the coop house where I cooked in 1968, I learned how upset my straighter housemates could be if I left the meat out of the lasagna, injected the roast beef with red dye, or served octopus instead of tuna salad. In 1970 my wife and I met our first macrobiotic, who seemed irritatingly self-righteous and mystical; but soon we too turned vegetarian and came to appreciate the provocative power of refusing steak at the family dinner table. Reading Frances Moore Lappe’s *Diets for a Small Planet*, we learned about protein complementarity and the ecological inefficiency of feeding precious grains to cattle. Hoping to secede from the System (or at least from the supermarket), we found *The Tassajara Bread Book* and started baking. *Mother Earth News* and *Organic Gardening* showed us how to make raspberry jam, pickle cucumbers, and grow all the corn and tomatoes we could ever eat on our 20-by-20-foot, chemical-free plot at the nearby community garden. We also brewed dark ale, picked purple clover for wine, and grew our own cannabis. At the anarchistic natural foods coop on South State Street, we bagged our grains, sliced our own cheddar, tore up our bill, and paid whatever we wanted. The new Sikh restaurant in downtown Ann Arbor taught us about vegetable tempura, curried squash soup, and tantric meditation. Cookbook writers Ellen Eldal and Anna Thomas showed us how to make tasty ethnic dishes while saving the Earth. At noisy demonstrations and concerts we scarfed free brown rice and beans served by radical communes dedicated to nourishing “the Revolution.” And when, in 1974, someone accidentally mixed fire retardant in dairy cattle feed, we, like every milk drinker in Michigan, learned that in a complex food system, everything really is connected and that there can be no complete escape to nature or self-sufficiency.

My radicalized food awareness translated into sustained scholarship a decade later, when I started a study of the hegemonic process—the way mainstream institutions handle subcultural dissent and deviance. How does an urban-industrial-capitalist society profit from discontent with urban-industrial-capitalist society? For case studies in what I called “retailing revolt,” I chose to examine the fate of blue jeans, “rock ‘n’ roll,” and natural foods. (It does seem that many food studies begin not out of intrinsic interest in food but because of interest in what specific foods can tell us about something else—gender, labor relations, class, ethnicity, imperialism, capitalism, or, in my case, the cooptation of cultural rebellion.) More or less by chance, I started with the food chapter, which soon became a whole book about the counterculture’s confrontation with the food industry.

In my research, I tried to set my own nostalgia and amnesia aside and went back to the food-related documents of the late 1960s, especially the Library of Congress’s vast collection of countercultural cookbooks, periodicals, catalogs, guides, broadsides, and memoirs. Even today, as I scan this often feverish material with the somewhat sedated perspective of a middle-aged teacher with his own rebellious children, I am still impressed by the core insights of the underground food writers, organic farmers, chefs, entrepreneurs, and consumer activists who articulated the “digestible ideology” of dietary radicalism. Unlike some journalists and historians, I do not dismiss the countercuisine as the latest silly manifestation of the “nuts among the berries” health food faddism that, according to critics, has deceived and diverted gullible Americans since Sylvester Graham, John Harvey Kellogg, Horace Fletcher, and Gaylord Hauser. While postwar crusaders like Adele Davis and J. I. Rodale established some continuity between the earlier health food movement and the countercuisine, it is my argument that the latter was motivated less by concerns about personal vitality or longevity (the traditional health food focus) than by radical politics and environmentalism. Or, just as much food scholarship is really about something other than food, the hip food rebellion was an expression of concerns that extended far beyond the kitchen and dinner table. Alienated by modern culture and anxious about future planetary survival, practitioners of the countercuisine looked to the past for ways to reverse the unsustainable tendencies of the global food supply system.

Using bread as an example, I will first sketch some of the countercultural food-related beliefs, practices, and institutions as they emerged in the late 1960s (content). Then I will speculate about why the countercuisine emerged at that particular time (context). Again focusing on bread, I will briefly overview what happened to the countercuisine over the next few decades (change), and then I will suggest why this all should matter to us today (the moral).

Content

Drawing largely on anthropological sources, I define a cuisine as a set of socially situated food behaviors with these components: a limited number of “edible” foods (selectivity); a preference for particular ways of preparing food (technique); a
distinctive set of flavor, textural, and visual characteristics (aesthetics); a set of rules for consuming food (ritual); and an organized system of producing and distributing the food (infrastructure). Embedded in these components are a set of ideas, images, and values (ideology) that can be “read” just like any other cultural “text.”

While the countercultural food arrangements I am “reading” were never as well-established and formalized as those of China or France, I do consider them to be intelligible enough to merit the use of the word cuisine. Thus, as every parent who confronted a newly vegetarian teenager discovered, the countercuisine was highly selective, elevating vegetable protein over animal, “natural” foods over those deemed to be “poisoned” by chemicals and processing. Food preparation techniques tended to be labor- and time-intensive, requiring some willingness to make dishes “from scratch” using low-tech manual implements—in opposition to the dominant corporate cuisine’s reliance on “quick and easy” automated convenience. The aesthetic principles of taste, texture, and presentation were adapted largely from ethnic styles, particularly Mediterranean, Latin American, and Asian dishes. I use the word “adapted” advisedly because in true post-modern style, the countercuisine was more interested in improvisational creativity than in antiquarian authenticity. (For attracting new recruits, the aesthetic eclecticism of Mexican-Italian Blintzes and sweet-and-sour spaghetti sauce was probably a clear marketing improvement over the earlier health food movement, whose cookbooks favored the ascetic banality of cottage cheese patties and walnut-squash loaf.) Similarly, rituals of consumption tended to be informal, irreverent, and spontaneous—the use of fingers or simple implements (especially chopsticks), much sharing, and a deliberate insensitivity to matters of time, order, dress, microbial contamination, or conventional decorum. Finally, from the very start many participants in the countercuisine were intensely interested in setting up an alternative infrastructure of organic farms (some operated communally, some individually), farmers’ markets, cooperative stores, natural foods processors, group houses, vegetarian restaurants and groceries—as well as an increasingly sophisticated informational distribution system of periodicals, newsletters, cookbooks, guides to simple living, and think tanks devoted to agricultural, nutritional, and entrepreneurial research. This elaborate but decentralized infrastructure of alternative institutions most differentiated the countercuisine from the earlier health food underground, whose primary institutions consisted mainly of a few supplement manufacturers, retail outlets, private clinics, and quasi-religious publishers.

As for an underlying ideology, I have detected three major themes that intertwined to give shape and coherence to countercultural food writings and practices. A consumerist theme targeted foods to be avoided, especially chemicialized “plastic” foods. A therapeutic theme had to do with positive concerns for pleasure and identity, particularly a hunger for craftsmanship, leisure, and tradition. Concerned with the integration of self, nature, and community, an organic motif addressed serious issues of production and distribution, that is, how to reconcile private consumption with wider planetary needs.

To illustrate how these three themes intersected, I will focus on one of the distinctively countercultural food practices that emerged in the late 1960s: the baking of whole wheat bread. When hip cooks began to experiment with soybean stroganoff, curried brown rice, or sesame-garbanzo latkes, they also started to bake the dark, heavy, whole-grained loaves described in books like *The Tassajara Bread Book*, *The Moosewood Cookbook*, and *Laurel’s Kitchen.* While the breads were not always very successful, they were a central part of the rebellion. By baking and eating these breads, you were signifying what you were against (consumerist self-protection) and what you were for (therapeutic self-enhancement). In short, bread was part of an oppositional grammar—a set of dichotomies between the devitalized, soft, suburbanized world of Wonder Bread and the vital, sturdy, nutrient-dense peasant world of whole-grained breads. In addition to straddling these consumerist and therapeutic elements, this set of dichotomies also pointed towards a holistic or organic sense of how the food system operated.

**Plastic versus natural**

Wonder Bread was commonly derided as “plastic bread”; tasteless, completely standardized and homogenized, rendered indestructible—indeed virtually embalmed—by chemical additives and plastic wrapping. Homemade whole wheat breads were, on the other hand, “natural.” Natural had two components. First, it meant a lack of additives, preservatives, chemicals, “poisons”; because it lacked these adulterants, it seemed more alive and life-sustaining. Sourdough was particularly intriguing because it was made from breathing cultures passed down from one generation to another—an expression of the transcendent vital force (much like yogurt cultures, unpreserved beer, and ripened cheese). The second aspect of natural referred to time: It was old-fashioned, traditional, nostalgic—the opposite of the highly rationalized, multinational food industry. The nostalgia tended to look back to ethnic, regional, peasant societies—all seemingly more honest, simple, and virtuous than the bureaucratic urban-industrial state. Thus, in its most romantic sense natural stood for a free form, eccentric, rough-hewn, unstandardized state of mind—a primitive, folksy resistance to the banal, dehumanizing, massifying tendencies of modern culture.

**White versus brown**

Paralleling the natural-plastic dichotomy was the opposition between White and Brown: The counterculture did not have much good to say about whiteness, whether in food, clothes, or politics. As one underground newspaper put it, “Don’t eat white, eat right, and fight.” Whiteness meant Minute Rice, Cool Whip, instant mashed potatoes, white sugar, peeled apples, white tomatoes, white collar, white bucks, bleached cotton, whitewash, white trash, white coats, and, of course, Wonder Bread. Wonder Bread came in for special attack because it was so symbolically rich. Long advertised as the builder of strong bodies in eight ways, Wonder was the best-selling brand. A first cousin by corporate marriage to that other expression of tasteless modern culture, the Twinkie, Wonder Bread’s manufacture could be taken to represent the white flight of the 1950s and 1960s. To make clean bread, ITT’s bakers removed all colored ingredients (segregation), bleached the remaining flour (suburban school socialization), and then, to prevent discoloring decay, added strong preservatives and stabilizers (law enforcement). Brown bread, on the other hand, may have had a shorter shelf life, but at its peak it seemed harder, more resilient, more full of innate character. You found this color contrast everywhere. If you
visited an underground food coop, you found a preference for brown in everything, from eggs, rice, and sugar to the brown paper bags, wrappers, and signs. The color contrast thus externalized white radicals' alienation from sanitized suburban life – and expressed a neo-primitivist fascination with cultures and struggles of brown people throughout the world.13

Convenience versus craft

A virtue of brown bread was that it took some time and skill to produce, and this leads to another important contrast, convenience versus craft. Wonder Bread represented the ultimate in labor-saving convenience, which was (and is) the food industry's main product and primary hope for global expansion. It saved time, effort, attention, and money – it even took virtually no time or effort to chew. Sliced white bread thus may have been one of the world's wonders, but the costs in taste seemed enormous. Thanks to the nutrients added back after processing, it may have been "biochemically adequate" but was spiritually vacuous.

Baking your own bread was a considerably less-efficient way to get nutrients, but that was almost the point. Like most Bohemians, hippies wanted to get off the fast track of modern life, to focus on the here and now. Bread baking was a form of craft therapy and meditation: a way to focus attention, a chance to slow down and spend a few hours in intimate contact with the textures, aromas, and chewy sensuality of creating something from scratch. After tasting her own homemade loaf, hippy cookbook writer Ita Jones (The Grub Bag) wrote that she had to bake her own even if it took a whole afternoon – indeed precisely because it took a whole afternoon. "There's no return to the days when I thought that three cluttered hours were preferable to three, long, calm, warm fragrant ones."16 Those last adjectives - long, calm, warm, fragrant - captured the nostalgic spirit of the counterculture’s fascination with traditional crafts, and I believe that if you scratch the surface of the current vogue for artisan and hearth breads, you will find that same hunger for a mythical world of village butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers.

Product and process

Finally, closely related to the contrast between convenience and craft was the one between product and process. Mainstream consumer culture put a premium on the end product; how it got to you did not really matter. For the sake of time-saving efficiency, the consumer was alienated from the act of production. The countercuisine, on the other hand, focused on the process – the opportunity to learn by doing, even from the failures. An underground newspaper's food column – called "Bread Fakin': A Garden of Kneadin'" – put it this way: "Don't be discouraged by a few bricks, or even a lot of bricks – they're all building blocks." It was more important how you got there, what you learned along the way, than what you actually wound up with. Hip food writers liked to quote Kahlil Gibran: "If a man bakes bread with indifference, he bakes a bitter loaf that feeds but half his hunger." But if you really paid attention to the process of baking bread, you would nourish both stomach and soul.17

For the most serious politically minded, this attention to process also resulted in a radical ecological analysis of global food networks. This was the organic theme, the growing awareness of ecological connections between field and fork, production and consumption. In addition to presenting recipes, hip food writers sometimes asked hard questions about the way the wheat was grown, milled, and marketed. Who grew it, what chemicals did they use, where did the water come from, how were farm workers treated, how did the grain conglomerates treat the wheat growers, what ties did the mass-market bread corporations like Wonder’s ITT have to the Vietnam War, and so on? Attention to process revealed that the production and distribution of bread, like all food, was intensely political. Similarly, in light of the corporate food system’s need to range widely and freely around the globe for the cheapest sources of raw materials, thinking about where one’s food came from could become a rather subversive act.18

If there was a theme emerging from much of this countercultural experimentation with bread and other foods, it was the one of responsibility: By eating “organically” raised foods (that is, those produced with concern for environmental impact), consumers showed they understood that their eating behavior had roots and consequences – implications not just for their own health but also for the state of the economy, environment, and, ultimately, the planet. (Again, Stewart Brand’s “Three Laws.”) Out of the ferment of the late 1960s countercuisine came a host of activist nutritionists, agricultural economists, New Age therapists, and radical academics who pushed the analysis.19 And then there were all the hip business people who combined their social and environmental consciousness with old-fashioned entrepreneurial hustle to establish the organic farms, coops, farmers’ markets, natural foods supermarket chains, New American Cuisine restaurants, and designer bread boutiques that feed some of us today.20

Context

What was going on in the 1960s? Why this rejection of mainstream white bread cuisine and culture? There were two contexts for this rebellion – a mounting dissatisfaction with the prevailing nutritional paradigm coupled with a repositioning of the oppositional left. Harvey Levenstein has clearly documented how the New Nutrition arose in the early part of this century and achieved conventional wisdom status after World War II.21 As expressed by most nutritionists, agronomists, and food technologists, this modernist paradigm had several main tenets.

First, when evaluating whether a diet is "adequate," the whole is less than its parts. That is, as long as you get the right biochemical nutrients – amino acids, vitamins, minerals, and so on – it does not matter what final form they take. Thus, enriched white bread is nutritionally equivalent to whole wheat. A good diet is more a matter of statistics than of taste or tradition.

Second, a healthy diet is a "well-balanced" one, composed of hefty doses of animal protein from two of the four "basic" food groups; such a high-fat, resource-intensive diet is the envy and goal of "developing" peoples all over the world.

Third, America has the cheapest, safest, most varied food supply – and for all of that we should thank our modern food industry, with all its agrichemicals and
labor-saving farm machinery, food processing, and mass-marketing. Chemicals are our friends. Moreover, only through such high tech production can we ever hope to feed a rapidly expanding world population.

Fourth, conversely, the supposedly good old days before chemicals and agribusiness were really terrible, characterized by the three “P’s”: plagues, pestilence, and pellagros. Contrary to nostalgia, Grandma did not know best when it came to providing safe, wholesome food; and neither did Old MacDonald, the family farmer, nor the friendly Mama-Papa corner grocery. Information about what constitutes good food should be left to science, not tradition.22

This consensus—fondly referred to as the Golden Age by food technologists—crested in the 1950s and early 1960s as marketers successfully rolled out a host of fabricated, synthesized, plastic-wrapped products, as women’s magazines taught suburban cooks how to whip up “gourmet” meals using processed foods (my favorite is the “Eight-Can Casserole”) and as the nation’s much-loved President Eisenhower unapologetically scarfed hash on a tray in front of the TV set.23 It was also the heyday of the agrichemicals that helped American farmers achieve yield increases that were unimaginable just a decade earlier. Pushing the modernist envelope, technological utopians of the 1950s predicted a push-button future of fully automated farms, restaurants, and kitchens that would “liberate” humanity once and for all from the drudgery of food production and preparation.24

These modernist fantasies were not confined to the science-fiction pulp magazines and Sunday supplements. One notable case of technocratic hubris was the widespread belief held by many highly regarded food policy analysts that, in the near future, a crowded world could readily be fed by foods synthesized from chlorella, a high-protein microalgae that, under laboratory conditions, was able to convert upwards of 20 percent of sunlight into usable nutrients.25 (Conventional “higher” plants like corn and soy, on the other hand, were able to “capture” less than 1 percent.) By “industrializing” photosynthesis, algae manufacturers would be able to bypass inefficient higher plants and anachronistic family farms altogether. Instead, air-conditioned, fully automated “skyscraper farms” would raise algae on raw sewage in enclosed ponds and then pipeline the protein-rich green “scum” to factories fabricating cheap hamburgers, pasta, and animal feed. As for the slimy taste problem—chlorella had what flavorists termed a high “gag factor”—algae’s proponents placed great faith in the culinary skills of food engineers. As Cal Tech biologist James Bonner put it in 1957, “the craft of food technology” would soon be able to create “wholly satisfactory” steaks made entirely from vegetable protein flavored with “tasty synthetics” and “made chewy by addition of a suitable plastic matrix.” True, such foods might not be up to elite gourmet standards, but Bonner predicted that in the ultra-utilitarian, modernized future, “human beings will place less emotional importance on the gourmet aspects of food and will eat more to support their body chemistry.”26 Here, then, was the apotheosis of what Harvey Levenstein calls the New Nutrition—the progressive-era belief that in a truly efficient world, one would eat just to live, and what one ate would be dictated by biochemical analysis, not frivolous aesthetics.

Unfortunately for the proponents of algae—and for food technology in general—in the 1960s the biochemical paradigm came under assault from a variety of directions. First, the more affluent, urban, liberal segments of the general public became less receptive to dietary modernism. Inspired by the three “J’s”—Julia Child, John F. Kennedy, and jet travel—the new gourmets of the 1960s awakened to food’s social and aesthetic dimensions. A renewed interest in roots encouraged many to try traditional ethnic and regional cuisines. Conversely they became more resistant to modernistic advice to eat just for biochemical efficiency, especially as consumer advocates questioned the safety of additives that preserved, fortified, and flavored highly processed foods.27 By the end of the decade, many Americans could appreciate social critic Lewis Mumford’s blast at “the brave new world of totalitarian technics.” According to Mumford, promoters of algae and other processed panacées ignored food’s role in enhancing conversation, pleasure, and the landscape. The “pathological technical syndrome” of the efficiency experts was “based on a desire to displace the organic with the synthetic and the prefabricated with the scientifically controlled.” The world needed more small farms, Mumford suggested, and with that a greater sensitivity to localness and diversity.28

Mumford’s advocacy of small-scale, decentralized farming had strong roots in American populist culture, but for most of the twentieth century proponents of modern agribusiness had successfully argued that the only way to keep up with rapid population growth (the Malthusian trap) was through extensive industrialization and consolidation of agriculture. The Malthusian threat loomed large in the 1960s, as world population increased at an unprecedented rate of 2.5 percent a year—leading to warnings of impending food wars not just from the apocalyptic Paddock brothers and Paul Ehrlich but also from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), National Academy of Sciences, and US Department of Agriculture (USDA).29 While the USDA encouraged further agricultural rationalization as a way to feed a hungry world, doubts mounted about the safety and efficacy of modern farming’s primary tools, especially pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, subsidized irrigation projects, and heavy machinery that destroyed soil while bankrupting over-mortgaged farmers.30

Concerns about the environmental impact of modern agriculture dovetailed with new worries about another key tenet of the reigning nutritional paradigm: the necessity and superiority of animal protein. Most of America’s postwar agricultural productivity gains went not into feeding the world’s hungry but into producing the corn and soybeans that fattened cattle, which in turn fattened consumers of steaks and fast-food hamburgers. Mainstream food marketers responded to the cholesterol scare of the 1960s with a proliferation of low-calorie, low-fat products, but disaffected youth looked for more comprehensive, subversive solutions. Thus, in the late 1960s a Berkeley graduate student, Frances Moore Lappe went to the library to look for research on feed-grain ratios, protein complementarity, and the ecological impact of animal production. The result—Diet for a Small Planet—was perhaps the best-selling book of the counterculture. Lappe’s basic point was simple: By feeding grains to farm animals, Americans were literally throwing away most of their food. A grain-fed North American steer ate twenty-one pounds of vegetable protein for every pound of protein it delivered to the steak eater. In addition to squandering food and clogging our arteries, the animal industry depleted soil, water, and energy resources—all of which would be in short supply in a world whose population was doubling every few decades.31

Lappe’s argument was by no means new. For many years Malthusians had been saying that rapid population growth, coupled with degradation of farmlands,
of course, it did quite well. As the counter-.cultural movement continued, people became more interested in natural foods and organic farming. This led to increased demand for fresh produce and led to the rise of organic food stores and farms. The movement also led to the growth of community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, where farmers sell shares of their produce to local consumers, providing a direct link between producers and consumers.

The rise of organic foods also helped to popularize the concept of local food systems. People began to value the benefits of eating foods that were grown locally, such as fresher produce and reduced transportation emissions. This led to the growth of local agriculture and the development of community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, where farmers sell shares of their produce to local consumers, providing a direct link between producers and consumers.

The counter-cultural movement also led to increased interest in alternative health practices, such as yoga and meditation. People began to seek out alternatives to traditional medicine and looked to natural remedies and holistic practices for their health needs. This led to the growth of alternative medicine and the development of new health practices, such as acupuncture and herbal medicine.

The counter-cultural movement also led to increased interest in environmental issues. People began to see the importance of protecting the environment and reducing their impact on the planet. This led to the growth of environmental organizations and the development of new environmental policies and practices, such as recycling and sustainable agriculture.

The counter-cultural movement also led to increased interest in social justice and political activism. People began to see the importance of working towards a more equitable society and looked to alternative political solutions, such as socialism and anarchism. This led to the growth of new political parties and the development of new political strategies, such as direct action and grassroots organizing.

The counter-cultural movement also led to increased interest in countercultural arts, such as punk and heavy metal music, independent film, and literature. People began to seek out alternative forms of expression and looked to countercultural art for inspiration. This led to the growth of new art movements and the development of new art forms, such as video and performance art.
stuff that the hip gourmets of Berkeley were creating but a close enough facsimile to appease most patrons of suburban supermarkets and casual theme-restaurant chains. And that is how we got some of the products that now take up considerable supermarket shelf space, such as natural cereals, the granolas and granola bars, yogurts, ethnic frozen dinners, veggie burgers, salad bars with alfalfa sprouts and sunflower seeds, Celestial Seasonings herbal teas, Ben and Jerry’s ecologically righteous premium ice cream, and “lite” versions of virtually everything. 36

Rather than recapitulate the full progression from countercuisine to Lean Cuisine, I will focus on the evolution of those early hippy whole wheat “bricks” into what the food industry calls “variety or specialty breads,” the consumption of which surpassed that of plain white bread among the more affluent shoppers of the 1980s. The incorporation process was gradual. At first, mass-market bread companies simply tried to coopt countercultural symbols: the loaves in brown wrappers with key words like “natural,” “wholesome,” and “whole-grained,” even though the whole wheat was only a tiny percentage of the flour and the extra fiber sometimes came from wood pulp. Or the old-fashioned, craftsman-like feel of “rustic” or “country” breads from Pepperidge Farm, an acquisition of Campbell’s Soup. Or the vaguely ethnic or European aura of Stella D’Oro, Lender’s, or Entenmann’s, all also acquired by major food conglomerates. 37

While these packaged baked goods captured some of the look of tradition, they lacked the texture, aroma, and taste. Filling that niche were new “boutique” bakeries, many of them established and staffed by ex-hippies who, once the counterculture disbanded in the early 1970s, specialized in their food interests by traveling to Europe to study with top chefs and bakers who were catering to similar longings felt elsewhere in the West. Returning home, they showed Americans what real peasant bread tasted like, first in the California-Cuisine style of panethic bistros (also set up by counterculture veterans) that dotted the chic gourmet ghettos of coastal cities, university towns, and upper-class resorts, and then (in the late 1980s and 1990s) in their own craft bakeries, which retailed rustic sourdough, sesame semolina, and savory olive breads for four to six dollars a loaf. 38 Ironically, by importing these Old World foods, they furthered the culinary globalization of foodways that had begun with the Columbian Exchange, if not before.

The middle class's flirtation with these “artisan breads” was a bit unsettling for packaged bread manufacturers. Instead of reviling the once-ubiquitous neighborhood “made-from-scratch” bakeries, the new hip bread boutiques probably accelerated their disappearance, for supermarkets responded with their own in-store bakeries, which increased from about 2,000 in 1972 to over 30,000 today (compared with around 350 of the independent boutiques). Retailing limp baguettes for 99 cents or pale imitations of seven-grain bread for $1.98, the in-store bakeries now account for half of the nation’s $18 billion sales of baked goods. Like the supermarket produce sections, which also boomed in response to affluent shoppers’ demand for healthier foods, these in-store bakeries are quite profitable, for the fresh-baked variety loaves command a higher price than packaged breads, although they do not cost a lot more to produce. 39

The supermarket in-store unit is the corner bakery of our day and has some of the same appeal on the surface: the personal, over-the-counter service, the inviting racks of warm loaves and sugary confections, the cute awnings, free samples, and most important, the freshly baked aroma that pervades the whole store. Sometimes you can even see what looks like an oven and thus vicariously participate in the baking process, much as diners at chic restaurants with exposed demonstration kitchens think they are watching dinner being cooked. But it is mostly an illusion. There simply are not enough scrap bakers left to staff every supermarket, and no big chain wants to pay the high costs of training and keeping them, so most of the skilled mixing work—and much of the baking, too—is done at centralized wholesale locations, often in highly automated German tunnel ovens that are capable of turning out fairly sophisticated crusty loaves and flat breads. (As is always the case when labor is too expensive or troublesome, Fordist automation rules.) If anything is actually baked in the store, it is usually from frozen dough, or more likely it is a pre-cooked “par-baked” loaf that is heated (or “finished”) just enough to provide the warmth and yeasty smell. And the crunchiness of the crust can be adjusted by the type of plastic bag it is sold in. 40

The main reason for this persistence of the status quo is that convenience—the food industry’s strongest suit—still sells. While consumers have shown a nostalgia for craftsmanship, most really do not want to spend much time or energy buying, or even shopping for bread. (Similarly, while many of us envy the impressive health profile of the traditional Mediterranean diet, few want the hard labor that went along with it.) Most consumers would rather buy a finished product that looks as if a skilled craftsman did it; and to save time, they would just as soon buy it in the same supermarket where they pick up their milk, laundry detergent, and drug prescription.

To be sure, the truly discerning (and richest) bread gourmets may still take the time to patronize the boutiques, where the craftsmanship, quality, and freshness are real—and there is no doubt that these are increasing. Some industry observers see a potential for as many as 3,000 more over the next few years. But it is doubtful that they will remain independent for long as they undergo the same pressures for consolidation that drives the mainstream food industry. A few franchise operations are already underway, and it is likely that we will soon see a shakeout and consolidation similar to what has happened in premium ice cream, bagels, and coffee. Indeed, one gourmet bread franchiser recently stated that he hopes to do for bread what Starbucks has done for coffee. So beware the illusion of the folksy corner bakery. The retail units may have righteous populist names like Northern Plains, Prairie Grain, and Montana Gold, but they will be centralized corporate affairs ripe for eventual takeover by the really big players—General Mills, Campbell’s, Phillip Morris, and so forth. True, McDonald’s aborted its recent Hearth Express experiment in which unwrapped, locally baked loaves of “hearth breads” were sold along with take-out roasted chicken and meat loaf, but just because McDonald’s backed off does not mean that Boston Market or T. G. I. Friday’s will do the same. Like the processors and supermarkets, the restaurant chains are very interested in high-profit variety breads. 41

But why should I care about these trends? If we, the upper-middle-class writers and readers of this volume, can find and afford this great bread, is not that what counts? I suppose the answer is “yes,” if one is content with a purely privatistic, myopic view of food. But, as this chapter shows, I am too much a child of the 1960s. I keep thinking about the global picture. As my hippy mentors wrote, it is not the
product, it is the process. If we think only about the end product rather than the process by which it was made, then the food industry will always be able to come up with products that at least superficially cater to our worries about health, skill, tradition, and community. But if we start asking questions about the process by which grain was transformed into the bread that sustains and entertains us, then we are not likely to be so easily appeased. What actually is in this stuff anyway? Is it really so wholesome? Who baked it and under what conditions? Thinking about process means asking why a peasant bread costs $5.00, while real peasants abroad cannot buy plain wheat and poor people here can barely afford store-bought white bread. And it means asking about environment and agriculture: Where did the plastic bag come from and where will it go after I discard it? How will the greenhouse effect affect grain production? Is our global seed stock genetically diverse enough to withstand the inevitable attack of the next pesticide-resistant fungus or fly? Did the farmer get a fair share of the profits? And down the road will that farmer’s land be in good enough condition to feed our grandchildren’s grandchildren? These are the questions that really matter. And no amount of postmodern marketing wizardry will answer them or make them go away.

NOTES

1. The Last Whole Earth Catalog (Menlo Park, Calif.: Portolo Institute, 1971), 43.
11. The “reading” of the countercuisine in the rest of this section is drawn from Belasco, Appetite for Change, 15–108.
15. Ibid., 48–50. In a sense the neo-primitivistic attraction to brown-nest had deeper roots in the ambivalence of affluent Westerners towards the fruits of their own political and economic mastery of third-world societies. Thus, in the 1920s rich metropolitan intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic found themselves attracted to black music (jazz), sexuality (Josephine Baker), and pigments themselves (Coco Chanel’s tanning creme). Jan Nederveen Pieterse, White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).
18. Belasco, Appetite for Change, 32–4, 68–76. Claude Fischler makes a related point in “The Mad Cow Crisis,” in Raymond Crew, ed., Food in Global History (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999); the modern food system’s vast distance between process and product leads to considerable consumer distrust and anxiety, but while Fischler tends to dismiss such sentiment as verging on paranoia, I see it as merited and, if channelled constructively, politically useful.
Industrial Tortillas and Folkloric Pepsi: The Nutritional Consequences of Hybrid Cuisines in Mexico

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In January 1999, neoliberal President Ernesto Zedillo eliminated the long-standing subsidy on Mexico’s daily staple, corn tortillas. It was intended as an efficient measure to improve competitiveness in the global economy, but many saw the decree as an end to the welfare state that had assured political domination for the ruling party for most of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, as neighborhood tortilla factories throughout Mexico City began to close—unable to compete, without the subsidy, against the industrial conglomerate Maseca, a producer of dehydrate tortilla flour—Mexicans feared the end of another era: more than two thousand years of eating tortillas made from freshly ground corn.¹ This essay will examine the twentieth-century transformation of Mexican cuisine, both the mechanization of Native American tortilla making and the introduction of Western-style industrially processed foods. The modernization of food production has been instrumental in drawing campesinos into the market economy, but it has done so in a halting and incomplete fashion, creating new forms of what Nestor García Canclín termed “hybrid cultures.” While this half-baked globalization allowed people to retain elements of rural, often-indigenous identities by “entering and leaving modernity,” many paid a high nutritional price, suspended between traditional and modern diets, eating the worst of both worlds.²

The modernization of tortilla production held enormous promise at the dawn of the twentieth century, because Mexico’s subsistence diet involved tremendous work for both male farmers and female cooks. Women labored for hours each morning over the pre-Hispanic metate (saddle quern) to feed their families tortillas. Despite this backbreaking daily chore, when mechanical mills capable of grinding the moist corn dough began arriving in rural communities in the 1920s and 1930s, women patronized the establishments only with great hesitancy. Their skepticism about this new technology reflected not a reflexive peasant conservatism but justified concern...