

Fast food/organic food: reflexive tastes and the making of ‘yuppie chow’

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Organic food consumption is one of several new trends in eating read as active opposition to industrialized food provision. While fast food consumption is characterized by compulsive gluttony, manifest in fat bodies, alternative consumption practices are seen to be driven by conscious reflexivity, such that consumers monitor, reflect upon and adapt their personal conduct in light of its perceived consequences. The purpose of this paper is two-fold. One is to examine the evolution of organic food from what Belasco called the ‘counter-cuisine’ to what organic growers call ‘yuppie chow’, to show how organic salad mix was the carrier of major changes in the organic system of provision, thereby calling into question the notion that organic food is necessarily an antidote to industrialized food. The other is to problematize the facile dichotomies between fast and slow, reflexive and compulsive, fat and thin, and, hence, good and bad eaters, to show where there is slippage and instability in these categories, in addition to a troubling politics of class and gender. To these ends, I showcase the changing provision of a particular organic commodity (salad mix, or mesclun) in California.

Key words: organic food, organic agriculture, consumption, reflexivity, agriculture-California, eating disorders.

Introduction

Hundreds of millions of people buy fast food every day without giving it much thought, unaware of the subtle and not so subtle ramifications of their purchases. They rarely consider where this food came from, how it was made, what it is doing to the community around them. They just grab their tray off the counter, find a table, take a seat, unwrap the paper, and dig in ... They should know what really lurks behind those sesame-seed buns. As the old saying goes: You are what you eat.

(from the introduction to *Fast Food Nation*, Schlosser 2001: 10)

The Slow Food movement is different from ecological movements and from gastronomy movements. Gastronomical movements don’t defend the small producers and their products, and ecological movements fight the battles, but can’t cook. You have to have both at the same time. (spoken by Carlo Petrini, founder of the Slow Food movement at a ‘convivium’ held at Berkeley’s Chez Panisse; Brennan 1999)

The recently published *Fast Food Nation*

(Schlosser 2001) is an exposé of an industrialized food system *in extremis*. Deliberately building on the legacy of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Schlosser seeks to enrage people's hearts as well as their stomachs by describing both the social and the public health/environmental costs of a food sector gone awry. Hence, not only does he recount the epidemiology of *E. coli* 0157:H7, he drives home the point that the rise of fast food was inextricable from the de-skilling, racializing and youthening of restaurant and food-processing work, making such work mindless at best and extraordinarily hazardous at worst.¹ Curiously, though, the desire for fast food is treated as somewhat of a given. Indeed, Schlosser treats taste as a purely biological phenomenon, unmediated by cultural and economic factors, claiming at several junctures that fast food simply tastes good. As but one consequence, he says, the USA has the highest rate of obesity in the industrialized world (Schlosser 2001: 240). The success of fast foods, he insinuates, depends on compulsive gluttony and unrefined taste, both of which are manifest in fat bodies.

Juxtaposed to fast food is what Bell and Valentine (1997) call ethical eating, a counter-trend (cf. Hollander, this issue) that includes vegetarianism, organic food, Fair Trade coffee, direct farmer-to-consumer marketing, and, most directly, the Slow Food movement. Social critics (including Schlosser himself), academics (e.g. Friedmann 1993; Miele and Murdoch forthcoming; Morgan and Murdoch 2000; Whatmore and Thorne 1997), diehard natural food consumers, and 'foodies' (e.g. Kraus 1991; McManus and Rickard 2000; Unterman 1998), most of all, read these trends as active opposition to industrialized food provision. In this view, consumption practices are driven by a *conscious* reflexivity, such that people monitor, reflect upon and adapt their personal conduct in light of its perceived consequences (Warde

and Martens 2000: 199; also DuPuis 2000). In contrast to the fast food eater, the reflexive consumer pays attention to how food is made, and that knowledge shapes his or her 'taste' toward healthier food. That this consumer has a 'healthier' body is only implied.

Presumably the end point of the broadest set of alternative practices, organic food consumption, is treated in this literature as reflexive eating *par excellence*. To be sure, growth in organic production has been strongly correlated with increased consumer knowledge about mass-produced food, at times coming as 'food scares' but also with compelling evidence of some of the public health, environmental and moral risks involved with chemical-based crop production and intensified livestock management. Yet, a look at the growth in organic food in geographic and historical context shows that the explosion in organic food production and consumption was not entirely innocent of some of the very factors that were implicated in the growth of fast food. Indeed, the simultaneity of growth with the so-called McDonaldization of America raises the question of whether the arrival of organic foods truly represented a paradigmatic shift or was the just the other side of the same coin.

The moral positioning of organic food in binary opposition to fast food is equally problematic in this literature. For, if fast food is about common tastes, mass production and massive bodies, to construct an inverse of refined (or reflexive) taste, craft production and crafted bodies raises some class and gender issues that, at the very least, complicate the new politics of consumption. In regards to class, this dichotomy not only suggests that 'good' food is out of the economic and cultural reach of non-elites, it fails to bring to scrutiny the labour conditions under which such food is produced. In regards to gender, it not only effaces the links between convenience food and

women's massive participation in the paid workforce, it contributes to the pervasive social nagging about body norms.

The purpose of this paper is, thus, two-fold. One is to examine the evolution of organic food from what Belasco (1989) called the 'counter-cuisine' to what organic growers call 'yuppie chow' to suggest that the success of the organic industry was largely wrapped up with gentrification—and the class differentiation that necessarily entailed. **The other is to problematize the facile dichotomies between fast and slow, reflexive and compulsive, fat and thin, and, hence, good and bad eaters, to show where there is slippage and instability in these categories, in addition to this troubling politics of class and gender.** To these ends, I will showcase the provision of a particular commodity (organic salad mix, or *mesclun*) in a particular place: California.²

In important respects, salad mix gave a jump-start to the California organic sector, which then became what is likely the largest in the world in terms of crop value.³ Therefore, the production complex around salad mix set a crucial standard in the evolution of the organic sector. Introduced by restaurateurs in the early 1980s, salad mix also helped establish organic food as precious, a 'niche' product not necessarily representing a critique of industrial food. So successful was organic salad mix as a high-end commodity that it induced major changes in the system of provision in the decade that followed. The growing disconnect between new forms of provision and the meanings organic farming originally embodied surely calls into question the positioning of organic farming and organic food as antidote to industrialized agriculture and fast food.

Making and remaking salad mix⁴

While the organic farming movement has mul-

tiply geographic and philosophical origins (see, e.g., Harwood 1990; Peters 1979), California was always important to its formation (Guthman 1998, forthcoming). Tropes of nature and health were central to the California mythology (see, e.g., Baur 1959; Shrepfer 1983; Starr 1985), and the 1960s' counter-culture, with its stronghold in the San Francisco Bay Area, drew on these tropes, in addition to the oppositional politics of the so-called New Left. Many of the key institutions and figures of the movement were also California-based. For example, Alan Chadwick, a British-born Shakespearean actor, began the first university-run research and extension service devoted solely to organics at the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1967. The decidedly counter-cultural milieu of this programme set the idiomatic tone for organic farming for a long time to come, as many farmers were apprenticed in this programme. In addition, the first organic certification programme in the USA, California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), started in Santa Cruz in 1973, then a rag-tag group of fifty or so self-proclaimed hippie farmers. The annual 'gathering' of ecological farmers—now a major industry conference—made its home in Asilomar, California. The Capay Valley, a small offshoot of the Sacramento Valley, became an important enclave of subscription farms, where consumers buy in for a weekly box of produce. There are other examples. Most of the organic farmers involved in these formative institutions counter-posed their vision to fast, industrial food in some respect or another.

Nevertheless, organic agriculture *arrived* in a post-1970s', *post*-counter-cultural climate, in some ways contradicting the simple-living, tread-lightly message that some would argue is central to the organic critique. Indeed, this emergence was contingent on bridging the counter-cultural associations of organic food

with a new class of eaters, a contingency that was similarly dependent on *where* it occurred: the San Francisco Bay Area—a curious *mélange* itself of a high-wage economy with a liberal-to-radical political climate (Walker 1990)—and a history of trend-setting in food.

From the heady days of the Gold Rush, the Bay Area was historically a high-wage economy (for whites), a centre for industries requiring high-skilled labour. The crucial juncture, for the purposes of this argument, was the explosive success of high-tech electronics in Silicon Valley and finance in San Francisco during the 1980s (Walker 1990). Riding the waves of financial crises and de-regulation that characterized the neo-liberal transition, many mini-fortunes were made in stock and real estate speculation, supplementing the already above-average wages of the professional working classes. No doubt, much of this wealth was a by-product of some of the same processes that made McDonald's the most financially successful restaurant chain in the world (e.g. tax roll backs, falling real wages). To be sure, the rapid growth in financial markets starting in the mid-1980s involved a sharpening of class divisions, so that a decade later, wealth in the USA was the most concentrated it had been since the 1920s (Henwood 1998: 66). Yet, as Walker notes, the Bay Area had long been a centre of personal innovation and indulgence, and cultural non-conformity, as well. It was a local social pundit, Alice Kahn, who coined the word 'yuppie' to connote the emerging group of young urban professionals who 'combin[ed] fierce upward mobility and strong consumerism with some remarkably progressive cultural and political interventions' (Walker 1990: 22).⁵

From the Gold Rush, San Francisco had also been a restaurant town, an early draw for immigrating French chefs. Unlike most of the rest of the USA, moreover, San Francisco did not shun *haute cuisine* in the era of what

Levenstein (1988) calls 'culinary babbity'. To the contrary, the Bay Area remained a haven of good food sense amid the downward spiral of dietary expectations and food quality that occurred in the middle third of the twentieth century. As anecdotal evidence, a survey of twelve Berkeley families, nine headed by professors, was taken in 1927. The surveyors noted that, 'the Berkeley diet emphasized fresh vegetables and fruits, especially the leafy and citrus varieties, milk products, and eggs, in contrast to the average urban diet which substituted the cheaper cereals and potatoes and spent relatively more for meat. The extraordinary amount of fresh fruits and vegetables were especially noteworthy' (Luck and Woodruff 1931; cited in Levenstein 1993). Proximity to the wine country of Napa and Sonoma counties, as well as prevalent truck gardens, contributed to relatively urbane food tastes.

It was a young woman from Berkeley who forged the unlikely connection between this early culinary history, the 1960s' counter-culture, and the *nouveau riche* of the 1980s. As a young adult, Alice Waters went to France and became enamoured with French rustic cooking. She returned to Berkeley to open a café in 1971 where she served simple meals to her friends. Within a few years of opening, she had pioneered the California version of *nouvelle cuisine*. Feeling that the best food was made from fresh, local and seasonal ingredients, she bought most of her produce from local farms. Warren Weber, of Star Route Farms in Bolinas, one of the original self-professed hippie farmers, began to sell cut organic baby greens to Waters in 1981, using the French term *mesclun*. A handful of others soon joined in, some calling it spring mix. All were garden-variety organic farmers—relatively small scale, independent and ideologically motivated—and, in Weber's words, 'employed the time-honored organic techniques of cover-cropping and composting'.

So when Waters modified the noun *mesclun* with the word ‘organic’ on the menu in what came to be an upscale restaurant, she started an association that she was only part conscious of. Not only did Waters inspire a rash of imitation, and quite instrumentally contribute to the diffusion of organic consumption, she also, and in this way, unintentionally, institutionalized a certain set of meanings for organic.

Within a decade after opening, Chez Panisse had become a world-renowned culinary institution. Waters continued to buy local seasonal produce and highlight its organic origins. Many Bay Area chefs trained with Waters and went on to open their own restaurants and become ‘celebrity chefs’ in their own right. Many also made it a practice to form personal relationships with local farmers to ensure availability of the highest quality ingredients. Following Waters’ lead, they wanted organic ingredients, although, crucially, only salad mix was regularly featured as organic. To draw emphasis to the farm–restaurant connection, some featured the name of the farm on the menu, Star Route Farms having received the most notoriety this way.

By the late 1980s, organic salad mix was on the menu of many upscale restaurants and certainly at those at the cutting edge. Greenleaf, a local Bay Area distributor, and Terra Sonoma, a consortium of small growers with personal connections to the restaurant business, made entire businesses out of selling speciality and organic produce directly to restaurants. Because restaurateurs were extraordinarily picky about what they would buy, they enforced a high appearance standard on growers so not to compromise their own reputations. The need for ‘quality’ became a major push for technical solutions to organic farming (and processing), at the same time it required an extraordinary amount of care. Growers were pushed to be delicate in their handling of or-

ganic produce and to discard (or separate) produce that did not conform to restaurant standards. In turn, organic shed the image of the twisted stunted carrot showing up at the local food-co-op to the splendid display of *mesclun* on a chef’s dish.

The specificity of the farm–restaurant connection reinforced another attribute of organic salad mix: that it was necessarily expensive. Restaurants were willing to pay top dollar for the finest, freshest and eye-pleasing mix. Several growers interviewed harkened back to the rumours than had once circulated about restaurants paying \$35 per pound for *mesclun*. One grower spoke of short-lived Kona Kai farms, situated on a small urban lot in Berkeley, whose owner had once boasted to have made the equivalent of \$100,000 per acre in one year selling salad mix and herbs to nearby restaurants. Complaining that the data were ‘heavily extrapolated’ and based on ‘counter-cultural economics’, this grower confirmed that it had been widely circulated. So whether these prices were real or illusory, such talk contributed to the notion that organic salad mix was a precious commodity. Upscale supermarkets picked up on this discourse, selling their salad mix as ‘custom-made’ and pricing it upwards of \$12 per pound (as observed by the author).

Although organic produce more generally had long been sold in health food stores, co-operatives and selected greengrocers, the *taste* for organic salad mix was mostly diffused through restaurants, as are many exotic tastes (Warde and Martens 2000). But *sales* of organic salad mix exploded when producers started to infiltrate more mainstream retail establishments. The domestication of salad mix began when two graduates of the University of California at Santa Cruz, Myra and Drew Goodman, who had been selling their own organic berries and lettuce to area restaurants like Chez Panisse, came up with the idea of bagging their

lettuce mixes. Adopting the name of Earthbound Farms, from 1986 to 1989 they were the only company selling washed, spun dried and re-sealable bagged salad mixes to supermarkets. Thereafter, others became involved in retail sales, some imitating the one-meal bags designed by Earthbound and others selling custom mixes in bulk to upscale supermarkets. The Aldicarb and Alar pesticide scares of 1986 and 1988, respectively, created a surge of growth in the California organic sector at large, with certified organic acres quadrupling in two years (Schilling 1995). Ultimately this cause of growth was outlasted by the expansionary activity around salad mix (Klonsky and Tourte 1995), suggesting that food safety was not the only impetus towards organic consumption, at least in this particular period. A leader in one major organic industry organization was later to quip, ‘Salad mix has done more to reduce pesticide use in California than all the organizing around pesticide reform’.⁶

Meanwhile, the equation of organic with high value brought a rash of new growers into the sector. In the aftermath of the 1980s’ farm crisis, many growers were looking for higher value cropping or marketing strategies, which occasionally led them to organic production. In California, commercial development pressure on farmland made organic farming especially attractive, a way to reap more crop value per acre in escalating land markets. Many growers simultaneously moved from commodity crops (such as cotton or sugar beets) into fresh vegetables. In the long run, these new entrants did a huge disservice to extant growers, who were eventually faced with unprecedented price competition (see Guthman forthcoming).

The gradual distancing of salad mix from its earlier movement roots was to have profound implications for the way it was produced. Todd Koons, a former chef at *Chez Panisse* who started his own brand of mixed greens

(TKO), introduced a system of contracting with other growers for the different components of salad mix. Eventually, other salad mix marketers followed suit. Consequently, another set of growers were brought into organic production, this time because they were asked to, as marketers preferred the ‘professionalism’ and ‘reliability’ of conventional growers. Koons, along with other key growers, also improved post-harvest processes (washing, spin drying and bagging), a key value-adding strategy but one that raised the cost of capitalization and, hence, barriers to entry.

Meanwhile, salad mix production began to stray from agro-ecological principles. Component contracting effectively encouraged monocultural production, at the same time it did not preclude suppliers from growing conventional crops on their other fields. Because baby salad greens are picked young, they had never wanted for pesticides. Fertility needs, however, were increasingly met with forms of soluble nitrogen such as Chilean nitrate, an allowed but contentious substance within the organic farming community, known to destroy soil micro-organisms and contribute to ground water pollution (Conway and Pretty 1991). Because baby greens could be grown quickly, growers could manage several crops per year, contributing to the logic of intensification that has characterized California’s salad-growing regions. Component production could also move around the state (as well as into Mexico and Arizona), taking advantage of seasonal climatic variation, and allowing salad mix to be produced year-round. At the same time, vacuum packing increased storage life and allowed salad mix to be shipped all over the country and into Canada.

And what were working conditions like? Growers in the organic industry continued to rely on the ‘time-honoured’ exploitation of racialized and marginalized immigrant workers

as documented in accounts of the California lettuce industry (Friedland, Barton and Thomas 1981; Thomas 1985). Many were hired through labour contractors, a system that keeps wages low through structural over-supply and attempts to remove grower responsibility for ensuring that workers are documented (Martin 1989). To ensure 'care' in weeding, some growers encouraged use of the short-handled hoe, a practice that would have been banned in California were it not for the last minute lobbying of the organic and ornamental flower industries (CCOF 1995). As for the harvest, with hardier components (e.g. radicchio), labour could be partially mechanized, meaning that a conveyor belt was placed in the field, ensuring that each head was cut and packed at a brisk clip; more delicate components were often hand cut with stoop labour.

TKO itself was to go bankrupt in 1996, attributed to rapid expansion and mismanagement, but the future of salad mix was altered for good. Over the course of five years, organic salad mix had gone from a speciality commodity selling for over \$12 per pound at retail, to just a commodity at \$4 per pound. Extremely low prices squeezed many of the high-end 'niche' growers out of the market, many of whom diversified with other, newly exoticized crops. A later crackdown on food safety, after sixty-one illnesses were linked to bags of salad mix found to be tainted with *E. coli* H157:H7 (*Food Chemical News* 1998), forced others to get big (for returns to scale on more frequent inspections and more elaborate washing equipment) or get out. As a consequence, salad mix became the province of some of the largest grower-shippers in the state of California. Salinas-based Missionero and Earthbound took up the slack of TKO, buying up its land and taking on the growers it had cultivated, and developed a significant clientele of 'white table cloth chains' as well as bagged

mix. Major multinationals such as Dole entered the retail salad mix market in force. Meanwhile, Earthbound Farms continued to grow at a rate of at least 50 per cent a year until 1995, when a series of mergers began. Having more capital than organic market potential, Earthbound and its new partners joined forces to create Natural Selection Foods. Thereafter, they became involved in a series of partnerships with major conventional vegetable growers, including Growers' Vegetable Express, and Tanimura and Antle. They continued to grow geographically, with at least 1,600 acres in production in Baja California where they grow off-season lettuce and tomatoes; they continued to grow in market share by buying out or contracting with some of their erstwhile competitors. By 2001, they had 7,000 acres in organic production; 2,000 more in transition; and were in contract with dozens of other large acre growers. Natural Selection had become the biggest supplier of speciality lettuces and the largest grower of organic produce in North America (www.ebfarm.com).

In short, salad mix was the medium of some dramatic shifts in the politics of organic production. With rampant growth in demand, the production of organic salad mix became increasingly industrialized, with scaled-up growers out-competing some of the earlier movement growers. Many of the practices they incorporated, while in keeping with organic regulations, were not in keeping with organic idioms. The association of organic salad mix with 'yuppieness' imparted even more political ambiguity to organic salad mix, here in the sphere of consumption.

Eating salad mix

In the early days of the organic movement, the shared meanings of organic food suppliers and

eaters made for a reasonably coherent movement politics. Salad mix was arguably one of the factors that de-stabilized that coherence, as certain consumers began to see it as a speciality item, rather than a systemic alternative to industrialized food. Yet, it is not simply its earlier cost structure that made salad mix seemingly inaccessible to all but the privileged, a so-called niche product (cf. Allen and Sachs 1993; DeLind 1993). Eating organic salad mix was in some sense performative of an elite sensibility, albeit a rather unusual one. Organic salad mix was strongly coupled with—indeed helped to animate—the figure of the ‘yuppie’, the San Francisco Bay version of which was not wholly devoid of social conscience, having grown up in the tumultuous late 1960s and early 1970s, but not shorn of gentrified aspirations either. Thanks to the Alice Waters diaspora, and the introduction of ingredient-based menus, this new group of eaters obtained a keener interest in the constituent ingredients of food and how they were put together, in lieu of the haute cuisine pretension of named dishes (Kuh 2001). In that way among others, they helped usher in broader entitlement to luxurious eating. At the same time, they developed their own conceits about taste, and brought with them heightened concern with body image that in important respects mapped on to the idea of reflexive eating.

Historians of food have shown how the making of taste has been inextricably tied to the conditions and social processes that gave rise to inequitable distributions of food and variations in diet, so that varying levels and practices of food consumption have been shaped by social ranking and identity (Burnett 1966; Mennell 1986; Toussaint-Samat 1994). In that way, taste has come to play a role in defining social ranking and identity (Bourdieu 1984). In particular, taste as an aesthetic has become a sign of privilege, albeit the nature of

this aesthetic has changed over time (cf. Korsmeyer 1999). So, for instance, eighteenth-century *nouvelle cuisine* helped usher the aesthetic shift to the visual, in particular ‘the singularization of presentation’ (Ferguson 1998: 606) that characterizes the so-called simplicity of extremely labour-intensive kitchen art (Mennell 1986).

Until the 1960s, dining out in the USA (except for the famed lunch counter or coffee shop) was largely the purview of the privileged, or the middle class enjoying a special occasion (Kuh 2001). Food habits gradually began to change in the late 1960s, with the expansion of chain restaurants, ethnic restaurants (operated by new migrants) and middle-class travel to Europe, creating new interest in fine food (Levenstein 1993). In its frequency, restaurant eating became much more democratized (Mennell 1986). Consequently, as Warde and Martens (2000) show for the UK, *where* to go and *what* to eat became the key indicators of class. And while dining out was never a conscious strategy for social display, the middle class were much more experimental and prone to evaluate the meals they enjoy in aesthetic terms. Brought to California from France by Alice Waters, new *nouvelle cuisine* or ‘California cuisine’ helped launch this trend in food experimentation, which evolved into a culinary eclecticism involving ‘dizzying dives into novel combinations of exotic ingredients’ (Levenstein 1993: 24). Northern California’s young *nouveau riche* were the primary consumers of this new cuisine, indeed were in some sense defined by it, as reflected in much of the local humour of the time.⁷

Historians of food have also noted that as taste has become a performance of class, gender and nationality, the body has become a potent symbol of such difference, a way in which one’s taste is displayed (Bourdieu 1984: 190). For example, gastronomes—public

arbiters of good taste—began to express concern about body weight as an affliction of gourmets in the early nineteenth century, contributing to the trend within *haute cuisine* towards simpler, lighter food and fewer courses (Mennell 1986: 37). Indeed, gastronomie was morally positioned as a model of discipline, control and moderation, counterpoised to the ‘unreflective’ and excessive eating of the gourmand (Ferguson 1998: 608–609, emphasis mine). During the Victorian era, the bourgeoisie emulated the aristocratic ideal of a graceful and slender body, disdainful of the need to display wealth and power ostentatiously. Women, in particular, were admonished to eat with delicacy, to take in as little as possible, and to display no desire, clearly reflecting extant mores about sexuality and establishing an early link between anorectic self-denial and privilege (Bordo 1993: 191). This is but one example by which good taste (and reflexivity) became wrapped up in self-surveillance.

Beginning in the 1960s, the links between body norms and taste found a new articulation, when breakthroughs in nutritional science combined with social changes to spur new concern over food intake, particularly in the USA. It is not only that fresh vegetables came to be routinely available on a mass-market basis, as did chicken, tofu and other so-called healthy foods (some of which were incorporated into fast food menus in not so healthy ways). New understandings of heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and so forth, coupled with a round of journalistic muck-raking, raised questions regarding the quality of the processed foods that dominated the early post-war era (Levenstein 1988). What Belasco (1989) called the counter-cuisine, which emerged out the counter-culture, emphasized the health-giving properties of relatively unprocessed food. With nutritional ideas increasingly emphasizing what should *not* be eaten, exhortations regarding

excess weight shifted from the language of aesthetics to that of health (Levenstein 1993). As Levenstein argues, these new ideas about diet fit in well with the moral asceticism of the times, given newly found awareness of international poverty (e.g. Biafra, the ‘other’ America) and the climate of scarcity that pervaded during the early 1970s’ energy crisis. Beginning in the late 1970s, body fat came to be relentlessly villainized in the popular media, to the point that ‘food replaced sex as a source of guilt’ (Levenstein 1993: 212).

Yet, it was more than health concerns (if notions of health can even be disassociated from other cultural constructs) that triggered a shift to near-impossible body ideals in the 1980s. Not only were the success-driven young urbanites helping to shape food tastes, they were also helping to define body ideals in ways that tended toward unprecedented self-surveillance. Indeed, it is arguable that ideologies of success were directly implicated in the new body ideal of muscular thinness. For example, some of the psychological roots of anorexia nervosa—an extreme form of self-surveillance—are over-achievement, the notion that autonomy, will, and discipline can lead to success, even the idea that toleration of pain is a sign of strength (Bordo 1993: 178; also Counihan 1999). In a striking piece, Price draws further parallels between new body norms and the political economy of the 1980s, juxtaposing the discourse of the tight, thin, sleek body to be made through diet and exercise with that of structural adjustment, e.g. ‘tightening their belts’, ‘cutting the fat’, ‘shaping up’ ‘bloated’ economies (2000: 92). This discourse was beginning to circulate at the same time that, according to Schlosser (2001), fast, cheap, convenience food was becoming the cornerstone of most working-class American diets and rates of obesity were beginning to soar, particularly among poorer people.

So it was also in this context that *nouvelle cuisine* offered such a ‘spectacular challenge’ to traditional restaurant cooking, with its emphasis on fresh ingredients, minimum preparation and an awareness of health considerations (Beardsworth and Keil 1997). When the exhortations of the new cuisine spilled over into North America, it is not coincidental that it was embraced by a new class of over-achievers. For a new generation of well-heeled American eaters, *nouvelle cuisine* was the perfect vehicle to mediate the deeply felt contradictions of food intake and simultaneously enjoy their new class position. It was expensive by nature of its use of the finest ingredients and labour intensiveness, a perfect combination for those whose moral sensibilities increasingly privileged environmental concerns over social ones. Simplicity of ingredients fit well with the asceticism yuppies grew up with, quite different from the stodgy *haute cuisine* of the old riche, at the same time that inventiveness satisfied the craving for difference. And as food came to be presented as art—a sensual *visual* experience—it made it possible for the body-obsessed to enjoy the dining out experience without admitting to the literally visceral sensual experience. In some sense, it made it possible to not be too rich or too thin, the phrase made famous by a New York socialite during the yuppie emergence (Levenstein 1993).

Considered this way, salad mix undoubtedly provided some interesting comfort. As *nouvelle cuisine in extremis* in its simplicity, perhaps it moderated the ambivalence of the new class position. Short of the ability to taste without swallowing (suggesting wine spit jars and aromatherapy lotions as the ultimate pleasures), salad, with its paucity of calories, was a good option for mediating body anxiety. The clincher, though, was organic food’s idiomatic associations with health and environmental soundness, perhaps even opposition to fast

food. As local food critic and restaurateur, Patricia Unterman (2000) was later to say, ‘when you choose to buy and eat organic and sustainably raised produce, a little of this karma rubs off on you, which makes everything taste better. A lot of this local, organic stuff does taste better’. Eating organic salad mix connoted a political action in its own right, legitimizing a practice that few could afford. But the subtle conflation of aesthetic reflexivity (that of the gastronome) with political reflexivity added an extra ingredient of desire. It is surely telling that organic farmers themselves began to refer to salad mix as ‘yuppie chow’.

One of the ironies of this connotation is that it necessarily limited market size to those who identified themselves in these terms. Consciously attempting to appeal to mass market tastes in order to expand the market, the major producers in the USA, including Natural Selection, started marketing non-organic salad mix under several other brand names, especially because prices no longer warranted the rigamarole of organic certification. Occasionally packaged with a packet of salad dressing, bagged salad mix was increasingly marketed as a convenience food. Pavich Family Farms, another major organic producer introduced organic iceberg lettuce, another way of decoupling the notion of organic from yuppie. Curiously, only upscale restaurants continued to consistently modify the menu item of salad greens with the adjective ‘organic’, suggesting some persistence in the relationships between reflexivity, distinction and eating out.

Although only one organic commodity among many, salad mix nevertheless has borne some important changes in the politics of organic consumption. Diffused through restaurateurs, it was an elite commodity from the onset, playing into yuppie sensibilities, including the desire to control one’s body shape.

Then produced in relatively more ecologically sensitive ways, it is now produced largely by mass production methods, albeit reaching a broader group of consumers, many who simply want food grown without pesticides. Yet, when no longer labelled as organic, it loses all oppositional meaning. In short, the meaning and character of salad mix has become quite fractured, suggesting no easy oppositions to fast, mass-produced food.

Organic oppositions?

Organic salad mix has come a long way from the aesthetic of the slow food gastronome, even further from the holey lettuce found at the local health food co-op. So it is striking that fast food and organic/slow food continue to be posed as binary, even organic assemblages, if you will, of taste, body type, social consciousness, class, mode of production, and so forth. Sometimes termed tendency and counter-tendency, sometimes hegemony and resistance, one of the problems with these oppositions is they impart a good deal of subjectivity on to the organic or slow food eater while the fast food eater is treated as mindless dupe. To be sure, Schlosser (also Ritzer 1993) makes the point that fast food is not an acquired taste; heavy doses of salt, fat, sugar—the stuff that rides easily on the tongue, along with the factory-made olfactory stimuli—gives it instant appeal, unreflexive appeal. In contrast, the discerning, organic food eater is imputed with much more individual agency, including the putative freedom to refuse food altogether. But who has the freedom to carve out what Ritzer calls these non-rationalized niches? At the very least, a binary framing should highlight the way in which privileged eating is intrinsically tied to impoverished eating; that what allows an aesthetic of food is disparity. The fact that

many of those who eat organic food came into their wealth from the some of the very processes that enabled the fast food industry's growth surely tightens the relationship between yuppie eaters and their fast food counterparts.

The uncomfortable parallel between the growth of organic food, particularly salad mix, and the contraction of particularly female body ideals provides more food for thought. Reminiscent of the opposition of gastronomy and gluttony, fast food has come to represent indulgent satiety, organic food a guiltless aesthetic. Yet, the suggestion that yuppie eaters have more control does not square with the psychopathology of anorexia nervosa that in some cases arises when sufferers cannot control their desire to control (Fraad, Resnick and Wolff 1994). More broadly, the conflation of good taste and a slim body obtains a moral valence not in keeping with growing recognition that such body ideals often insist on neurotic self-surveillance, bulimia and/or occasional plastic surgery for those who can afford it (Price 2000). Not only is body anxiety a questionable indicator of reflexivity, there is a good deal of slippage in eating patterns. Surely there are those who will eat a Jack N the Box® hamburger one day and a salad of *mesclun* the next. Fast food is often pitched to healthy eaters (e.g. Subway®'s advertising campaign suggesting you can lose weight and cut fat by eating fast food) and slow food is often made tasty by slavish uses of salt and butter. And while anorexia is more a stigma of the privileged, there is no easy mapping of body types on to taste or lifestyle, as Schlosser so flippantly posits.

Most importantly, to posit one assemblage as unwaveringly good and the other as altogether bad de-politicizes a potentially powerful politics of consumption. Little is it considered that organic production depends on the same systems of marginalized labour as does fast

food. Or that organic salad mix led the way in convenience packaging, and is often grown out of place and out of season. Or that fast food serves women who work outside the home who are then blamed for depending on it to manage family and work. Or that slow food presumes a tremendous amount of unpaid feminized labour. Restaurants serve up their own contradictions. How else to explain the *haute* restaurant that serves organic *mesclun* and *foie gras*? The well-paid artisan cook working in tandem with the illegal immigrant bus boy? If the political importance of organic food/slow food is attention to the labour processes and ecologies by which food is produced, it is imperative to make sure that these valorized alternatives reflect alternative values.

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Notes

- 1 In an opposite logic to Fordism, the low-wage service economy, emboldened by fast food, made workers dependent on unfathomably cheap food and all of its consequences, including the food scares that could bring the entire edifice down.
- 2 Need I remind the reader that California was also the birthplace of the fast food industry?
- 3 Today California holds more organic farms than any other state in the USA (extrapolated from Klonsky and Tourte 1998), is second to Idaho in the amount of certified organic cropland, and grows 47 per cent of the certified organic vegetables and 66 per cent of certified fruit in the USA (Economic Research Service 2000).
- 4 Data in this section are drawn from a preliminary study done in 1995 (see Buck, Getz and Guthman 1997) and the author's dissertation research, which took place in 1997 and 1998 (Guthman 2000). The latter study included over 150 semi-structured interviews with both all-organic and mixed (i.e. both conventional and organic) growers in several regions of California. Approximately 20 per cent of these growers had at one time been involved in the production of organic salad mix. The research was supported by grants from the National Science Foundation (SBR-9711262) and the Association of American Geographers.
- 5 The author recognizes that in most places yuppie has come to refer to those who are wealthy, self-absorbed and *without* social conscience.
- 6 In actuality, pesticide use in California increased dramatically in the 1990s (Liebman 1997).
- 7 For example, Alice Kahn used to feature two yuppie characters named Dirk and Bree in her weekly column for Berkeley's *East Bay Express*. As Bree's name suggests, they were often the butt of food jokes. The San Francisco Mime Troupe's (misnamed given its tradition of oral political satire) show of 1988, *Ripped Van Winkle*, presents another example. Waking up from a deep sleep begun in the 1960s, the main character experiences a series of surprises in the new yuppie world of San Francisco. One of these was a menu being read by an upscale restaurant waiter with elaborate descriptions of the daily offerings.

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Abstract translations

Bouffe-éclair/bouffe biologique: goûts réflexifs et la production de 'bouffe yuppie'

La consommation de produits biologiques n'est qu'un des nombreux courants dans le domaine alimentaire perçus comme une forme d'opposition à la production industrielle d'aliments. Alors que la restauration rapide est caractérisée par des habitudes compulsives résultant en des corps gras, les pratiques de consommation alternatives sont vues comme étant motivées par une attitude de réflexion consciente de la part des consommateurs qui étudient leurs habitudes alimentaires et les adaptent à la lumière des conséquences anticipées. Cet article comporte deux buts principaux. Le premier est de retracer l'évolution de la nourriture biologique à partir de ce que Belasco nomme 'contre-cuisine' jusqu'à ce que les producteurs biologiques qualifient quant à eux de 'bouffe yuppie'. L'intention est de

démontrer comment des mélanges de laitues biologiques ont entraîné des changements majeurs dans le système d'approvisionnement de produits biologiques, et d'interroger la notion que les produits biologiques sont nécessairement un antidote à la nourriture manufacturée. Le second but de cet article est de réfléchir sur la dichotomie qui existe entre les notions de vite et lent, réflexion et compulsion, gras et mince—et, par conséquent, de 'bons' et 'mauvais' mangeurs—afin de démontrer les glissements et instabilités qui existent entre ces catégories, de même que les concepts problématiques de classe et de sexe qu'ils véhiculent. Afin de démontrer ces points, j'analyse les changements survenus dans les mesures d'approvisionnement d'une commodité biologique—le 'mesclun' ou salade mélangée—en Californie.

Mots-clés: nourriture biologique, agriculture biologique, consommation, réflexivité, agriculture-Californie, troubles de l'alimentation.

Comida rápida/comida orgánica: gustos reflexivos y la creación de la 'comida yuppy'

El consumo de la comida orgánica es una de las varias nuevas tendencias en el consumo de alimentos que se puede interpretar como oposición activa al aprovisionamiento industrializado de alimentos. Mientras que la comida rápida se caracteriza por glotonería compulsiva, evidente en los cuerpos gordos, prácticas de consumo alternativas parecen ser motivadas por reflexión deliberada en el sentido de que los consumidores hacen monitoreo, piensan en, y luego adaptan su conducta personal en luz de las percibidas consecuencias. Este papel tiene dos objetivos. El uno es examinar la evolución de comida orgánica de lo que Belasco llamaba la 'contra cocina' a lo que los productores de comida orgánica llaman comida yuppy'. Así se demuestra como la ensalada orgánica (en bolso) llevó a cambios importantes en el sistema orgánico de aprovisionamiento y, por consiguiente, se empezó a cuestionar la noción de que la comida orgánica es un antidoto a la comida industrializada. El otro objetivo es problematizar las dicotomías entre rápida y lenta, reflexiva y compulsiva, gordo y delgado y, por consiguiente, buenos y malos consumidores, para demostrar que estas categorías son inestables y que engendran una política problemática de clase y género. Con este fin exhibo la cambiante provisión de un producto orgánico en particular (salad mix, o mesclun) en California.

Palabras claves: comida orgánica, agricultura orgánica, consumo, reflexión, agricultura-California, problemas alimenticios.