

The relationships
we build with
friends and
neighbors,
partaking together
in the feast of the
senses,

helping to inspire collective curiosity and
communion with our environments, are at the
heart of the food movements the Yogurt Pedaler
sought to reflect.

By communing with our “environments,” I don’t
mean the trees and rivers and smog-filled air,
although that’s a part of it. I mean the human and
built environments. Who are our neighbors? How
can they support us, challenge us, make us laugh?
What are these streets and buildings that we live
in? What stories have they seen, what events will
they stage, what actions do they encourage, and
what character do they lend to our communities?

In Dayton, the farming family fighting to start the
only farmers’ market in town develops friendships
with regular customers who come back every
Saturday because the food they buy is cheap and
they know the people who grew it; the fact that
it is organic and supports an intimate economic
exchange they trust and want to support are
added benefits. Like the 61st Street Farmers’
Market in Chicago, a lot of their customers
become regulars by purchasing produce with
food stamps, meaning the community built
around that local food is truly a community of the
hardworking people that built the neighborhood.



The Yogurt Pedaler connects yogurt making to local dairy
farms and their communities, getting people together on the
street and in kitchens. In the summer of 2010, I pedaled from
Chicago, IL, to Knox County, OH, visiting dairy farms along
the way, making yogurt with milk from those farms, and
teaching people about yogurt making and dairy farming at
farmers’ markets and schools in the rural and urban Midwest.





As an urban resident, I know local farmers, like the Kilgus family, through their appearances at my neighborhood farmers' markets. In Fairbury, Illinois, on the other hand, I joined the Kilgus family at the county fair a mile from their farm, my first dairy stop as the Yogurt Pedaler. Tractor pulls and carnival games were set up next to local church kitchens serving communal dinners and 4H pig contests, and the Kilgus kids ran around begging their parents to go on the rides and eat cotton candy. At fairs like this one, food draws people to enjoy the demolition derbies, 4H goat contests, and carnival rides. The nearby fields may grow endless rows of corn and soybeans, but the funnel cakes, hot dogs, and cotton candy consumed by the hordes have their roots far from the hard work of the fair's visitors.

Given my identity as the Yogurt Pedaler, it may seem odd that processed foods like funnel cakes and cotton candy are centerpieces to events I find so enjoyable and important to strengthening



communities. Truthfully, the Yogurt Pedaler is an inherently conflicted project, since it calls upon a variety of contemporary food movements (sometimes at odds with each other) advocating local, organic, and food traditions. However, the choices we make about the food we consume are so integrated within agricultural and economic systems—at a local and national level—that raising awareness about the complexities of these systems is an essential first step to fix what many agree are broken systems. And without understanding and respecting the real concerns of the people who produce our food, the movement is in danger of remaining disconnected from its agricultural roots and irrelevant to its most invested players. These people are the heart and soul of Midwestern county fairs, with their stands of taffy apples, fried Oreos, and processed hot dogs; the fact that they go home to milk their cows, till fields of corn, or harvest soybeans is no contradiction.

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The proximity of these Midwestern farming families to their communities creates a strong web of trust, so even passing strangers are invited to buy freshly picked vegetables on the honor system. Customers drop money into cashboxes on tables on the shoulders of county highways, and return to their cars with ripe tomatoes, ears of corn, and cartons of eggs. These small family farms don't advertise online; they depend on word-of-mouth and a dedicated clientele they know from face-to-face interactions at local farmers markets, the corner store, or the county fair.

For many farmers, like Scarlett Payne and Mark Apple, pasteurizing milk is prohibitively expensive, so they run their farms as goatshare and cowshare programs, in which people sign a private contract, essentially paying Scarlett or Mark to take care of their animals so they can consume the milk they produce. This means their customers are members of an exceptionally transparent, accountable relationship, one that develops an unusual level of trust among members.



When I visited Apple Family Farms on my way out of Indianapolis, Mark introduced me to one of his customers, Mike. Mike was a local guy learning about his food from Mark's milk, and he had just started making his own sour cream. Mark saw a potential mutual interest between us, and so introduced the Yogurt Pedaler to one his trusted customers and friends; Mike and I bonded over fermented dairy products. Mike started out as just a customer, but his investment in his food deepened through his relationship with Mark and his cows, building a relationship beyond just an exchange of food and money. When I entered that network briefly, they showed me a glimpse of how trust and human contact inspire meaningful exchanges that we can all value.

These relationships can be hinted at in fleeting exchanges like mine with Mark and Mike, but it takes time to develop real trust and community resilience. This meant I ran into plenty of

problems being an outsider. New arrivals to a community are never immediately embraced into the neighborhood networks; many Americans have trouble embracing food carts without extensive regulations. Transient street vendors may be hard to trust, peddling food from unknown sources, it takes time to build social and economic networks. There was no way I was going to expose and encourage local agricultural resources and communities when I wasn't a part of them myself.

In my home state of North Carolina, I know which roads off the state highways are most likely to hide the best peach stands or huts selling boiled peanuts. There is an intersection just over the bridge to the island where my family always went to the beach where a pickup truck sits in the shade in the mornings, a weathered fisherman selling shrimp, his head shaded by the tattered brim of an old baseball cap, until his blue plastic coolers are empty. And throughout

LEFT TOP: **Roadside produce pick-up, on the honor system**

LEFT MIDDLE: **Traders Point Creamery, Zionsville, Indiana**

LEFT BELOW: **Mark Apple, of Apple Family Farms**

BELOW: **Yogurt-making workshop at Kenyon College**





the state, every restaurant is closed on Sundays except the BBQ restaurants, reliably packed to overflowing after church gets let out with families and congregations in their Sunday best enjoying hushpuppies, sweet iced tea, and pulled pork platters slathered in their respective “famous” regional sauces.

As the Yogurt Pedaler, however, I rode through unfamiliar territory too fast to become part of these webs of trust and become familiar with local food communities, most of which have taken years, even generations, to grow.

The road to Ohio was 750 miles long, and while I passed through fields of food nearly the whole way, there’s not much that’s romantic, really, about the landscape. All of the cornfields are

enormous, and at the end of the rows there are signs emblazoned with some GMO (genetically modified organism) company logo and a mysterious series of numbers. No signs of people, just fields and fields of corn, some soybeans for good measure, and the shoulders of the road lined with pretty purple wildflowers and swarms of butterflies.

While I just caught fleeting glances of it, food produced by these farmers builds strong communities in the Midwest, just out of sight of passersby. In communities where trust is built over generations of family farmers, promoting “local” food as the Yogurt Pedaler may be much less effective than taking the time to build relationships over homemade sour cream or funnel cakes at the county fair.



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