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## Food for Thought

Opinions on Issues Impacting farming and the food supply.

### Alice in Wonderland

*-Julie Gunlock, National Review -4/20/2009*

In an interview shortly after the groundbreaking, Alice Waters — the organic-food world's most active and least humorous spokesperson — commented on the new White House vegetable garden: "The most important thing that Michelle Obama did was to say that food comes from the land. . . . People have not known that. They think it comes from the grocery store."

Oh, really — is that what people think? To whom, exactly, is Ms. Waters referring? Is she referring to the millions of people living in the grain-belt states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri — states one cannot drive across without spending hours staring at corn and soybean fields? The millions living along the Pacific Northwest coast and Alaska who are supported by the fishing industry? The fishermen of Gloucester, Mass.? Maybe she is talking about people living in Wisconsin — where dairy farms and cow pastures are as ubiquitous as art galleries in New York. Or perhaps she is referring to the thousands of people like me, who — in the suburbs of an East Coast metropolis — just throw a few Lowe's-purchased plants in the ground, and hope for some rain to support a small backyard garden. Yes, Ms. Waters, even these "people" know that the grocery store doesn't spontaneously produce food.

Her condescension is typical of a food culture that is increasingly withdrawn from mainstream America — a food culture that increasingly preaches to the average American consumer that eating non-organic food is bad for you. The truth is, organic food is an expensive luxury item, something bought by those who have the resources. Those who can afford it and want it should have it, but organic food is not a panacea for the world's ills.

It may be easier for Ms. Waters and her cadre to simply label Americans stupid and ill-informed than to tackle the real reason people are not eating more organic and locally grown food — i.e., most Americans simply are not able to afford it. Even 60 Minutes — known for asking tough questions and making interviewees sweat — basically punted on this issue. Highlighted on the program earlier this year, Waters introduced Lesley Stahl to a man that grows organic grapes and sells them for a staggering \$4 a pound (to give non-shoppers some perspective on this price, grocery-store grapes usually cost under \$2 a pound, and even most meat comes in under \$4 a pound).

While Stahl did seem surprised at the high price, Waters never directly addressed the cost issue; instead, she made an offhand remark that people would simply have to make the choice between expensive grapes and Nike tennis shoes. What she fails to appreciate is that some people can't buy those tennis shoes either. It is not about making choices between two expensive items, it is about something much more fundamental. Particularly in this economic downturn, when about one in eight adults is currently out

of a job and looking for work, many families are not just cutting back on luxuries, but are reassessing their food budgets and trying to save every penny they can. If Waters had been a little more frank, and simply affirmed that \$4 a pound for grapes is a steep price that most people can't afford, fair enough; instead, viewers were treated to a lecture on how we simply need to make better choices.

There are others, in her view, who are making better choices — namely, the Europeans. Waters gushes over the European slow-food movement even as she dismisses American food sensibilities. In one interview, she hastily summed up American food history: “Americans don't have deep gastronomic roots. They wanted to get away from the cultures of Europe or wherever they came from. We stirred up that melting pot pretty quickly. Then fast food came in and took over.”

It is a stunningly simplistic assessment of American food culture, making it sound as if the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock and were greeted with a combo meal from Wendy's (supersized, of course). In fact, America has an amazing and varied food culture — whole books, documentaries, and movies have centered on it. Has Waters visited New York, Little Havana in Miami, or border towns in Texas? And what about the millions of chef-owned restaurants serving up those treasured American comfort dishes that can make even the most elite food critic smile? Food traditions in this country have endured. My own family came to the United States from French Canada over 150 years ago, yet my mother continues to have tourtière (pork pie) and croton (pork spread — sort of a poor man's pâté) every Christmas Eve. Waters, who has lived in Berkeley, Calif., most of her adult life cooking things just dug out of California's rich, sun-drenched earth, is clearly out of touch with the broader American reality.

Consider, also, her campaign for a White House vegetable garden. Waters has been badgering U.S. presidents about this vegetable garden for years. In 2000, she wrote a letter to Pres. Bill Clinton about the importance of a White House garden, saying: “I can think of no more powerful way to ground your legacy than to leave behind you a kitchen garden and the compost pile to nourish it.” Really? A garden and a compost pile? Grounding President Clinton's legacy in compost? Did she think about how this sounds, alongside Clinton's other goals, such as Middle East peace, a secure and nuclear-free Korean peninsula, health-care reform, and Russia's peaceful transition to democracy?

In Alice Waters's wonderland, all is made better with the growing of vegetables. But regular Americans know better. Many enjoy buying organic, visiting their local markets, and gardening, but they also know that the purpose of food is nourishment. America's robust agricultural sector has made food cheaper and more plentiful not just for our nation's citizens, but for the entire world. Environmentalists may dismiss big, industrial farms, but it is these largely American innovations that are helping feed the world, and keeping costs down for coupon clippers like me.

—Julie Gunlock, a former congressional staffer, is now a stay-at-home mom