

THE GREAT MINNESOTA GET-FAT-TOGETHER!

Like many Minnesotans, I have developed a sort of love-hate relationship with the Minnesota State Fair. But, in spite of the parts that don't work for me, I find myself drawn back every year for more, more than a million others agree. Living in Minnesota for several decades I've seen the changes at the fair, many great, some, well, not so great. What intrigues me the most, and it's actually related to the "hate" part of my Fair affair, is what I perceive to be the sad state of the food there. The fair has all this delicious home-made food on display in the Home Ec building that we can't taste, and all this other food-like substance everywhere else that we shouldn't be eating. Perhaps it's because I work with local and natural food for a living, but really, I think there are lots of people beginning to notice the trend towards super-sized. And believe me I'm neither purist nor puritan. I think that we should all be able to have a ball at the fair, and not get all hung-up on "issues" or that everything everywhere has to be P.C. However, I know that I could have lots more fun at the fair if there was more "real" food there, actually more "local farmer" food there. Plus, eating this way helps the local farmers reclaim their one most-special event, and could actually plant the seed for people who want to eat wholesome delicious food throughout the rest of the year.

This trend we have all seen of "more-bad-food on a stick" set me off on a journey to learn how we slowly morphed from a local agricultural event to the current inundation with cheaply-made, sugary globs of body-destroying, anti-farmer corporate food. When I began to study the history of food at the fair, and, by the way, if you love the fair, check out *The Minnesota State Fair-An Illustrated History* by the mother-daughter team of Kathryn and Linda Koutsky, I discovered that the original and main purpose of the state fair was to demonstrate both the fertility of the soil in our territory (the fair started before we were a state) as well as the bounty of delicious food possible here. All this to lure more farmers and merchants to the Northland, which was obviously perceived as cold and sterile. Monstrous piles of easy-to-understand, easy-to-eat foods has been a state fair tradition from the beginning, Machinery Hill was just the means to the end.

After four years of territorial fairs, the first Minnesota State Fair was held in 1859 near what became downtown Minneapolis, the year after

Minnesota was granted statehood. During the fair's early years, the site of the exposition changed annually with stops in Minneapolis, St. Paul, Rochester, Red Wing, Winona and Owatonna. The Minnesota State Fair finally found a permanent home at its present location when Ramsey County donated their 210-acre poor farm to the State Agricultural Society, the governing body of the State Fair. The conversion of a poor farm was somewhat ironic but these urban farm food facilities were being dropped all over the young nation.

The character of early fairs was dominated by agricultural exhibits and competitions, reflecting its original purpose of encouraging farming in the state. While the agricultural focus is still hanging on by a thread, the scope of activities has broadened to include large-scale entertainment features and more and more city-related activities and events, lawnmowers instead of tractors, skate-boarding exhibits, more automotive accessories and an endless supply of accoutrement for suburban and commuter living.

Historically, voluminous food options were always an important part of fair-going, giving both farmers and city folks alike a rare opportunity to splurge on the wild array of delicious and rich foods. It was all part of the bounty, and bounty has actually been pretty rare for the common man, that is, until recent times. Nowadays we expect dessert with every meal, and soda drinks, sweets and fried foods are on every corner and they fill every festival. In fact, now it doesn't matter which fair or festival you attend, the food is pretty much all the same, fried, sugared, gigantic, and constructed almost entirely from cheap commodity ingredients from far-away factory-farms. I estimate that at least 95% of the state fair food is laden with genetically-modified crops such as corn, soy, cottonseed oil, canola oil and sugar beets. Approximately 99% of the meat comes from confinement factory farms. The average food item in Minnesota has traveled 1500 miles to get here. Since most factory commodity food is relatively flavorless, manufacturers must add MSG, artificial flavor, artificial color and other chemicals to create addictive flavors and smells.

What I would love to see is more local food, more food made by hand, food made with intelligence, creativity and, yes, even love. Food from Minnesota grass-fed meats, pastured eggs, rich local organic cream, butter and milk, and fresh organic fruits and vegetables. Likewise, not all foods need to be fried in toxic hydrogenated oils. Nothing quite illustrates so clearly the

decline in American food quality like seeing photographs of the fair attendees from the 1800's up until about the 1980's. Kids were skinny back then and it's quite rare to see a heavy person in the photographs. Now it's a shockingly double-wide crowd, adults and children alike! Seeing an obese child waddling along with a dessert in each hand is a scary sight, and yet it's visible everywhere at today's fair. The state fair is obviously not solely responsible for the current obesity epidemic but this special event could stand as a unique and powerful educational and experiential venue for change, perhaps more appropriate here than anywhere else in the state.

Changing the paradigm would be easy and graceful and no one would need to get overly worked up about it. Food vendors who choose to go green and wholesome would need to do nothing more than to display signage indicating which local, sustainable, organic, free-range, and humane ingredients they utilize. Customers then get to choose! The committee who annually bequeaths permits to the next new fried, sugared, junk-food booths have enormous control over the foods we are offered. What if we got some "new blood" there? Just think what a Rick Nelson foodie on that committee could do for our beloved fair!

Surveys show that almost everyone will choose these good options if the cost, taste and appearance is even remotely similar, and actually wholesome foods taste even better! Scare stories that organic foods are too expensive are mostly myths propagated by the massive food giants. Wholesome, nutrient-dense foods also satisfy without giving you the sugar blues or the MSG brain fog in the afternoon. And less is more! One 100% grass-fed hamburger with organic side dishes satisfies like 2-3 fake burgers.

Change could start small, say with the Farmer's Union, the Eco-Smart building, the Horticulture Building, or we could even designate one whole area of the Food Building to local and natural food. Until that time, we can all vote with our dollars, selecting the current options for local wholesome food plus we can eschew the worst of the worst. Try the apples at the Horticulture building, ask for grilled walleye, get the honey ice cream sundae with sunflower seeds, enjoy craft local beers and wines, corn on the cob with butter, the natural brats served at the outdoor vender near the

horse barn, sample the organic options at French Meadows bakery in the food building, organic coffee and desserts at the Farmer's Union building, and many others. It could be a fun detective game for you or your children to see how much "good" food can be found! We could be the first state in the nation to revert our sacred annual event back to a REAL FARMER event. Let's choose to "get it together" at the great get-together!

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