

FOOD REVOLUTION



The Feminist Food Revolution

BY JENNIFER COGNARD-BLACK

From farms to community gardens to restaurants, **women are taking food back into their own hands.** So why do men keep getting all the credit?

Michelle Obama, planting veggies with children at the White House



IS THE FIRST LADY A FEMINIST FOOD REVOLUTIONARY? IF THE past year is any indication, the answer is yes.

Last spring, she dug a kitchen garden in the South Lawn of the White House. Then she spent six months drafting strategy on food reform, including funding to make healthy foods available to and affordable for poor communities and to add local, seasonal produce to school lunch programs. Finally, this February she unveiled the “Let’s Move!” initiative to fight childhood obesity through fresh food choices and daily exercise.

Throughout her campaign, Obama’s revolutionary message has been simple: Eat local, seasonal food; plant food sustainably; and enjoy food more slowly—taking time to cook it and sharing meals with family and friends around a common table.

These have been the mantras of women’s grassroots and public-policy groups on American food for four decades. As our nation’s food economy has become increasingly bankrupt—producing cheap, nutritionally deficient foods through industrial methods while paying farmers and farmworkers less and less—women have founded and developed such programs as:

TOP: CHRIS SATTLBERGER/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: MARK WILSON/GETTY IMAGES

- **EDIBLE SCHOOLYARD**, a 1-acre organic garden and kitchen classroom for urban public school students in Berkeley, Calif., founded by famed California chef Alice Waters
- **DC URBAN GARDENERS**, a network of Washington, D.C., folks committed to locally grown food and eco-friendly gardening practices, founded by gardening writer Susan Harris
- **FOOD NOT LAWNs INTERNATIONAL**, a movement to “turn yards into gardens and neighborhoods into communities,” started by *Food Not Lawns* author Heather C. Flores
- **BUY FRESH BUY LOCAL**, a national network with local chapters that connect consumers with locally produced foods, run by Pennsylvania farmer Jessica Greenblatt Seeley
- **FOOD LITERACY INITIATIVE**, a project out of Harvard University to educate the local community about food sources and agriculture, nutrition and food preparation, advised by famed vegetarian cookbook writer Mollie Katzen

MICHELLE OBAMA’S “LET’S MOVE!” is just the latest among these and other projects spearheaded by women that are attempting to change how Americans plant, produce and prepare their food.

Yet the coverage on and credit for such work has largely gone to *men*.

For example, within a month of Michelle Obama unveiling “Let’s Move!,” ABC aired *Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution*, a TV show set in Huntington, W.V., in which British chef Oliver tried to reteach locals how to cook “tasty meals with fresh ingredients—no packets, no cheating.” Oliver said he hoped his show would convince the “bad guys” to “start cleaning up their recipes.” That makes him a kind of Supercook in the

minds of millions: a manly man fighting nefarious evildoers. A quick Google search for Oliver plus the term *hero* gets 254,000 hits, with phrases such as “school lunch hero” and “foodie hero.”

Yet while Oliver meets with heroic adoration, the press ties metaphorical apron strings around Michelle Obama’s waist. Dana Milbank, writing for *The Washington Post*, calls Obama’s food agenda “extremely domestic.” When the first lady planted vegetables with school kids this past spring, Milbank described her with “dirt on her knees,” teaching children “how to do ‘the rhubarb dance’” by “wiggling fingers and casting a voodoo-like spell on the vegetable, chanting, ‘Grow, rhubarb, grow.’” Yes, just the sort of thing that might make children think gardening is fun! But instead of recognizing that Obama knows her audience and her issues, this patronizing portrayal belittles the critical cause she has chosen to champion.

Oliver is but one of a small group of white men who have turned a national interest in sustainable food into cults of foodie personality, eclipsing the many women in the movement to become a kind of Fantastic Foodie Four. The other three are Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001) and co-producer of the 2008 film *Food, Inc.*; Michael Pollan, best known for *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (Penguin, 2006); and Morgan Spurlock, whose 2004 documentary about living solely on McDonald’s, *Super Size Me*, was nominated for an Oscar.

So why are men getting most of the praise and recognition? As Temra Costa, author of the new book *Farmer Jane: Women Changing the Way We Eat* (Gibbs-Smith, 2010)—which profiles 30 exceptional women who advocate sustainable food and farming—explained when asked why men were left out of her book: “It’s not that men aren’t changing how we eat. ... It’s just that they’re really good at getting all of the press.”

So let’s not forget to also read Marion Nestle’s watershed book *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (University of California Press, 2007). And follow the activism of Vandana Shiva, who’s written copiously about international seed wars, industrial fertilizer poisoning and what she terms the hijacking of the global food supply. Or study the work of Psyche Williams-Forsen, a University of Maryland associate professor of women’s studies, African American studies and American studies who, as part of her scholarship on black women’s symbolic relationship to chicken, analyzes a KFC commercial through the lenses of gender and race—an approach Spurlock neglects when discussing McDonald’s advertising machine.

Put simply, women’s contributions to the national food movement, Michelle Obama notwithstanding, are not visible enough. Many may know of Alice Waters and the 1970s New American Cuisine that made local, seasonal and sustainable eating fashionable, yet few have heard of the thousands of women who have taken up farming, planted urban and community gardens, advocated for food safety and better school lunches, or run restaurants with organic, seasonal menus. Women’s food work has initiated a true revolution in the sense of making wide-reaching and dramatic changes in the ways people think about and participate in how food is produced, prepared and consumed. And it’s a feminist revolution, with women

Women have been changing the way food is produced, prepared and consumed.

QUEEN FRIEDA: A feminist food pioneer still makes produce a specialty

The Green Grocer. The Mushroom Queen. The Lady of Shallot. Those are just some of the nicknames for Frieda Caplan, founder of the first woman-owned and -operated wholesale produce company in the U.S.: Frieda's, Inc.

She began in 1962 with a small stand under the banner "Frieda's Finest/Produce Specialties," featuring California brown mushrooms (then a specialty item). That first year, she staked a big claim to her fame by becoming the first U.S. produce seller to offer Chinese gooseberries from New Zealand—re-named kiwifruit. The fuzzy-skinned import, which Caplan also convinced California growers to plant, led to Caplan's other nickname: Queen of Kiwi. Over the years, she's also helped introduce such items as spaghetti squash, alfalfa sprouts, jicama and sugar snap peas to American taste buds, always contributing to the availability of a rich variety of plant foods, which the USDA has determined contributes to maximal health.

Produce had always been a man's world, so at her first business convention, the master of ceremonies welcomed, "gentlemen and Frieda Caplan." When she was named "Produce Man of the Year" in 1971, she handed back the award, saying, "Please redo this." The honor has been known as "Produce Marketer of the Year" ever since. Among many other honors, the *Los Angeles Times* named her one of the 12 Southern California personalities who shaped business in the 1980s.

"My gender was not even a consideration [for clients]," says Caplan. "If they found they could make money with the products I was selling, that was the important thing."

Caplan, who says she's "becoming a stronger feminist all the time," has supported the women's movement for decades through her membership in feminist organizations and her philanthropy. Among other activism, she's a member of the International Women's Forum, a global organization of high-achieving women dedicated to advancing women's leadership.

Now 87, she has already advanced her own two daughters, Karen and Jackie, as leaders: Today they run Frieda's, Inc., while she chairs the board. Obviously, Caplan has managed to blend food, feminism and family into one healthy and sustainable stew.

—KATE NOFTSINGER

farmers, gardeners and sustainable chefs trying to raise the visibility of women as well as enable all of us to make healthier food choices.

One testament to this revolution is the boom in women farmers. In the 2007 U.S. Census of Agriculture, the total number of women operating farms increased 19 percent, far surpassing the overall 7 percent increase in farmers.

Women tend to run smaller, more diversified farms and participate in direct-to-eater (farmers') markets. For almost two decades, women have also been running regional and national associations to support other women farmers and farmworkers, such as Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture (BRWIA), Organización de Líderes Campesinas (Women Farmworker Leaders), the Women's Agriculture Network (WAgN) and the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN).

Meet one feminist farmer, Elina Snyder, an economics major who runs her own market garden in Leonardtown, Md. During college, she worked on an organic farm, where she found that a number of tasks were deemed "female" or "male" depending on how much strength they required. But Snyder insisted on learning all aspects of farming; she needed to know more than just how to pick cherry tomatoes—a "female" task. "I had to prove how strong I was," she explains. "I had to say 'I can do that.'"

After Snyder started her own small farm, she still had to prove herself at farmers' markets. "I was the only female who was both a grower and a vendor, and I would often get incredulous questions such as 'You grew this

Frieda Caplan (center), with daughters Jackie and Karen to her left



all yourself?" she says.

Snyder is about to apply for graduate school in sustainable agriculture so that she can grow and sell organic food on an even bigger scale. "I distrust agribusiness," she says, "and I want to build a local food network to support both myself and my community."

You don't need a rural farm to grow food, though: There is a long tradition in America of creating urban gardens out of clay soil, concrete or rooftops. The innovative SmartRoofs program, run by Sustainable South Bronx—founded by a woman, Majora Carter—encourages planting multipurpose "green roofs" in the New York borough as a way to improve air quality, lower energy costs, reduce stormwater runoff and provide nourishment.

In Detroit—where many urban residents live in food "deserts" with a lack of nearby access to fresh, healthy food (but usually no shortage of cheap "junk" food)—the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network promotes urban gardens and operates a healthy-food-buying co-op. It also runs a 2-acre urban community farm—managed by a woman, DBCFS vice chair Marilyn Barber.

On an individual basis, there is a growing movement among suburban feminists to pull up lawns and plant front-yard gardens. A mother and community organizer from Edina, Minn., Cheryl Gunness tilled her front lawn to create a vegetable, fruit and flower garden after one of her sons developed an allergy to peanuts. "I put the garden in the front because it was practical—my back yard is shady, the front sunny," says Gunness. "But then it became a very cool thing. People stopped by, asked questions. My elderly neighbors picked my rhubarb and then shared slices of their rhubarb pie."

Gunness felt that front-lawn gar-

dening was a feminist gesture, making a statement about women's labors. "This hard work I'm doing is visible," she says. "Here I am, sweat running down my face, and people *see* me. My drudgery isn't hidden in the back yard."

Heather C. Flores further argues in *Food Not Lawns* that growing one's own food is radical, since it shifts the power balance from industrial control back to individual (or community) control. Flores calls such action "guerrilla gardening." "Those who control our food control our lives, and when we take that control back into our own hands, we empower ourselves toward autonomy," she says.

Food makes its way from farms and front lawns to dining tables, and there another group of food revolutionaries—feminist chefs—are cooking with local, seasonal ingredients. Take Maggie Pleskac, owner and top chef of Maggie's Vegetarian Café in Lincoln, Neb.—the first vegetarian/vegan restaurant in the city, and in a state defined by its deeply masculine meat industry. Besides the hypermasculinity, raising beef also undermines the environment and keeps people hungry worldwide, as Frances Moore Lappe—another visionary woman—pointed out in her groundbreaking 1985 book, *Diet for a Small Planet* (Ballantine). Lappe noted that Americans feed ten times as much grain to cattle as is consumed in the U.S.—grain that could feed many more hungry people than the meat from the cattle can.

In Nebraska's culture, Pleskac has had to flex feminist muscle in defense of her ever-changing vegetarian/vegan menu built around seasonal foods. "A fellow male restaurateur once said to me, 'You can't survive without consistency,'" says Pleskac. "I told him, 'I'll never be consistent with the mainstream!'"

Simply choosing vegetarianism or veganism can be a revolutionary feminist act, Pleskac argues, because it refuses dominant and commercial food structures. But one must have real choices, including access to healthy and culturally relevant food, whether from a local grocery store, urban garden or cafeteria lunch line—and those are often unavailable in low-income communities. In the new anthology edited by A. Breeze Harper, *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society* (Lantern Books, 2010), contributor Psyche Williams-Forsen—not a vegan herself—points out that because of racial and class disparities in our health and food systems, "a lifestyle of health is also about inherent race and class discrimination."

So let's celebrate the rhubarb dance with Michelle Obama. And read personal stories on the Farmer Jane (www.farmerjane.org) and Sistah Vegan (www.sistahvegan.wordpress.com) websites of women farmers, guerrilla gardeners and sustainable sistahs. Let's join community gardens, plant lawns with veggies, reform our children's lunches and buy fresh/buy local. Then, let us share our own heroic stories of food and feminists. ■

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Growing one's own food is radical—it shifts the power balance back to individual control.