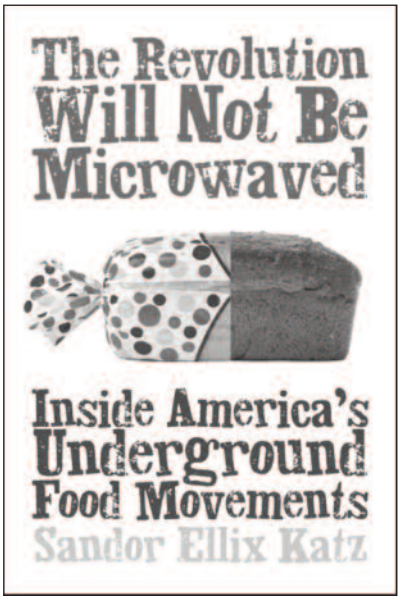
BOOK REVIEW



HYDROGENATED LANDS, HIGH-FRUCTOSE BODIES, ANTI-COMMUNITY FOODS: REVOLUTIONARY MOTIVATION?

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THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE MICROWAVED
Inside America's Underground Food Movements
By Sandor Ellix Katz
Chelsea Green Publishing: Vermont, 2006, 378 pp. ($20.00)

Everywhere I turn these days, people are talking food. Take this conversation, for instance:

"What would your last meal be?"

"I dunno . . ."

"Well, I would have pizza. 'No need to worry on my account,' I'd say. 'Just give me the phone book.'"

"Maybe steak. Or mac n'cheese."

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I eavesdropped on two young men as I read Sandor Elix Katz's *The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved: Inside America's Underground Food Movements*. I was saddened by these apparently "favorite" foods, and I was acutely aware of Katz's call to revolutionize the means by which our culture considers the act of eating and growing food. Most of us eat on a daily basis and most of us are not subsistence producers, leaving us constantly struggling to make the best of available culinary choices. Others, and many others at that, pick up the phone and order take-out, grab a paper bag of subsidized oil derivatives from the drive-through window, or put the zapper on defrost and wait for that chicken pot pie. In *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), Michael Pollan detailed the ambivalence of the modern omnivore. Katz makes it abundantly clear that we need not be passively satisfied with "the best available choice"; he suggests we owe it to our mental and physical well-being, and that of the community and the greater environment, to revolutionize food culture. His book is evidence that this revolution is already well underway.

The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved is a reference manual, a personal story, and a sort of "state-of-the-food-revolution." It is a more mature exploration of the discussion he began in *Wild Fermentation*, his first book (2003). Katz explores fringe food politics through ten chapters focused on various "hot" issues: slow food, raw food, seed saving, and foraging, to name a few. After writing *Wild Fermentation*, he had the opportunity to travel, speak about fermentation, and learn what others were up to around the country. We are given a taste of these diverse projects—biodynamic, beyond organic, soil-centric, etc.—through unique characters with names like Spud and Daz'l. A comprehensive list of "Action & Information Resources"—including periodicals, books, films, and organization contact information—follows each chapter for anyone interested in joining the food revolution.

Interwoven with his well-documented research facts are tales of his own journey atop the "ebb and flow" of health. Katz is a gay man with AIDS living in an intentional community in Tennessee. When he discusses the relationship between food and health, he speaks from personal experience. And he does not pretend to know it all, but instead offers pearls of wisdom. Relevant (and unique!) recipes accompany each chapter, such as passionflower elixir, chickweed pesto, and okra-dulse-lamb's-quarters-cashew pâté.

Katz writes with an easy fluidity and an open, non-judgmental air. He describes the community he resides in as "non-dogmatic," and the same may easily be said of him. Not everyone will agree with everything that Katz writes, but one would be hard-pressed to argue that he is a doctrinaire.

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Everywhere I turn these days, I learn more about the criminal politics of the global-industrial food system centered in and providing for the diabetes-ridden, obesity-laden, and increasingly individualistic United States. What is "real," "natural," and "healthy"? Federally approved labels seem only to confuse these terms, thus rendering them meaningless. The organic movement has escalated into the same fast-food, microwaveable, supermarket-driven—in Katz's words, "constant convenience consumerism"—against which it originally reacted. Free trade policies have disabled associative linkages and regional self-sufficiency within the United States and instead created complex pathways of corporate-driven industrial dependence. And, as Katz writes, "we must acknowledge that 'fair trade' is an upscale marketing niche, not unlike 'organic.'" Enormous government subsidies for agricultural products such as corn and soybeans and, in essence, the meat industries have resulted in equivalently humongous health care costs. The result? A food and health system that, rather than becoming self-perpetuating, cannot delimit its own community and needs greater and greater inputs to persist. How is one to respond to such insidious pizza-'n-

heart-attack culture?

We must not only adjust our expectations to the provisions offered locally and seasonally but, Katz argues, seriously "think about whom you trust to safeguard your food." I'm with him in suggesting that what is needed is none other than a "structural revolution." Community supported agriculture and farm-share models are examples of how this change may occur. Local economies based on face-to-face interaction and conscientious safety precautions appropriate to the particular scale and product are at the heart of this transformation. Networks of people who wish to reconnect with each other to form healthy, interactive nodes are vital.

From bread clubs to street food, revolutionary groups are fighting the "insidious erasure caused by the global thrust for homogenization." These people are not wearing Che Guavara t-shirts but are armed with homegrown food that they have dried, smoked, canned, and fermented. They are wearing muck boots and rain slicks. They are everyday heroes fighting for (bio)diversity. They believe that a true democracy is founded on intimate relationships with each other and the land and that "[s]ometimes laws that are antithetical to the truth must be broken."

I have met these people, too. They are everywhere.

• They are the Laotian owners of the Philadelphia restaurant colloquially called "The Blue Tent" because of the blue tarp that served as rain cover over outdoor picnic tables. They served $1 beers (with an open "all-ages" policy) and $5 bowls of delicious coconut curries. Women were invited inside their house to the second-floor bathroom and men used the makeshift milk-carton urinal on the alley-side of the house. Their restaurant was eventually shut down by the health department, but they made enough cash before they closed to open up legitimately a few blocks away, albeit with significantly higher menu prices and no alcohol license.

• They are the Amish community that set up a barrel BBQ every Sunday one summer in a predominately African-American neighborhood park. There was a line down the street until, once again, the health department intervened.

• They are the people like Ralph, a young man I met once at Eugene's Saturday Market who told me about the new back-to-the-land ritual he and his fellow farmhands had discovered: direct connectivity. This philosophy is founded on eating fresh produce right off the plant. "It doesn't get fresher than that!" he told me. Sure enough, it doesn't. I tried it and I recommend it. Strawberries are an especially tasty plant with which to experiment.

Today, February 16, 2008, I flipped through *The New York Times* (*NYT*), the preeminent newspaper in North America. On the front page an article reports that an uncertified pharmaceutical plant in China killed a reported four U.S. citizens and caused medical complications for 350 others through a toxin manufactured in a supposed blood thinner. Similarly, Katz cites an article from 2000 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that the third leading cause of death in the United States is iatrogenic (i.e. caused by medical care). The front page of the *NYT* business section features "F.D.A. Seeks To Broaden Range of Use For Drugs" and "Conflict on the Menu: Obesity Experts Split Over Requiring Calorie Counts to Be Listed." It turns out pharmaceutical companies would like to have the right to offer scientists exploratory articles about untested additional uses for drugs, thus rendering, say, a breast cancer drug multifunctional as a lung cure-all. In addition, the new president of the Obesity Society has been working for the New York State Restaurant Association to suggest that if restaurants in New York City label the calorie counts of food they may incite a rash of binge eating, thereby (ironically) worsening the obesity epidemic. And while the *NYT* sports section notes that 40% of Native American adults over forty-five suffer from Type 2 diabetes,the market section reports that Coca-Cola holds a strong market position.

"In true Orwellian fashion, ignorance is security and knowledge is dangerous." A quick glance at the newspaper thus reveals that Katz has engaged in a conversation affecting everyone, not simply the revolutionary elite. America's food system is complex, political, and often provides contradictory information to consumers. It is on a smaller scale, based in personal experience, that we can hope to learn about alternatives.

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My food choices have always been founded in my politics. Once my friend Jordan explained to me, upon my repeated but friendly harping about her diet, "I don't eat politically, okay?" We remained friends for a time, but I never quite understood what she meant by that statement. It isn't hers to choose: food is political, period. Sandor Ellix Katz's book is a call to "reclaim our health and our power, both as individuals and communities," and "safeguard and assert our rights to associate, as amateurs, with a diversity of useful plants."

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