# *IS THAT THE WAY THE COOKIE CRUMBLES? CONSUMER DESKILLING IN FOOD SYSTEMS AND THE JOURNEY TOWARD FOOD SOVEREIGNTY*

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***Deskilling within food systems has been occurring for as long as food industries have been in business. Many of these attempts have been successful, resulting in a drastic shift towards non-cooking across the world, including Canada. Deskilling occurs in both the world of the labourer and the consumer and this paper will focus initially on examples of deskilling within our food system and then move towards the argument for reskilling in an effort to obtain food sovereignty***.

***The paper will commence with a history of deskilling, and the gendered dimension of the consumption movement. Attention will be paid to the various forms of deskilling as the term does not necessarily imply that its meaning extends beyond the realm of meal preparation, but rather includes the loss of nutritional and environmental knowledge surrounding food choices. Within the discussion on deskilling, this paper will describe various methods of consumer deskilling such as: professionalized and scientific deskilling, deskilling as 'positive', deskilling of the palette, and forced deskilling.***

***In a move beyond simply identifying the various aspects of deskilling, the latter part of the paper will focus on reskilling in the resistance against unsustainable, corporate controlled food systems and the movement towards greater food sovereignty and food literacy. One of the strengths surrounding the movement is that it fits within the broader contexts of many global issues including community food security, the organic movement, the fair trade movement, CSA's and kitchen literacy.***

## Introduction

While agriculture by its very nature has strong ties to the earth, it has been economic rationalism that has guided the shift towards our current industrial food system; a system that is highly contested and according to some, both unable to and uninterested in celebrating the intrinsic value and visceral significance of food. The literature that supports sustainable food systems does so by discussing and promoting alternative food movements: a return to healthy, whole and natural foods. They challenge the current industrial agricultural complex and do so by creating stronger connections between producers and consumers through the use of Farmer's Markets, CSA schemes, and even farm gate sales. Proponents of alternative food systems are enabling people to interact with their food in a way that the current system neither supports nor desires.

The literature acknowledges the importance of 'voting with your food dollar' or supporting local farmers as a form of resistance to the industrial food system, however the absence of food skills is of equal importance (Wilkins, 272). This is what Jaffe and Gertler call *deskilling* and it is something that both producers and consumers have become bound by as a

result of the current agricultural paradigm (2006). For example, someone working in a bakery at a major grocery store chain will likely never actually learn to make bread, as the bread that these stores 'bake' is actually delivered to the store frozen, reheated and sold as fresh. This means that even a person who is a 'baker' by name no longer learns to bake, or practices the art of baking.

The same systematic deskilling process can be seen with consumers, many of whom no longer know how to preserve food, create traditional dishes, or how to simply make a meal from scratch. In the age of fetishized channels devoted entirely to food preparation and enjoyment, it is an awfully ironic culture that in turn, cooks less than it ever has before (O'Sullivan et al., 2008). The focus of this paper will be on consumer deskilling as Wilkins explains that a "population of passive food consumers – people who do not think about the food system and its sustainability – is...one of the chief goals of industrial food production [as well as] the dominant food industry" (270). It will be argued that a key component of any sustainable food system is the process of reskilling people not only as *consumers*, but also as *citizens*.

**Unpacking Terminology**

Deskilling is best explained by Jaffe and Gertler who define deskilled consumers as those who "do not have- and are systematically deprived of- the information, knowledge, and analytical frameworks needed to make informed decisions that reflect their own 'fully costed' interests" and that "without deliberate steps to counter this process, consumers become progressively less 'skilled' in absolute and relative terms, as they become increasingly distanced (in time and space and experience) from the sites and processes of production" (143).

Scrinis builds on this by providing some clear manifestations of deskilling including "a decline in home-based food production...the shift from unprocessed whole foods and home-prepared meals to increasingly processed, prepared and convenience foods...an overall decline in the percentage of gross income spent on food...the loss of traditional and locally-distinct foods, cuisines and farming practices...and a decline of cooking and food preparation skills" (121-122). Other examples include a decline in informed shopping, food storage and preservation, a lack of holistic nutritional knowledge, and the social or environmental impacts of food choices.

Using the concept of a *sustainable food system* as the goal which food movements are working towards, it will be defined using Feenstra's description of ''a collaborative effort to build more locally based, self-reliant food economies – one in which sustainable food production, processing, distribution and consumption is integrated to enhance the economic, environmental, and social health of a particular place'' (100). Within this definition, the relevance to organic agriculture is clear. A sustainable food system is one that is environmentally responsible, socially sound, economically feasible and made up of both passionate and knowledgeable producers, as well as passionate and knowledgeable consumers. Without the latter, a sustainable food system is unlikely to thrive, as this paper will discuss.

## Global Systems and Consumer Disconnection

When discussing the geography of food, it is important to consider multi-scaled approaches, as a global perspective on industrial agriculture ensures an inclusive and holistic context (Bell and Valentine, 1997). That being said, "there are myriad important reasons to keep the global picture in the background...as power relations and economic forces at the international level filter down to very local contexts, and are present in both rich and poor countries" (Clapp, 282). The global food system and its activities around the world greatly determine the potential for alternative food movements at the local level.

Clapp argues that "the rules and norms that govern...the current global food system may at first glance seem distant from local food production and the cultural dimension of food consumption...but these global rules can and do have profound implications for the viability of food systems at all levels, from the global right down to the local level" (285). A critical analysis is one that understands the implications that decisions at the global scale have on the local scale. The same can be said for food knowledge, as "the route from field or factory (or lab) to table" is more like a maze than ever before (Jaffe and Gertler, 145). Scrinis defines this as a *disconnection*, and explains that it "may take a number of forms, including a physical disconnection from—and lack of knowledge of—where, how and by whom foods are produced" (121-122). This is no accident, as the industry counts on this disconnection; it is only by creating a disconnection that consumers become consequently deskilled and therefore increasingly reliant on industrial food products.

## Creating the Deskilled Consumer: How did we get here?

While the focus of this paper is on the deskilling of consumers, it is important to understand the evolution of deskilling in the world of the producer as well. In the 1920's and 1930's, food processing and manufacturing began to incorporate "labor rationalization based on Taylorized logic" in which "every dimension of work is reorganized to be more efficient, predictable and calculable" (Jaffe and Gertler, 144). The result is an impersonal, abstracted labour process as workers are prevented from understanding the entire production process due to new technology coupled with Fordist principles guaranteeing greater control and power over workers (Jaffe and Gertler, 145). Since the goal is to maximize profits, greater control over workers would logically be followed by an even greater control over consumers. The consumer therefore became the focus of intense study as it was revealed that consumption patterns could be easily and increasingly manipulated.

The ideas of producer and consumer, in a relative sense, are still new terms that emerged when people no longer had the ability to be self-provisioning. This meant a new reliance on the products and services offered by capitalist industries. By introducing waged labour, there came new opportunities for the industry to "cash in" on working families, who now had less time than ever to devote to food preparation or shopping, and would therefore welcome any sort of assistance in the kitchen (Jaffe and Gertler, 145).

While the industry continued to "colonize existing non-capitalist spheres of production" with canned soup and cereal, household labour activities and processes were slowly being taken from women and their families (Jaffe and Gertler, 147). Labour processes in the public sphere were continually deemed productive, while "food procurement and preparation

activities [were shifted] into the capitalist sphere" resulting in these processes being viewed as consumptive (Jaffe and Gertler, 148). This patriarchal move was encouraged and supported by industries, who could now dictate "appropriate patterns of consumption" to women for their families (Jaffe and Gertler, 149). For the first time, food that traditionally came from 'Mom's Kitchen' began to come from 'nowhere' (Bell and Valentine, 3). There are myriad other ways in which food skills are manipulated and disregarded, and the following section briefly discusses some of the more common examples.

**Forms of Deskilling**

Because of the disconnection discussed earlier, the increasing gap in food knowledge is strongly tipped in the favour of the industrial food system and therefore the balance of power is also in the hands of the food industry. While there is no limit to the creative ways in which people have become systematically deskilled over time, for the sake of highlighting key trends, some of the more common examples referenced by Jaffe and Gertler (2006) have been formally categorized below:

- *Professionalized deskilling:* The professionalization of nutrition has not armed consumers with a greater understanding of what constitutes a healthy diet and certainly not a healthy food system for that matter. This is because the food industry has managed to exploit a "reductive focus... through the marketing of their foods on the basis of the quantities of particular nutrients they contain, thereby obscuring the quality of the ingredients and the level of processing that a food product has been subjected to" (Scrinis, 120). Otherwise known as nutritionism, this has led to dietary fads (e.g.: the no carbs diet) by creating an ever-changing superficial hierarchy of nutrients. It is counter-intuitive to the age-old idea that moderation, variety and quality guarantee a healthy, balanced diet. People are forced to reconsider their own cultural knowledge and traditions and therefore often end up buying products "recommended" by nutritionists and dieticians as opposed to based on what has been traditionally considered a healthy or balanced food choice (Pollan, 2008).

- *Emancipatory deskilling:* Since the 1920's and 1930's there has been a steady attempt to show that deskilling is a positive and liberating change. Through advertising, the industry has managed to convince both the nuclear and post-nuclear family that industrial food is "an opportunity to break the bonds of female servitude to domestic chores. At the same time, this transformation of the family into a consuming unit was an opportunity for industry to resocialize women into capitalist femininity" (Jaffe and Gertler, 149). By playing on the desire for convenience and freedom from food preparation, processed foods have become the assurance that a family can sit down and have a meal together without slaving away in the kitchen.

- *Palette deskilling:* The deskilling of a consumer's palette is the most covert form of deskilling as the consumer will not necessarily understand that their experiences with certain foods are often manipulated (Jaffe and Gertler, 154-155). There has been a great effort within the food industry to recreate ethnic dishes that have traditionally been *characterized* by strong and distinct flavours. Because some of these tastes may appeal to a smaller segment of the market, the use of salts and sugars augment the tastes of these foods, to appeal to a greater number of people (Scrinis, 121-122). This is a clear example of the industrial food system privileging capital accumulation over the intrinsic cultural value

of that particular food, or their consumer's experience with it. Another consequence of deskilling the palette is the lack of taste-memory. Many people are unable to experience the range of tastes that a fruit or vegetable has to offer because they have not been exposed to the variations, and thus cannot choose food based on specific characteristics (Jaffe, and Gertler, 155; Scrinis, 121-122).

- *Standardized/homogenized deskilling:* Most processed food are created "to fit the same logic of standardization that is displayed in fast food restaurants" (Jaffe and Gertler, 144). So long as the consumer follows the directions, they can expect "a consistent product that has been engineered to cook, bake, microwave, and taste exactly the same each time" (Ibid). Standardization went beyond just the taste of food, as advertising campaigns marketed industrial foods as more hygienic and therefore safer because of the "advanced production methods" that are practiced in industrial kitchens (Ibid).

- *Forced deskilling:* While arguably most deskilling has been somewhat forced whether through pervasive advertisements or food deserts, there are examples within Canada of deskilling that has been *imposed* on people. A common example is the forced deskilling of aboriginal and indigenous communities in Canada. Increased contamination of traditional foods (fish, caribou, etc.) and high PCB levels in breast milk have resulted in a forced loss of traditional food knowledge and arguably the "most fundamental aspect of consumer deskilling": breastfeeding (Jaffe and Gertler, 151). Food choices for the Inuit are integral as "food can be [a] symbolic resource in the making of Inuit identity" (Searles, 69).
  The Inuit of Nunavut can no longer rely on traditional foods, and have been "fully integrated into a globalized cash economy" (Searles, 56). This is an important change in Inuit food identity as the range of processed foods become increasingly available, they are incorporated into "local systems of meaning and value" which poses a threat to the passing on of traditional knowledge (Ibid).

- *Generational deskilling:* Because of emancipatory deskilling and even forced deskilling, there is a ripple effect termed generational deskilling. O'Sullivan et al. explains that research with elderly Canadian women demonstrated that the traditional handing down of food knowledge gives "a sense of continuity and security in knowing [their] children value traditions they have maintained and that the themes would continue to be repeated, again and again" (74). For example, a person whose mother spent most of her time in the kitchen, emancipatory deskilling might be deemed a blessing. This association with food preparation as arduous, means that she is less likely to prepare her own meals and because "food production has traditionally been learned through apprenticeship, with children learning first-hand while their mothers cook...", it is even less likely that she will teach her own children (Jaffe and Gertler, 147). This has given the industrial food system guaranteed access to generations of people who do not have cooking skills sufficient enough to sustain themselves or their families (Lang, 1999).

**Reskilling and Organics: Not Only How, But Why?**

When discussing the importance and relevance of reskilling in order to best support a sustainable food system (and thereby organic agriculture), Donald and Blay-Palmer state that it is incorrect to simply conclude that the industrial food system "has colonized" alternative

food systems (1903). While this is undoubtedly correct, they acknowledge that there is a strong corporate presence in the organics movement. This illustrates that the movement has split into at least two distinct directions: the corporate controlled and conventionalized organics industry, as seen in California (Guthman, 2004) and the organics movement that is still heavily rooted in the social, environmental and health considerations that characterize traditional organic supporters.

While organics has a key role to play in the move towards sustainable food systems, it is important to recognize that reskilling is a process that is not easily co-opted by the industrial food system. What does this mean for organic agriculture? Simply put, it means that a reskilled consumer has the necessary skill set to appreciate the unique qualities of organic food and will engage with organic producers and products in a way that is not encouraged or supported in the industrial food system.

Jaffe and Gertler explain that "skilled consumers will be vital to the positive transformation of food systems" (158). The decision to reskill oneself is to actively resist the barriers to knowledge and self-education that the industrial food system has worked so hard to put in place. By gaining experiential knowledge of food, food preparation, appreciation of taste and quality, and increasing food literacy, one renders the range of products and services offered by the industrial food system as both useless *and* undesirable. Corporate attempts at hi-jacking organic agricultural movements are simply not possible when combined with efforts to reskill people, as self-education is a process that the food industry cannot profit from and therefore has no interest in.

Consumer reskilling primarily consists of changing one's own *consumption* practices or decommodifying them, which is done through a range of activities, that might include growing one's own food, joining a CSA or food cooperative, community kitchens, community cooking programs, or meeting farmers in the community (McLaughlin et. al, 1506; Jaffe and Gertler, 157). The idea of consumer reskilling is not without its critics however, as Roff challenges the notion that "consumption can instigate revolution in the foodscape...because of the evidence suggesting the conspicuousness of alternative eating practices" (512). Therefore placing the responsibility of a sustainable food system on *consumers* as opposed to *citizens* is something that might be considered dangerous. Roff argues that these "neoliberal tactics provide a space for the rent-seeking practices of food manufactures and reinforce current trends towards processed and pre-fabricated meals. Thus, consumerism in no way guarantees the alternative sociologies, economies and agricultures espoused by contemporary food movements" (513). Based on Roff's argument, the traditional ideals of citizen engagement remain an equally important way to create and contribute to a sustainable food system.

Based on Roff's observations, it can be best concluded that while consumer reskilling is a necessary part of building a sustainable food system, reskilling citizens is equally imperative. Therefore there must be a distinction between reskilling *consumers* through changing *consumption* habits and reskilling *citizens* through *education* and *incorporation* into larger social movements (such as the organic movement, or the food sovereignty movement). The

potential for “effective resistance...is increased by the links that exist between branches of this broad struggle – food security, anti-hunger, fair trade...” (Jaffe and Gertler, 157).

In order to truly combat the industrial food system, we must engage in what Wilkins calls food citizenship, or “ the practice of engaging in food-related behaviors that support, rather than threaten, the development of a democratic, socially and economically just, and environmentally sustainable food system” (271). Both consumer reskilling and citizen reskilling are necessary components to the building of a sustainable food system. For example: a consumer who has become so deskilled that they cannot appreciate the freshness of a local tomato grown organically and in season will be of no help to a local, organic farmer who is being undermined by the globalized food system through the ‘dumping’ of tomatoes from Florida into conventional grocery stores in her/his area. However, a consumer who understands the struggles of that farmer in the globalized food system is more likely to buy the organic tomato, enjoy it, and begin to (re)cultivate their own ability to appreciate taste, quality and flavour. Perhaps it is best said then, that reskilling cannot stop at simply reminding people *how* to interact with food, but it must remind people *why* we interact with food.

## Conclusion

While the literature on deskilling has been present since the time of the industrial revolution, the way it has shaped our food system and consequently our health, our culture, food socialization, and our current industrial food system has not been discussed at great enough length in the literature. When communities reskill themselves not just as *consumers* by changing consumptive choices, but as *citizens* who are educating themselves, the goal of establishing a sustainable food system that meet the needs of all people will be a recognizable and feasible goal.

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