

Matthew Benson on Food Revolutionary Joan Dye Gussow

Standing against the vast, intemperate sweep of the Hudson River—like an Old Testament prophet—Joan Gussow can't escape the metaphors her storm-tossed garden invokes. "I guess I've been going against the current for ages," she says. Her advocacy in support of local-food systems predates today's green movement by decades, for while the rest of the culture was idling at the drive-through of food consciousness, Gussow was a fist-in-the-air campaigner for nutritional standards. As a writer (*This Organic Life: Confessions of a Suburban Homesteader*, Chelsea Green, 2001), educator, and visionary antagonist of the industrial food system, she has helped mobilize the farm-crawling locavore in all of us.

"I used to be considered totally insane," Gussow says, recalling how her ideas were once thought of as far-fetched. "I was one of those people who'd ruin dinner parties by talking about the planet's future." But now that the level of food literacy is up, Gussow is on everyone's Evite list. "There's so much more out there about food, so much talk and action; more farmers' markets, more CSAs," she observes. "Now local is a tag word people love."

The decentralized 19th-century agricultural model, in which farms and food production were integrated into communities, may be one ironically progressive solution to righting the wobbly petroleum-wheeled food cart. And if the peak-oil scenarios are right, and \$300-a-barrel oil is in our imminent future, a 2,000-mile salad from the Salinas Valley of California will be considered a luxury food item, right up there with Perigord black truffles and foie gras. The environmental awakening of the past decade has been encouraging, Gussow admits, but we'll surely need a concerted Darwinian adaptation as a culture in order to prepare ourselves for a sustainable future. "We're all going to have to make other arrangements," she says wryly.

Gussow's expertise as an educator has been in nutrition: She is professor emerita of nutrition and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and has served on the Diet, Nutrition, and Cancer Panel of the National Academy of Sciences, as well as on the FDA's Food Advisory Panel and most recently on the National Organic Standards Board. Her work from the beginning has focused on shaping the argument over what America eats and drinks; in a culture that has been suckled on the subsidized teat of processed fat and sugar, that's no mean feat. The locavore movement really began as an effort to educate consumers about food: In order to understand what you're eating, know the source.

Although she has been described as a "sustainable hedonist," Gussow is by no means a food martyr. True, she doesn't suffer the proliferation of "food-like substances" that clog the world's aisles and arteries, and can rail against industrial food production, synthetic additives, genetic engineering, and artificial price supports with the best of them. "The food supply is full of thousands of food-like objects which several generations have been taught are what food is," she says. "We know absolutely nothing about their healthfulness since we pay attention only to the nutrients we know and to known toxins. We have no history with this food supply. Is a Twinkie life-giving? Is an energy bar?" But she's far from cynical: "I used to feel guilty about being happy when I had such a gloomy view of the world. The truth is,

I'm basically a very optimistic person."

Her own life-sustaining Piermont, New York, property is a place of magical, improbable beauty. Though the Hudson has tried on occasion to reclaim her land, the banks of this formidable river have yet to foreclose on her. Her 22 neatly ordered beds of organic root and leaf vegetables and fruit trees—including apple, peach, Asian pear, and a glorious 'Brown Turkey' fig that grows like an imposing sentinel along the river's edge—are a testament to dogged persistence and grit. "Challenge is very exciting to me. Some people skydive and bungee-jump. I grow my own food."

At 81, wearing a woven poncho and a pair of Crocs, she moves like an animated curator through her raised and abundant beds, marveling at the size and color of a Russian kale, or the year's remarkable potato crop, realized at a time when the whole Northeast had suffered one of the coolest, wettest summers ever. Out of a narrow one-sixth acre, she manages to fill her larder for the year. "I eat Brussels sprouts in the dead of winter; I have a fantastic crop of winter carrots, and a great sweet potato crop. I love fresh kale cut up and massaged with olive oil, lemon juice, and salt." She grows all the home garden staples, plus lemons and limes that over-winter inside. You can't help but marvel at the almost transcendental joy Gussow experiences in her garden.

How, then, do the rest of us rally? Gussow's advice is to keep the food politics local. "We need to eat meals together. Concentrate on the kids. Make lunch hours in schools longer. Get kids involved with [school gardens](#) and cooking. Perhaps," she says, with the insight of a well-lived organic life, "they can reform their elders."