

Summary

"FEEDING DEMOCRACY, DEMOCRATIZING FOOD"

National meeting on food, gathering young citizens and professionals

From 3rd to 7th of July 2013 at La Frennaie's eco-camp (Marais Poitevin, France)



Extract of the meeting's call

Cooking, producing or keeping food is a knowledge that has progressively slipped away from us. We've let ourselves be stripped away from our relation with food. Equally, we've seen our relation to soil and territory disintegrate, our relation to climate and seasons change, and consequently our health degraded. However, facing the global mutations of our societies and our environment, a consensus is arising: this political and economic model is nowadays heading towards disaster.

As a response, people's collective initiatives have begun to thrive everywhere. From community-supported agriculture to cooking workshops, from permaculture gardens to local grocery shops, from seed banks to community restaurants... Another trend is now beginning to root. Beyond the simple addition of isolated initiatives, these new approaches draw the outlines of new territories and propose new relations with health and work. This impetus prefigures a less precarious, disposable and finance dominated society.

As actors of this change, we represent a reality that is not to be found in partisan's speeches and mercantile reasoning. Food should not be only considered on an epicurean or consumptive basis, but definitely as a professional, social and environmental issue. It is more than time to take over the debate on a common perspective: "feeding democracy, democratizing food".

Introduction

"Let's feed ourselves" is a self-managed collective initiative that aims to open a room for discussion on food issues. In spring 2012 and summer 2013 around 50 young people with various professional, cultural and political backgrounds gathered around the statement that food is a democratic issue that we need to reappropriate!

Following the two first meetings, we wrote this summary of our exchanges and practices in order to share those inspiring moments. What we experienced and what we built, what were our methods and practices, what were our reflections and in which direction are we heading? We present you with a record of this on-going process that opens gourmet perspectives for "Let's feed ourselves" as a network.

This document is addressed to all those who want to rediscover a meaning to their work, take the time to take their time, learn to live together rather than one next to the other and revive pleasure.

To the beauty-of-gesture lovers, the day-to-day aficionados and the long-term projects passionates. To those who don't want to follow moralist injunctions but cultivate their passion...

The origins of "Let's feed ourselves!"

Food may appear as a less political, controversial or central issue than other topics. However, not only do we need to feed ourselves everyday but also food is strongly connected to other issues such as agriculture, ecology, transport, urbanism or industry. Citizens have been progressively dispossessed of their food mainly to the profit of few food industry giants. Reclaim food, starting with your own supply, is a strong and concrete act for people to make their voice heard.

The 2013 meeting in the La Frênaie eco-camping

La Frênaie (www.lafrenaie.org) is a self-managed structure created in April 2007. It is both a co-op manufacturing yurts and ecological mobile homes and a non-profit organisation managing an eco-camping and a nature interpretation center. The eco-camping is designed to be an edible camping with fruit trees along the path and a community vegetable garden.

La Frênaie is located between Deux-Sèvres and Charente-Maritime departments in the heart of France's second largest wet zone, the Marais Poitevin. This place within a natural environment was a source of inspiration for the 2013 meeting.

The workshops

The workshops were organised in small groups using participative and non-violent methods. As an introduction, everybody was invited to write down an important date for them in their life and in History, and share them within small groups.

A Make Commons of initiatives started with 4 presentations:

- "Direct from the farm to the neighbourhood, a community-supported agriculture system" – Rémy, Saint Etienne. A vegetable box scheme in the suburbs of St Etienne with 22 producers and 160 members;
- "The sharing garden" – Jean-Eudes, St Jean de Liversay. A 5000m² community garden in a rural area using permaculture and agro-ecology methods. The land is provided by the city council through a 5-years convention;
- "A caravan on the path to transition" – Caroline, Toulouse. In order to promote local initiatives, participative sites and field visits will be organised in a 21-day trip in August 2013 across Midi-Pyrénées region. The objective is to capitalise experiences and create links between stakeholders and people willing to get involved.
- "A veggie garden in a university campus managed by the students" – Éléonore, Poitiers.

The last part of the meeting consisted in visits to local initiatives such as the yurts workshop, the local vegetable box scheme, the village grocery shop and a small cheese dairy.

Some conclusions of the thematic workshops

The thematic workshops were an important part of "Let's feed ourselves!". The exchanges were rich and diverse. We are presenting here an insight of the main ideas developed. They don't aim to represent all the opinions of the participants.

A citizen issue:

- Each citizen should be able to give his opinion on food production and distribution, but also on their social and economic impacts. It is a mean to acknowledge our role as citizens.
- It is not mandatory to be a food expert to take part in the debate or to raise awareness. It is a transversal issue for all kinds of public.

An individual issue:

- Cooking is also being a food producer and thus taking part in the food industry.
- We must acknowledge that we don't have all the same needs depending on our organism and lifestyle. We need to escape from culpability and revive the pleasure in food.

A professional issue:

- Professionals should be able to communicate with citizens. Collective organizations may be more efficient than experts' debate.
- The lack of economical acknowledgement of alternative initiatives is a brake in the change of society.

A land issue:

- Every territory is bound to food and agriculture. Protection of fertile growing land should equally include community gardens in cities and agricultural land.
- Agriculture real estate is a social issue in the hands of experts. The issue of agriculture land should address the question of spatial planning.

The practical workshops

The meeting was also practical and the participants took an active part in the activities proposed by La Frênaie and other members of "Let's feed ourselves!".

A volunteer team designed and built a pedagogical veggie and herb garden. Another group went into the forest to collect wild flowers such as Plantain, Burdock, Common Hogweed, Common Avens and learn their uses. Some participants harvested dead wood in the marshes to allow small boat's circulation. And every day a cooking team prepared meals out of local and seasonal products.

Public debate

As public space is a political space, it was decided to organize a public debate about "food and democracy" on the Friday night at the port of the village of La Grève-sur-Mignon. The deputy president of the Poitou-Charentes region and a representative of the Young farmers of Charente-Maritime (dairy farmer) took part in the debate that lasted 2 hours.

Among the topics discussed were the issues of access for young people to land, access to sustainable employment in the organic production domain but also access to healthy and local food for everyone. The evening ended with a public concert of folk-world band Loca Tangata.

Conclusions of the 2013 meeting :

- I. The desire to reconnect with pleasure
- II. Not just be consumers
- III. The desire to place youth as a political force
- IV. The desire to change society
- V. Question the productivist system
- VI. The desire to reappropriate the language and knowledge from experts

Perspectives

“Let's feed ourselves” aims to be an on-going process. Its main perspective is to build a collective working as a network using self-management practices. The collective wants to be autonomous from the organizations that initiated the meetings .

At the moment, the prospects are to continue developing the working groups, organise other meetings, outreach to other networks and create local communities wherever possible.

The working groups engaged at the end of the forum aim to create and enhance a calendar of events, imagine our medium-and long-term strategy, create a map of initiatives we want to promote, make a directory of members, manage the blog and create a document identifying the needs and resources in our network.