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Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty

Mark Winne (2008). Boston: Beacon Press. ISBN 978-080704730-9. 192 pp. \$23.95 (hardcover).

Review by Cornelia Butler Flora

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Mark Winne's book *Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty* comes as a welcome contrast to the volumes by intellectuals about their quests to eat locally as part of their mission to expose the industrial food system. While equally personal and situated in the structural, Mark Winne describes and analyzes his efforts to close the food gap through providing healthy food for the urban poor. As personal as the foodquest books by Kingsolver and by Pollan, Winne shares his attempts to reduce poverty by increasing access to healthy food by people who are food-insecure.

He takes us through his first efforts at gardening and organizing community gardens, reminding us that the most important word in that phrase is "community." He illustrates his premise that the best programs link members of the community to each other as well as to programs that increase access to good food. He introduces us to teenagers, parents, farmers, and organizers who are part of the food- and social-justice movement. And he demonstrates the many barriers to healthy eating in the food deserts of inner cities and the various attempts — few of which have been successful — to make healthy food available to the food-insecure people who live there.

See the book's website at www.markwinne.com.

Winne's analysis is intensely place-based. While the major part of the book deals with the development of the Hartford Food System in Connecticut (U.S.), he deepens the analysis through stories of other places facing similar challenges. He credits community activists with successes, but he also exposes failures and analyzes what might be necessary to make their efforts work better.

While optimistic about farmers' markets as a mechanism to democratize healthy food, he takes on the "hunger establishment," such as food banks and not-for-profit antihunger organizations, which defend the particular federal program that funds their efforts by beating back any new program or suggestion of integration or expansion of those served. Food banks, which early on sold themselves as dealing with food waste, have become huge dumps for the food industry, cultivated by the food bank managers. What better tax-deductible use for outdated packages filled with

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high-fructose corn syrup and fats than “giving” them to the poor, who because of low wages, precarious employment, and the shrinking state and federal safety nets, must take what is there and be grateful?

While the local provides the context for effective efforts to close the food gap, Winne brilliantly traces the decline of attempts to reduce poverty in the U.S. as the federal government systematically removed itself from concern about the poor and their access to food. He shows the ease with which political maneuvering transformed concern about the poor’s access to food to concern about farmers’ access to subsidies. He is, however, laudatory of the Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (FMNP), which began as state-level actions and finally was embraced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He argues that innovation must come from the local level, because entrenched vested interests work to maintain their piece of existing poverty management programs.

Increasing income inequality is mirrored in dual food systems. Upper-middle-class consumers have access to fresh and local produce available from clean and well-stocked stores near their homes. The poor must settle for fast food or a very long trek to grocery stores that actually sell fresh produce. He emphasizes the health impacts of that differential diet, as obesity and its concomitant conditions of diabetes and heart disease increase at the same pace as the increase of fast-food outlets in low-income neighborhoods.

The book has no footnotes and no index, which makes it difficult to find the excellent studies to which he refers or to find particular insights that link local action and place. But despite the occasionally impossible metaphor or unsupportable hyperbole, it is written with such wit and passion that even college professors can take joy and hope for a more equitable food system emerging from local action.

