

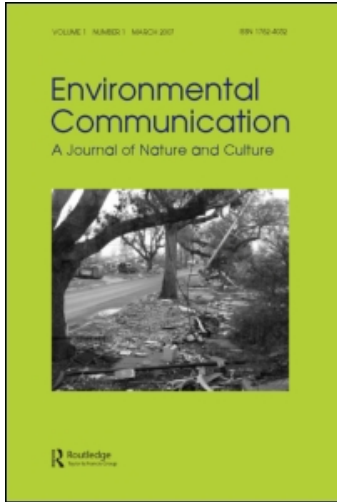
This article was downloaded by: [Click, Melissa]

On: 16 September 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 927030376]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t770239508>

### Saving Food: Food Preservation as Alternative Food Activism

Melissa A. Click; Ronit Ridberg

Online publication date: 16 September 2010

**To cite this Article** Click, Melissa A. and Ridberg, Ronit(2010) 'Saving Food: Food Preservation as Alternative Food Activism', Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture, 4: 3, 301 – 317

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/17524032.2010.500461

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2010.500461>

## PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

# Saving Food: Food Preservation as Alternative Food Activism

Melissa A. Click & Ronit Ridberg

*The renewed interest in sustainable agriculture suggests we are in the midst of a food revolution. However, food movements' focus on individual, instead of collective, action has opened food activism to critiques that it is too focused on consumer politics and lacks the force necessary to make substantive changes in the global food system (e.g., Delind, 2006; Hassanein, 2003). Our examination of the practices of and motivations for food preservation, using survey and interview data, reveals that food preservation presents an opportunity to move alternative food practices away from an individualistic, consumer-oriented politics to a politics based upon relationships to self, others, and the earth, enabling activists to connect more deeply to the goals of food movements. Unlike the dominant discourses of food movements, which encourage an individualistic, consumer-oriented politics, food preservation emphasizes connection and relationships and thus has the potential to subvert the capitalistic logic of the global agro-food industry.*

*Keywords: Food Preservation; Food Movements; Activism; Home Canning; Consumerism; Cultural Studies*

In March 2009, *The New York Times* asked, “Is a food revolution now in season?” (Martin, 2009). The renewed interest in sustainable agriculture, evidenced by the popularity of organic produce, farmers markets, gardening, community-supported agriculture (CSA), Slow Food, and local food provides a clear answer: yes. Food movements in the USA are composed of a variety of like minded organizations that are united with a common goal: “a food system that promotes the health of people as well as the environment” (Nestle, 2009, p. 37). Environmentalism is a critical

---

Melissa A. Click, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at University of Missouri. Ronit Ridberg is a M.S. candidate in the Agriculture, Food and Environment Program at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science & Policy, Tufts University. Correspondence to: Melissa A. Click, Department of Communication, 103 Heinkel Hall, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211, USA. Email: [clickm@missouri.edu](mailto:clickm@missouri.edu)

component of alternative food networks, which maintain “a belief that America has become efficient at producing cheap, abundant food that profits corporations and agribusiness, but is unhealthy and bad for the environment” (Martin, 2009, para. 15). Thus, food activists work to reform the global agro-food industry to reduce the environmental impact of the food system (particularly the quantity of petroleum products used to grow and transport food), and improve the taste and nutritional value of the food we eat (specifically reducing intake of highly processed, high-calorie, monoculture foods).

Given the strength and success of the global agro-food industry, key food activists, such as Wendell Berry, Marion Nestle, Carlo Petrini, Michael Pollan, and Alice Waters, advise those interested in protecting the environment, improving their health, and changing the food system to begin with changes in their own behaviors. Thus, alternative food practitioners seek to change the food system by buying organic, shopping at farmers markets, aspiring to be locavores, counting food miles, eating Slow Food, joining CSAs, and planting community gardens. Michael Pollan (2006, para. 14) advises those interested in changing the food system, “You can vote with your fork . . . and you can do it three times a day.” For some, however, this popular strain of the alternative food activism in the USA is based upon a set of individualistic consumer-oriented strategies that does not indicate that a revolution is nigh. This focus on individual, instead of collective, action has opened food activism to critiques that it is too focused on consumer politics and lacks the force necessary to make substantive changes in the global food system (e.g., Delind, 2006; Hassanein, 2003).

As members of alternative food networks, the authors have struggled to justify the importance of the steps we take in our own lives to fight the global agro-food industry. We believe that an examination of the practices of and motivations for food preservation provides the opportunity to discuss the possibilities of utilizing memory, relationships, the senses, and a sense of accomplishment to create in its constituents a new way of thinking about food that has significant potential to impact the future of our food system. In this paper, we explore food-preservation practices and motivations through the words of people variously involved in alternative food networks. The feelings and experiences shared through an online survey and phone interviews reveal that it is possible to change our food system by saving food.

## **Literature Review**

The study of alternative food networks is interdisciplinary, and as noted by Parkins and Craig (2009), is built from work in sociology, geography, economics, food studies, and cultural studies. The breadth of disciplines invested in the study of food activism has resulted in research with different perspectives and agendas. Below we discuss three general areas relevant to our project: descriptive studies of food movements, studies of food preservation, and critical evaluations of scholarship on food activism strategies.

### *Studies of Food Movements*

A substantial portion of food-movement research focuses on describing the contours of food movements, developing support for growing movements, and evaluating movements' political contributions. For example, Brehm and Eisenhauer (2008) examine the benefits and motivations of CSA membership. Gasteyer, Hultine, Cooperband, and Curry (2008) examine farmers markets and survey farmers-market consumers to understand the relative success of urban markets over rural ones. Tam (2008) examines the Slow Food movement, and responds to critiques that the movement is not politically effective. Together, these studies help scholars and practitioners to understand the structures of food activism in a variety of locations. Our work, too, aims to give concrete evidence to the everyday practices of food activists.

### *Food Preservation*

Very little has been written about food preservation in the social sciences. We struggled to find sources that were evaluative instead of instructive. Shepherd's (2000) examination of the global impact of new developments in food preservation gives some context for understanding the ways in which storable and transportable food enabled travel, settlements, war, and development on every continent. Shepherd discusses the major techniques of food preservation (drying, salting, pickling, smoking, fermenting, canning, freezing, and dehydrating), yet tends to focus more on the historical contexts surrounding the development of the techniques than on the social impact of the techniques. Thus, Shepherd's chapters on canning and freezing, for example, spend more time discussing the lives and careers of the techniques' creators than exploring the ways in which these techniques impacted the everyday lives of the people who used them.

Bentley's (1998) examination of the gender politics of the US's food rationing campaigns during WWII includes an investigation of home canning as a natural outgrowth of Victory gardening. Home canning was encouraged by the US Government to free up commercially grown and canned produce for military personnel overseas. To do this, Americans were encouraged to grow their own produce at home in "Victory gardens"; food preservation allowed Americans to store the produce they grew. Through WWII, canning was promoted as patriotic and information about gardening was spread through the media and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) county and home demonstrations. In addition to inspiring patriotism, canning was promoted as a form of community building and through it Americans were encouraged to work together to produce food. Gardening and canning also took on the symbolic connotations of a simpler time, harkening back to a preindustrial America and also provided "a kind of cleansing of the soul through intimate contact with the earth" (Bentley, 1998, p. 116). In 1943, the peak year for home food production, Americans produced at home more than 40% of the vegetables consumed that year and canned 4.1 billion jars of food (Bentley, 1998, p. 114).

Bentley (1998, p. 137) examines the gendered, classed, and racial aspects of canning in WWII, arguing that canning was a "middle-class venture," even though

community canning facilities were available to those who could not afford expensive equipment like pressure canners. While canning was women's work, underscored by the government campaigns directed only at women, non-white women were largely excluded from canning information and equipment through segregation. Middle-class white women took great pride in their canned goods, both in their numbers and their aesthetics; beautifully arranged shelves of food became a source of satisfaction, and state fairs began contests to judge the superiority of canned goods.

The end of WWII signaled the end of food rationing and canning's popularity. As incomes grew, Americans spent more on mass produced foods. Freezing became an attractive alternative to canning, and the increased availability of fresh foods from around the globe diminished the need for home canning. Bentley does a compelling job of detailing the reasons for the growth and demise of gardening and canning, and demonstrates the political, social, and cultural impact of food and preservation practices.

Shepherd's and Bentley's works demonstrate the cultural impact of food preservation, but the lack of contemporary studies on food preservation suggests there is much work to be done to fully understand the cultural impact and political potential of food preservation.

### *Theoretical Explorations of Food Movements*

The studies discussed in this section are loosely based upon cultural studies approaches that seek to explore the ways in which dominant culture can be undermined through the political practices of everyday life (Fiske, 1992). Further, the studies below take the rhetoric, strategies, and examinations of food activism to task, pushing them to be more accountable and reflexive. Delind (2006) critiques the two major arguments she believes to be common to most local food campaigns: (1) local foods are a vehicle for the revitalization of small businesses and local communities; and (2) local foods are smart choices for individuals seeking personal improvement. Both arguments focus upon "the structural conditions and quantifiable effects of local food" (Delind, 2006, p. 124) to the exclusion of "the emotive, the cultural, [and] the spiritual" (p. 127) aspects of local food. Delind challenges researchers and practitioners alike to move beyond the concept of "local," which she argues has been too thoroughly associated with making smart consumer decisions, to the concept of "place," which asks us to become intimately familiar and physically engaged with the meanings and traditions of the spaces we inhabit. The missing ingredients of the existing local food discussion, in Delind's (2006, p. 121) opinion, are the "cultural and nonrational elements," and she concludes, "without them as full partners, the movement cannot be sustained in any felt, practiced, or committed way."

Goodman and DuPuis (2002) respond to arguments like Delind's and suggest that consumption practices are forms of political activity, and that understanding such practices can shed light on the current transformation of the food system. The authors argue that cultural scholarship has made useful contributions to social

theory, but that “the work tends to ignore, undertheorize or explain away production-consumption relationships” (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002, p. 11). To better understand such relationships, they suggest that studies of food activism would benefit from the appropriation of the theories of cultural Marxism, material culture, and standpoint feminism, which “adopt a more diffuse definition of politics that sees any form of influence as political action” (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002, pp. 12–13). Such an appropriation would allow scholars to place “struggles of contested knowledges” on the same footing with “struggles to form political alliances” (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002, p. 17). Goodman and DuPuis argue that both forms of politics are powerful and thus both are worthy of scholarly attention.

Parkins and Craig (2009), in opposition to the above arguments by Goodman and DuPuis, critique the existing research on alternative food networks, arguing that

the political and cultural significance of alternative food networks cannot be fully captured if we limit the possibilities of their evaluation to a binary where they are either celebrated for their difference from the existing structures and power relations of globalized food production or they are criticized for always insufficiently challenging and overturning global capitalism (Parkins & Craig, 2009, p. 81).

Eschewing a focus on the economics of the global agro-food industry, they call for scholars to more carefully examine the role that culture plays in alternative food networks, with particular emphasis on the culture of everyday life. The authors use an exploratory case study to model the kinds of investigations the authors feel would be more fruitful. Their investigation of the Otago (New Zealand) Farmers’ Market suggests that market goers experience the market emotionally and affectively, which inspires “forms of ethical reflexivity that cultivate our capacities to imagine, desire, and practice more just and equitable ways to be . . .” (Parkins & Craig, 2009, p. 91). They conclude by calling for increased interdisciplinary work on food cultures that explores the political impact of the practices of everyday life.

These studies make clear that there are competing cultural studies approaches to examining food activism. Though like Goodman and DuPuis we believe there is utility in consumption-driven approaches to changing the food system, we wish to explore the everyday and non-rational elements of participation in food movements heralded by Delind and Parkins and Craig.

The current project is a true blend of each of the three types of literature we review above. Our work is descriptive in that it examines the motivations for and practices of food preservation used by our participants; our work also aims to contribute to the dearth of social scientific studies on food preservation, particularly giving necessary attention to the valuable political practice of food preservation that we believe is often overlooked because of its association with women’s work. Finally, our work demonstrates that food preservation is a useful site for examining the cultural impact and political possibilities of everyday practices that utilize emotion and the senses to build political awareness and commitment to social change.

## **Method**

This research is based upon a mixed methods explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), combining survey data collected online during February and March 2009 ( $N=902$ ), and follow-up telephone interviews with 30 survey respondents in May and June 2009 ( $N=30$ ). In an explanatory design, “qualitative data helps explain or build upon initial quantitative results” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 71). The methods used for both data sets are described below. For demographic information on both groups of participants, see Table 1.

### *Survey Research*

Though interviewing was the primary method employed by the authors, an online survey was created, and a link to the survey was disseminated, first to gather a wide variety of descriptive statistics about the beliefs of participants in food movements and the practices of those who regularly preserve food. The survey consisted of 47 closed- and open-ended questions. To reach a broad sample, respondents were recruited through national listservs, such as COMFOOD and Growing Food & Justice for All. Our request for participants was also sent to university extension offices, Master Gardener groups, Slow Food groups, and food-preservation groups on Yahoo! Groups and Facebook. Between February 24 and April 1, 2009, 902 surveys were completed by respondents in 42 of the 50 states in the USA.

After consenting to participate in the study, respondents answered a variety of questions about the sources from which they acquire their food (e.g. farmers markets, CSAs, home garden) and the length of time they have been using these sources; the food-preservation techniques they frequently use (e.g. canning, freezing, storing, drying) and how they learned these techniques; their experiences with food preservation (e.g. with whom they preserve, what days of the week they preserve, how much they typically preserve); their motivation for preserving food (e.g. to save money, to know and control what is in their food, to adhere to religious or cultural practices); their future plans for preserving food (e.g. what they would like to try next, what would encourage them to preserve more); and their participation in food movements (e.g. what food-related organizations they have supported, how their views about food influence decisions about spending money and/or voting). The survey also collected respondents' demographics and contact information if they were willing to participate in a phone interview.

### *Interviews*

Based upon the exploratory descriptive statistics gleaned from analysis of the online survey, the authors created a semi-structured interview protocol for one-on-one interviews. The protocol's 15 open-ended questions were designed to examine four general areas of interest: food values and habits (e.g. how they think about food and how that materializes in their daily lives), attitudes about and reflections on their food-preservation activities (e.g. how they feel during and after preserving food; how food preservation has changed how they think about food), participation in and

**Table 1.** Frequency distribution for survey and interview participant demographics.

	Survey		Interviews	
	<i>N</i>	Total (%)	<i>N</i>	Total (%)
Sex				
Male	143	15.9	7	23.3
Female	759	84.1	23	76.7
Race				
White	837	92.8	26	86.7
Non-white	65	7.2	4	13.3
Age				
18–29	180	20.0	4	13.3
30–39	211	22.9	10	33.4
40–49	158	17.5	3	10.0
50–59	235	25.5	9	30.0
60–69	100	11.1	3	10.0
70 or older	17	1.9	1	3.3
Household income				
\$25,000 or less	126	14.0	6	20.0
\$25,001–50,000	236	26.3	8	26.7
\$50,001–75,000	192	21.4	5	16.7
\$75,001–100,000	151	16.8	3	10.0
\$100,001–150,000	126	14.0	4	13.3
More than \$150,000	66	7.4	3	10.0
No answer			1	3.3
Education				
High school or less	44	4.9	2	6.7
Some college	175	19.5	6	20.0
Bachelor's degree	238	25.8	8	26.6
Some graduate school	123	13.7	2	6.7
Graduate or professional degree	317	35.3	12	40.0
Children in household				
None	575	64.6	20	66.7
One	118	13.3	4	13.3
Two	122	13.7	2	6.7
More than two	75	8.5	4	13.3
Marital status				
Single, living alone	97	10.8	4	13.3
Living with spouse or partner	641	71.5	23	76.7

evaluation of food movements (e.g., do they consider themselves to be part of a food movement; do they see their food-preservation practices as food activism), and hopes for the future of food (e.g., what changes do they hope to see in our food system; what role might preserving play in the food system nationally). The final section of the protocol asked the respondents to verify the demographic information they reported on the online survey.

As aforementioned, potential interviewees were identified through the online survey, which included a question about whether survey participants would be



willing to participate in a phone interview. Interview subjects were selected from the 322 survey participants who indicated that they would be willing to participate in an interview. Potential interviewees were contacted either through email or by phone (depending on the contact information they supplied) to find a convenient time for the interview. To insure that the authors' interview techniques were similar, the authors reviewed each other's first few interviews, and kept in regular contact by phone and email during the interview period. Interviews were conducted in May and June 2009 until we believed we reached saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008); in total 30 interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted an average of 30 minutes and was recorded to allow for transcription at a later date.

The interviews resulted in 315 single-spaced pages of verbatim transcripts. Each interviewee was given a pseudonym to preserve confidentiality. To analyze the transcripts, the authors identified emergent and recurring patterns in the same four interviews independently and then through numerous phone calls and email exchanges, identified, compared, refined, and combined the themes that emerged from each author's work, using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Based on the overlap among each author's themes, the authors collaborated on the construction of a codebook to be used to analyze the interviews. The authors then applied the codebook to the same two interviews, and, when they were satisfied they were coding similarly, analyzed the remainder of the interviews.

### *Participant Profile*

Many of the people who participated in our study considered themselves members of a food movement. When asked if he considered himself part of a food movement in a phone interview, John stated, "I would say we're nearly disciples of it now . . ." Scott said, "I definitely see myself as part of a movement back towards a more natural . . . relationship with food, as an individual and as a society." Renee shared, "I believe I'm part of a food movement . . . And it's very empowering. It's very tough work. But I think it's really essential for us to keep a hold of these traditions."

Our survey respondents reported behaviors that are consistent with the rhetoric of alternative food activism, indicating that they frequent farmers markets (80.5%,  $N = 726$ ), buy local food (79.9%,  $N = 721$ ), buy organic food (77.6%,  $N = 700$ ), and maintain their own vegetable gardens (72.7%,  $N = 656$ ). Respondents' answers to an open-ended survey question, "describe how your views about food have influenced the way you spend money on food," consistently demonstrated that our survey respondents believe that the way they spend their money is a political act. For instance, survey respondents offered the following: "As consumers we have a voice and our dollars speak volumes"; "The way I spend my money is the best representation of my morals in this society"; and "We vote with our dollars, so I am OK with spending more money on food that I know was produced within my

community with love and sustainable methods.” Additionally, some survey respondents argued that the money they spend on food is a contribution to their futures: “It’s a ‘donation’ to a social cause and to planet earth, and also a religious/spiritual matter,” and “It’s an investment in personal, community, and ecological health.”

Fewer survey respondents directly connected their views about food with behaviors considered more traditionally political, some arguing that they wanted government regulation out of food altogether (e.g., “I think that food is a personal issue, not a governmental issue”), and some asserting that they did not see a connection between food and politics (e.g., “My views about food have nothing to do with how I vote. What does food have to do with voting????”). Other survey respondents saw a direct connection between food and environmental policy (e.g., “Food and the environment are inseparable, so I always vote for the candidate most likely to approve or make legislation to protect the environment”); between food safety and government regulation (e.g., “The federal government needs to provide adequate funding for regular and thorough inspections of food processing facilities in the USA and of imported food products to ensure public safety”); and between food and specific government policies (e.g., “I pay attention to the Farm Bill and to agricultural and food policy in general. I favor policy and candidates that support a diversified agriculture and more local and regional food systems”). Many survey respondents also shared that they have volunteered for (45.8%,  $N=413$ ), belonged to (43.5%,  $N=392$ ), donated to (37.4%,  $N=337$ ), or worked for (27.3%,  $N=246$ ) organizations that advocate for their views about food. Additionally, nearly half of the people we interviewed were either self-employed as farmers or worked in a support role to a non-profit organization, such as a farmer’s market or a food advocacy group.

Our respondents identified and were familiar with important alternative food figures and texts. Michael Pollan was repeatedly named as a motivational figure in our interviews, and 39.0% ( $N=352$ ) of our survey respondents reported that they had read Pollan’s book, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. John’s comment is representative of many interviewees’ statements about Pollan: “I was really struck by the power of that book . . . I think he is one of the leaders because he does it in such a rational, calm way and he makes total sense.” Barbara Kingsolver was also frequently identified as an influential figure; her book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, was read by 33.5% ( $N=302$ ) of our survey respondents. One survey respondent described their connection to Kingsolver’s book this way: “*Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* was critical in moving me from thought and idea around food politics into action.” Other frequently mentioned figures include Alice Waters, Marion Nestle, Carlo Petrini, and Vandana Shiva. Our respondents’ familiarity with key alternative food texts, and many other books they shared with us, suggests that they are eager to learn more about the ways they can participate in food movements. Below we discuss the motivations for and experiences of preserving food that our survey respondents and interview participants shared with us.

## Results and Discussion

Though food preservation usually takes place in the private sphere, thus outside of the sphere generally thought of as the political sphere (the public), the discussions we had with our interview participants revealed that they consider their food-preservation practices to be in line with their political views about food and the environment. The deep level at which they experience the activities of food preservation (involving relationships, the senses, and feelings of self-empowerment), suggests food-preservation practices have the capability to move food activists beyond a consumer-oriented approach to politics and to develop a relationship to food more in line with the environmental beliefs of alternative food movements. As Delind (2006) and Parkins and Craig (2009) point out, this profoundly felt knowledge, which helps food activists build a deeper connection to food production, humanity, and the earth, has significant political power. We begin by discussing the reasons our interview participants preserve food and then move to a discussion of the relationships, feelings, and memories they created in the process of preserving food.

### *Motivations for Preserving Food*

Because the recruitment script we used to invite participants to our online survey indicated that the survey was about food preservation, an overwhelming majority of our survey participants (93.9%,  $N=847$ ) had preserved fresh food for consumption at a later date. Most of the survey respondents had been preserving for “a few” to “many” years (68.1%,  $N=538$ ). They indicated that they had learned to preserve food from books (70.3%,  $N=634$ ), family members (61.5%,  $N=555$ ), the World Wide Web (54.9%,  $N=495$ ), and friends (46.6%,  $N=420$ ).

Of those who had experience with food preservation, 89.4% ( $N=806$ ) had frozen food, 52.0% ( $N=469$ ) had canned food, and 51.8% ( $N=467$ ) had stored food in the year prior to taking our survey. Making jams and jellies (47.1%,  $N=425$ ), drying (42.5%,  $N=383$ ), and pickling (38.6%,  $N=348$ ) were also techniques our survey participants had used in the last year. Though our survey revealed that participants utilized a variety of food-preservation techniques, we focused particularly on canning in our interviews because of the practice’s increased requirements of knowledge, equipment, time, and stamina, and because of recent recognition of canning as a resurgent practice of alternative food activists (e.g. Dickerson, 2010; Moskin, 2009).

In a typical year, our survey participants spend between 5 and 20 hours preserving food (35.0%,  $N=297$ ) and preserve more than 40 quarts of preserved food (33.4%,  $N=283$ ). Many have friends (59.2%,  $N=534$ ) and family members who preserve (37.6%,  $N=339$ ); most specified they preserve by themselves (65.7%,  $N=593$ ) in their own homes (92.7%,  $N=836$ ). The survey respondents’ own gardens were the primary source for their preserved food (47.0%,  $N=398$ ). When asked about their primary motivation for preserving food, the survey respondents most frequently selected “to know and control what’s in my food” (34.5%,  $N=292$ ) and “it tastes

better” (23.7%,  $N = 201$ ). These two motivations, directly tied to oft-stated goals of food activism, also emerged in our interviews, alongside interviewees’ desires to eat more locally and sustainably. We discuss these three motivations for preserving food below.

*To know and control what is in food.* On our survey and in our interviews, one of the most frequent justifications given for preserving food was “to know and control what is in my food.” When we asked interview participants to elaborate, answers included wanting to tailor foods to their palates, to avoid additives and preservatives, and to avoid unsafe food. For example, Wendy preserves in part to control for taste, “I also just really like my preserves, because I don’t tend to make them as sweet.” Liz similarly described that she preserves to control taste, “if you’re making things of your own, you just can put in more of the stuff that you want. Like I don’t use a lot of salt.”

Many interviewees discussed their concern about and distrust of additives and preservatives in store-bought food. John stressed that he believes his self-preserved food is better than store bought because “there’s no chemicals involved, there’s much less salt involved.” Jennifer emphasized that unlike her preserves, store-bought preserves contain artificial ingredients, “you have to really pay attention because you look at the ingredients and I’ve noticed more and more in different products that they’ll put in aspartame, or different chemicals, which I think is just terrible.” Bethany was less concerned about additives than accidental ingredients, “The government allows so many rat hairs and insect parts . . . And I know they’re not in my food that I make.”

As these participants’ statements reveal, part of the concern about ingredients has to do with safety, and the people we interviewed felt more comfortable consuming food preserved at home than they did eating store-bought food; their comments reveal that recent food scares (which respondents connected to the instability of the global agro-food industry) cemented their beliefs. Mary Jo conveyed that she was very concerned about food safety, “I know I’ve already mentioned the [*E. coli*] spinach like three times, but there have been several of those instances that I think are disconcerting, and the swine flu and the avian flu were both . . . they are things that make people think twice about what they’ve taken for granted.” Debbie was one of many we spoke to who was motivated to begin preserving food after the 2007 pet-food recall; she shared, “Our dog was a victim of the tainted pet food recall . . . and that caused me to start thinking about well, if the melamine is in our pet food, what could be in our food?” Like many participants, Jennifer indicated that she believes that the food she makes at home is much safer than what she can buy, “You know what’s in your food and you know that you did it under the best conditions and that you were really careful. I think that’s real important.”

*Taste.* In line with the survey and interview participants’ desire to eat safe food with known ingredients was taste, a benefit of local food often touted by Slow Food and sustainable agriculture groups. Richard insisted on the superiority of his homemade pickles, “You can’t go to the store and buy a decent pickle, so

you have to make them!” Elizabeth compared her applesauce to store-bought applesauce, “We find that store-bought sauces don’t have the flavors that our sauces have.” Mary Jo similarly compared her frozen corn to store-bought frozen corn, “When I open a bag of frozen corn, from the grocery store, it smells like freezer, it doesn’t smell like anything real. But when I open the Tupperware of frozen corn, it smells like corn! And it’s corn that had been harvested two days before I froze it.”

*Eating locally and sustainably.* For many interview participants, preserving food that they perceived was environmentally produced was bound up with their desires for knowing where food comes from and preferring food that tastes better. Preserving locally and sustainably grown food in season allowed the participants to “extend the seasons” and eat according to their environmental beliefs all year long. Katherine directly tied her decision to preserve to her environmental beliefs, “I think my dedication and interest is primarily one of environmental stewardship, and that’s where I think that using local foods and storing foods and eating seasonally is very important and necessary.” Mike’s justification for buying a small farm is illustrative of many interviewees’ desire to preserve food that was not transported over long distances, “So I’m doing all this because I believe in the peak oil conversation . . . not only do we intend to sustain ourselves here by growing as much of our food as we can, but we intend to preserve it in the most sustainable ways that we can.” Samantha was similarly motivated to preserve local food to reduce her reliance on food shipped from elsewhere:

I think buying food that’s been shipped in from some far country is not very nutritious, and most likely sprayed with a lot of chemicals. Or else really expensive, or else used a lot of diesel to get it here. I think its unsustainable . . . I think my answer is just put it all away in the summer, and then live out of your freezer and your pantry, and your root cellar.

Other interview participants were interested in preserving local food because of the connections they have made with producers in their area. For Elizabeth, this relationship makes the food more trustworthy than food grown and packaged by the global agro-food industry:

I think it’s bizarre that people pick up sauces that they have no idea where it comes from or how it’s made . . . You know where your food comes from, because either you grow it or you get it from a farmers market where you can ask the farmer, “how did you grow this?”

Taken together, our participants’ motivations for preserving food are aligned with the rhetoric and goals of alternative food networks. The wish to control what is in one’s food suggests a distrust of the current food system; the desire for better tasting food indicates a longing to enjoy the experience of eating to the fullest; and the goal of eating locally and sustainably reveals the participants’ dedication to eat according to their environmental beliefs. The impact and experience of our participants’ preservation practices, discussed below, demonstrate the ways preserving enabled them to build a deep emotional and sensorial relationship to food and food politics.

### *The Impact and Experience of Preserving Food*

While our online survey gave us a broad sense of what people were preserving and why, our interviews brought us deep into the experiential world of food preservation. What struck us most were the childhood memories of food preservation, the relationships built through preservation, the physical labor involved in preservation, and the deep connection preservers had with their finished product.

*Memories.* Though food politics undoubtedly played a significant role in our participants' motivations for preserving food, the stories they told about learning to preserve food suggest they also had deep emotional ties to the process and the product. Peggy shared memories of canning with her grandmother, "It's kind of a tradition . . . I learned it from my grandmother . . . I still use one of her crocks." Bethany reminisced about doing the prep work for her family's food preservation, "Some of the happiest memories I have of childhood were when my aunts used to come out and [we] would work on something."

Many of the interviewees described their food-preservation practices as extensions of family traditions and emphasized that food preservation connected to their ancestry. Carrie clearly connected her practices to family traditions, "That's just the way I grew up, food was really important. My grandparents were really serious about growing, preserving, and preparing really quality food." Louis similarly maintained, "When we preserve food, I look back over things. Some of the recipes we use have been passed down from my dad's parents, through my parents, my mother's parents, or great grandparents, down the line. It's a tradition and it's also my memories of my heritage."

While some participants learned to preserve from family, others sought help from strangers, and the process built new and long-lasting relationships. Barbara asked for help from a vendor at a nearby farmer's market, "There's a woman who sells at that market who does kind of old-school canning. And so I would always make something and then go back and ask her why it didn't come out exactly like I wanted it." Rita's interest in canning grew unexpectedly while on a vacation:

My husband and I were on a camping trip out in Utah and met an elderly couple who invited us into their camper for a cup of coffee and to visit. And we . . . were invited to stay for dinner. And she opened her cupboard and it was full of glass jars of food . . . So I asked this woman if she would teach me . . . she lived about 300 miles north of me. We arranged a trip. I spent a week with her . . . And, it was wonderful and I've been canning ever since.

*Relationships.* Regardless of how and when they learned, our interview participants agreed that preserving food with others provided an opportunity to build relationships and strengthen bonds. Jennifer and her husband make a point of preserving food with their children, "they have always helped, so it's a chance where you can visit and you can talk, and it doesn't seem so tedious." Elizabeth also likes to preserve food with her family, "I'll get my step-sons involved or my parents will come up . . . it really

is enjoyable because we make it something that we do together.” Debbie recalled a special day spent with a friend, “It was one of the nicest afternoons I spent with her. It’s a way to connect with other people.”

*Mental and physical labor.* Despite having fond remembrances of food-preservation experiences, many interview participants stressed the difficulties of food preservation, particularly with canning. The seemingly endless piles of food, the tediousness of preparation, and the physical discomfort of standing in a hot kitchen for hours at a time makes food preservation a challenging task, and one that stands out among many of the other less challenging ways to participate in food movements. Many interview participants, like Barbara, reported feeling anxious while preserving food, “I would start doing it and I would feel really overwhelmed by how much work there was to do.” Lack of experience with canning stressed Kevin out, “It just felt like there was so much that could go wrong . . . it just was a new experience and it felt like there was a lot at stake.”

Other participants discussed their physical experiences with preserving food. For example, Eric shared, “It’s a big time commitment and it’s pretty horrible at the time, standing in front of this boiling water and it’s the middle of the summer and I live on a third floor.” Kirsten’s description was comparable, “During the process, I often feel boring, hot, unpleasant in various ways . . . And a little stressful because you’re like, ‘If I don’t watch that jam at just the right moment, it’s all going to burn.’” Renee described candidly how she felt about canning, “I feel so much better about it once it’s done . . . It initially is one of my favorite things to do and then it ends up being very heavy. Like the hot kitchen, my feet get sore, I realize that while I’m excited to make a bunch of tomato sauce, I didn’t realize it was going to take me until 12:30 at night.”

*Sensory experiences.* If food preservation is a challenging task, it is also a rewarding one. Some of our interview participants revealed that the rewards are reaped at a physical level and experienced through the senses, while other rewards are more deeply felt as pride in one’s accomplishments and a connection to the earth and humanity. At the physical level, smells, sounds, and sights were frequently mentioned as pleasurable markers of a job well done. For example, Eric recounted the smells of canned goods, “For me, the biggest part is I think this idea of in the middle of winter, being able to open a can of tomato sauce and smell what smells like summer food, is like sort of a magical thing.” Several people, like Cathy, mentioned the bliss of hearing their jars seal, “if you’re jarring it and canning it, to hear it ping when you go to bed, and you’re like, ‘there it goes. It was worth it, it was totally worth it.’”

The sight of preserved food was mentioned frequently, particularly with reference to canned foods. Megan reported admiring her own jars, “Then when you’re done . . . having all of these gleaming jars.” Eric also reflected on the colors of his jars: “Just having these clear glass jars . . . even pickled stuff I think looks great ‘cause you have all these different colors in a clear glass . . . But just having the sort of rainbow of different colored things, and I like that they have no labels . . . and I think they have a really beautiful aesthetic.” Mary Jo’s reflection suggests that a sense of accomplishment

is strongly tied to the pleasure of the visual display of canned food, “I put it all on the shelf in my cabinet, and the shelf was actually starting to bow a little bit in the middle . . . I loved the sight of that! I loved the fact that I had captured all of this, and sort of put it on pause until I could eat it.”

*Pride and accomplishment.* As our interview participants’ reflections on their preserved foods indicate, bound up in the physical pleasure of preserved food is a sense of self-reliance and security. Scott shared how secure his preserved food makes him feel, “It’s kind of exciting to have like a freezer full of food . . . If I suddenly have no employment, I can eat for quite a while actually, with all the food that I have preserved.” Jennifer similarly said, “It is a real comfort to have stuff put aside that, if you needed it and you couldn’t get to the store or didn’t have the funds, then your family would still have food on the table.”

Many interview participants reported feeling proud of their preserved food. Kevin described, “I just think there was so much pride in the final product, of how good it tasted and how delicious it was.” Cathy reflected, “It’s just really nice to know we did it . . . I mean there’s definitely a feeling of accomplishment and empowerment.” Debbie felt her finished products symbolized her growth, “I felt like I had something to show for my efforts, like I had accomplished something.”

*Deep connections.* Many interview participants disclosed that on top of enjoying their preserved food and feeling empowered about their ability to preserve food, they created a stronger bond with history and with the forces of our planet. For instance, Rita shared that through food preservation she felt a connection with women worldwide, “I feel very connected to the women in my past and women worldwide who do this on a daily basis.” Kevin emphasized that the connection he now feels is beyond words, “I couldn’t even express the profoundness of the connection to some piece of just human heritage that I feel like I had been disconnected from.” Megan also reported feeling a connection to human history, “You kind of feel like you’re living a historical document of some kind.”

Building on the connections fostered through food preservation, quite a few interview participants recounted the ways in which their activities have given them a deeper understanding of their food and the earth. Scott shared that he now has a deeper appreciation for growing seasons, “We’re so used to food on demand. But, when you preserve or you garden, and you suddenly have all this food all at the same time, you do see it as kind of a, I guess a gift from nature that you have to hold onto somehow.” Many parents, like Kirsten, emphasized the knowledge that food preservation gives their children; she insisted that part of her motivation for preserving food is: “So that our children can make the connection between that green bean on their plate in January and understanding that that’s the same green bean we picked out of the garden in August and washed and blanched and here it is.” Rita described the disconnect from food she feels in the grocery store that she believes she repairs when she preserves, “I would really say [the benefit of food preservation is] a connection. And we’ve lost that connection when you go into a grocery store and it’s



fluorescent lit and everything is perfect on the aisles in identical labels and whatnot. That is such a sterile environment.”

The impact and experience of food-preservation practices demonstrate the ways in which alternative food activism can move beyond an individualistic consumer-oriented politics and build a deeper connection with food and the environment. Food preservation allowed our participants to extend family histories, build and sustain relationships, to experience the difficulties of food preservation through their senses, to feel proud of their accomplishments, and to develop a deep appreciation for humanity and the earth. The assertion made by many of our respondents that food preservation would be a regular part of their lives until they were physically incapable of doing so demonstrates the deeply felt commitment they have to saving food. We believe this commitment is tied to the participants’ involvement in food movements and the deep pleasure they receive from preserving food.

## Conclusion

Through our discussion of the motivations and experiences of our survey and interview participants, we have illustrated the ways preservation (in this case, specifically canning) upholds and extends the goals of alternative food networks. Our participants, who expressed a fundamental distrust of the global agro-food industry, preserved food to control the content of their food, improve its taste, and store locally and sustainably produced food to eat when such food is out of season. The experiences of our participants revealed that food preservation presents an opportunity to move alternative food practices away from an individualistic, consumer-oriented politics to a politics based upon relationships to self, others, and the earth, enabling activists to connect more deeply to the goals of food movements. Unlike the dominant discourses of food movements, which encourage an individualistic, consumer-oriented politics, food preservation emphasizes connection and relationships and thus has the potential to subvert the capitalistic logic of the global agro-food industry. The recent revival of canning, and its direct association with alternative food practices (e.g. Dickerson, 2010; Moskin, 2009), when combined with our participants’ experiences, reveals there is something important to be gleaned from the practices of food preservation.

Specifically, the emotional, historical, and sensory connections made by our survey respondents and interview participants demonstrate, as Delind (2006, p. 121) argues, “that cultural and nonrational elements are fundamental” to alternative food practices. We believe that the “enriched emotional life” (Parkins & Craig, 2009, p. 91) built through food-preservation experiences has the potential to build a deeper awareness of food and environmentalism and strengthen practitioners’ commitments to working to change the global agro-food industry. Importantly, the knowledge built through the everyday experiences of food preservation should not be discounted; though its impact may be less tangible than sales figures, our participants demonstrated that food preservation is an important political practice.

Our work on the political potential of food preservation has just scratched the surface. Future work should interrogate the impact of gender, race, and class on food

preservation and its practitioners. Future studies should also examine the growing efforts to make food preservation, canning specifically, more communal. Yes We Can in San Francisco and Canning Across America are interesting examples. The use of the World Wide Web to spread information about food preservation, particularly through blogs, is another fruitful avenue for study.

## References

- Bentley, A. (1998). *Eating for victory: Food rationing and the politics of domesticity*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Brehm, J.M., & Eisenhauer, B.W. (2008). Motivations for participating in community-supported agriculture and their relationship with community attachment and social capital. *Southern Rural Sociology*, 23, 94–115.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J.W., & Plano Clark, V.L. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Delind, L.B. (2006). Of bodies, place, and culture: Re-situating local food. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 19, 121–146.
- Dickerson, S. (2010, March 10). Can it: At-home preserving is ridiculously trendy. *Slate*. Retrieved March 10, 2010, from <http://www.slate.com/id/2246148/>
- Fiske, J. (1992). Cultural studies and the cultural of everyday life. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, & P.A. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural studies* (pp. 154–164). New York: Routledge.
- Gasteyer, S., Hultine, S.A., Cooperband, L.R., & Curry, M.P. (2008). Produce sections, town squares, and farm stands: Comparing local food systems in community context. *Southern Rural Sociology*, 23, 47–71.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Goodman, D., & DuPuis, E.M. (2002). Knowing food and growing food: Beyond the production-consumption debate in the sociology of agriculture. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 42, 5–22.
- Hassanein, N. (2003). Practicing food democracy: A pragmatic politics of transformation. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 19, 77–86.
- Martin, A. (2009, March 21). Is a food revolution now in season? *The New York Times*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Moskin, J. (2009, May 26). Preserving time in a bottle (or jar). *The New York Times*. Retrieved May 26, 2009, from [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/27/dining/27cann.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/27/dining/27cann.html?_r=2)
- Nestle, M. (2009, January–February). Reading the food social movement. *World Literature Today*, pp. 36–39.
- Parkins, W., & Craig, G. (2009). Culture and the politics of alternative food networks. *Food, Culture, & Society*, 12, 78–103.
- Pollan, M. (2006, May 7). Voting with your fork. *The New York Times*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from <http://www.pollan.blogs.nytimes.com>
- Shepherd, S. (2000). *Pickled, potted, and canned: How the art and science of food preserving changed the world*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Tam, D. (2008). Slow journeys: What does it mean to go slow? *Food, Culture, & Society*, 11, 208–218.