

## What's New in Good Old Biodiversity

— by David Szanto

### UNISG grads survey the state of our plates

**L**ocal became the new organic and a cheer went up. Organic became the new “new” and rapidly started biodegrading. “Improved” and “lite” got bulldozed into the buzzword landfill long ago. So as the discourse around biodiversity ramps up, is it in danger of losing its meaning too? Will it get co-opted for commercial interests and overused into empty, hypermodern rhetoric? Will gastro-wags like myself soon be standing around *Edible Magazine* launch parties trumpeting that *biodiversity is the new sustainability*, a heritage-rhubarb-and-artisanal-maple-syrup martini in hand?

To check the current pulse of biodiversity (and its meaning), I turned to fellow alumni of the Food Culture and Communications master’s program at the University of Gastronomic Sciences. Since graduating last November, our class has started a wide range of professional lives, all within food, but spread across geographies and occupations. In the US we have a cheese educator, a farm worker, a chef, a wineseller, a writer, a food traveler, and a market consultant. A nicely diverse bunch for sampling the significance of “biodiversity.”

Julie Glenn, who used to report television news, starts by pointing to the inherent communications challenge that biodiversity faces.

“In my previous work *biodiversity* was a story no one would touch with a 10-foot pole because it was way too complex to address in a minute and 15 seconds.” Today Julie is a wineseller on Florida’s Gulf Coast and praises biodiversity for the consumer angle it offers. Whereas 10 years ago she says diversity created confusion among neophyte wine drinkers, today the market has matured. Individual preferences have started to outweigh brand recognition, so emerging varietals and extensive regions offer a hook to those bored with Cab, Zin, and Chard. Driving increased consumption may not seem as noble as supporting agricultural security, but it does point out one big benefit of biodiversity: variety tastes good.

**Biodiversity is not a quick sell—if it is in its potential that biodiversity has value, rather than in an immediately visible benefit, is it any good to an instant-gratification society like ours?**

At Murray’s, New York City’s nexus of cheese, Taylor Cocalis coordinates the education program. Her take is that society rewards professional specialization, which in turn builds value around homogeneity in general. Combined with our functional approach to eating, it becomes ever harder to engage people in the pleasure of diverse eating. Enter biodiversity. “‘American cheese’ can only be tasted once, but a raw-milk, clothbound Cabot can be discovered over and over again, with countless variations in the taste, texture, and experience.” A single product with wide-ranging nuances allows her seminar participants to stay within their comfort zone while opening up to new sensations. Taylor’s Trojan horse is made of cheddar; in its belly, an army of biodiversity.

Sandra Messick, who has been traveling in Germany and Italy working for producers and food communities, looks to the dictionary for a definition. *Bi-o-di-ver-si-ty (n): the variety of life in the world or in a particular habitat or ecosystem.* Recently returned to California, her habitat has



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suddenly shifted. “I’ve come to the conclusion that there are three main ecosystems when it comes to eating in America: 1. Completely natural; 2. Completely Trader Joe’s; and 3. Completely manufactured.” For her, then, the spectrum of diversity has been telescoped. In a country that she feels has lost touch with food origins, Sandra’s solution is to create her own habitat and “hope a few converts come around soon to join me for a meal.”

After a bit of wandering myself, I returned to my hometown of Montreal post-Italy. On the food front, a trip to this city’s great Jean-Talon market reveals a tremendous spread. But having now been here for

a while, I'm also remembering the richness of our human diversity—the language and culture, the ethnic groups, the neighborhoods and economic classes. Growing up within the Montreal mosaic, I osmotically learned that diversity is both normal and necessary. Even more so than a breadth of gastronomy, cities need a panoply of social differences. Jammed up against each other, these differences breed conflict, yes, but also a great deal of fertility and innovation. In her 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, the late Jane Jacobs wrote:

*Does anyone suppose that, in real life, answers to any of the great questions that worry us today are going to come out of homogeneous settlements? ...Dull, inert cities, it is true, do contain the seeds of their own destruction and little else. But lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration, with energy enough to carry over for problems and needs outside themselves.*

Diversity goes hand-in-hand with future problem solving; it carries potential. This may be the very

Seattle's Pike Place market, Lauren Maxey delights in food diversity not only for its range of flavors and textures, but also for human diversity and the range of individual taste preferences. Together, the two drive her to be more creative in her cooking. It also drives her "to develop menus for a diverse clientele that expose each group to something they are comfortable with and also to something that is new or uncomfortable to them." More Trojan horseplay.

Looking forward, we should also look back. New Jerseyite Suzanne Wetzel works with the European Emporium market network and notes that historically, city food markets were inherently biodiverse. They represented the output of local producers, so necessarily would vary from region to region. (Of course the appeal of regional distinctiveness then perversely drove us to globalization. Ooh, bananas. Ship 'em to London!) Former Sacramento lobbyist Lisa Frank says that biodiversity simply wasn't on the radar in her legislative circles, even among the ag lobby. But she also remembers, from many years before, her cousin Mike, a Nevadan farmer with a huge and complex chart showing projected field rotations.

He was practicing biodiversity inadvertently, not because it sounded good at cocktail parties, nor for sales and marketing reasons. The rotations were just the way farming had always been done, and he kept it up because it made sense for his farm's longevity. Biodiversity for sustainability.

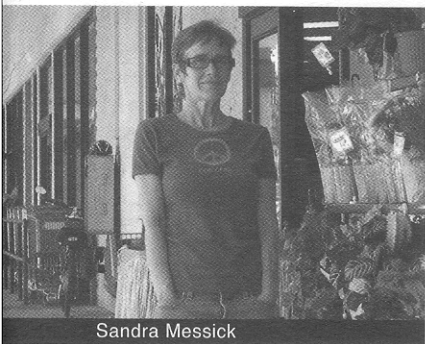
Much as I would now like, I don't

think I can really get away with my pronouncement about "the new sustainability." It doesn't seem that biodiversity is the new anything, really. I might even have to flip it around.

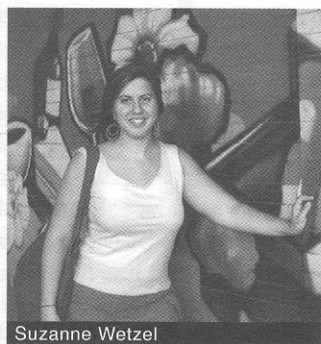
Let's see: "Biodiversity is the old—" Hmm, the old what? Tradition? Taste? Quality? I don't know. Maybe just... The Old.

David Szanto is a writer and communications consultant who would like to thank the wise American women of his UNISG class for their insights and help with this article.

The University of Gastronomic Sciences was co-founded by Slow Food in 2003 to educate new leaders for food communities around the world. For more information about its undergraduate and graduate programs, visit [www.unisg.it](http://www.unisg.it).



Sandra Messick



Suzanne Wetzel



Lisa Frank

reason biodiversity is not a quick sell—if it is in its potential that biodiversity has value, rather than in an immediately visible benefit, is it any good to an instant-gratification society like ours?

Yes, says Dana Zemel, who finds of-the-moment beauty in biodiversity. And not just for herself, but for the customers of and visitors to the organic CSA farm in Colorado where she works. "It means cheering on the lady bugs and daddy long-legs creeping and crawling through beds of Red Salad Bowl, Rudolf radishes, Armenian cucumbers, and Dragon carrots. [It also means] feeding the soil—not just the plant—to reach its full potential of healthy, beneficial microbes and nutrients." Further west, at