

sensory landscapes

Food + Earth = Real Place

A CONVERSATION WITH AMY TRUBEK

BARBARA SWIFT I am very interested in your book, *The Taste of Place*. I think Americans have a disconnected relationship to place, and your book gets at this in a very interesting manner.

AMY TRUBEK In the book, I tried to emphasize that the relationships to soil and to food for many humans, for much of history, were primarily sensorial experiences—aesthetic and livelihood experiences. We need to eat and drink to survive, but if we thought about agriculture as not just a tilling of the soil but an aesthetic of the soil including all the senses... I think that's an element environmental designers should think about. Something as simple as incorporating edible plants into annual planting can be a sensory experience combined with the aesthetic of food.

BS In your book, you focus on the relationship between food and place, but one of your observations had to do with food as a commodity that easily can be separated from place.

AT Food is fundamental to what we need to survive along with water, shelter, air, etc. However, we no longer think of the ability to procure food as the major constraint in our relationship to food. Instead, we think about our desires. There is a global system that allows us to think of our desires first and then use the marketplace to purchase our desires as commodities. For most Americans, food is primarily a commodity not linked to place. This has given us a tremendous amount of possibilities, but also created a skewed relationship with food.

There is a groundswell of concern because we put food in our bodies. We don't put houses in our bodies, so concerns about what we might be doing to ourselves physiologically by separating ourselves from place seems to be creating an interest in knowing where our food comes from—more interest than in knowing about light bulbs because our choice in light bulbs does not seem to have such a perilous quality. This is one of the reasons I think the topic of food is particularly powerful as a cultural conversation about place.

There are a lot of interesting implications to a place-less food system. We can eat anything we want whenever we want it. We have a level of variety in our diet that has never been seen before. If you were the Roman emperor you couldn't have the variety that I can have with my middle class life in the United States because you didn't have the resources or the technology. We have created systems resulting in tremendous variety, but the price we pay is that we don't know anything about where our food comes from or how it is made.

Now, as we struggle with the reality of a commodity system, we're trying to figure out what to do. In England they have a labeling system for meat arising from the problem with hoof and mouth disease in cattle in addition to mad cow. For safety, the consumer wants to know where the animals come from. Now you can get the information, but you are still in the placeless commodity system. You're just getting information. That's where we are moving because we don't want to give up variety and the ability to not be burdened by the work of food. Throughout history humans were burdened with trying to get food and trying to survive. Now we have a system that allows us to survive without feeling like somebody in the household has to spend all of their time procuring and preparing food.



BS I'm increasingly seeing labeling, particularly in produce, dealing with the source.

AT It's called the "Country of Origin" labeling law and is part of this visibility idea. Produce has to be labeled to indicate where it comes from. There was something I wanted recently, and it came from Guatemala, and I was like, "OK, well? Do I want to get it?" So then you're at that moment in the grocery store actively thinking about place—it's a new version of "Do I want the Twinkies or not?"

BS When I consider something, I think about the embodied energy, the use of resources, and it becomes a moral debate for me.

AT I think this is very important. Often when I give talks on *The Taste of Place*, somebody always wants to turn the discussion into a morality tale. I am really resistant to doing so. My fear is that then the discussion stays at the level of individual choice or judgment. You are to judge or not judge others, you judge or don't judge yourself. To talk about food and place this way keeps us in the American cultural belief system concerning food and doesn't create change. If we want to make food and place something different, we can't create morality tales. The stories should be about sensory pleasure related to where the food came from and the economic livelihood and cultural traditions of those who are involved in the work of that place. That's what I focus on.

BS You are endeavoring to change the fundamental relationship between food and place in the American culture.

AT Yes, and I don't necessarily think I'm going to succeed.

BS It seems that if we can't bridge the distance between the diversity/commodity food system and the place-based system, fundamental changes won't happen and the relationship to place in America won't mature or change.

AT I have a sociologist friend who says it's the discourse around food that is significant; what you're getting at is the discourse we will have around food in the future if we say that place is important. If we start to choose place-based food, then we have to create a discourse and system to support that behavior. How does that happen? Part of what I'm trying to do in the book is show that a taste of place discourse is emerging among certain groups. The next question is, will this be a meaningful discourse that chefs, cheesemakers and winemakers have solely among themselves or does it move to another layer of cultural acceptance and awareness?

BS This is a fundamental issue for all disciplines, and as individuals we understand the need for the discussion, but sometimes the professional training gets in the way of the discourse. If I have this conversation with a developer, they might personally understand and agree, but professionally they are working in a circumstance that makes it difficult to integrate the two things together.

AT There's a development — South Village — in South Burlington where a developer with a gardening and agriculture team has designed a farm in the middle of the development. People are able to get the farmed products; they have someone to run the farm, but because of the economy, the next stage has not been built. The farmer is running it as a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture); the homes are going to participate, and then they'll open it up to the larger community to sell the produce. I thought it was a great premise to have a farm in the middle of a development. Different forces are coming together with some really innovative problem solving. People are thinking across domains and making connections they never could have made 30 years ago, so I think our common sense might be shifting. I don't know the breadth or the depth of this change...I think you may see more and more innovative work that relates to place over the next 10 years.

BS For quite a long time I have thought that people respond to places as animals; therefore, you need to engage all the senses. I think food is a different way to tackle

this idea. I wonder if there are things in this book that would shift people's thinking and approaches concerning the profound disconnect between Americans and place.

AT The connection between taste and place is resonating in a way that's larger than when I first wrote about it. I would say that it's clear to me that there's a broad scope of people trying to understand place and localizing action. That's partly because of global climate change, among other reasons. So I say, "Oh, have you thought about taste in that way, too?" and people say, "Oh, oh yeah, I hadn't really thought about that." It's very interesting for me because when I wrote the book, I was not actively involved in the environmental movement — localizing foods because of climate change — but it's increasingly becoming a very dominant discourse. The book does not directly address some really new ideas, such as the locavore notion of eating within a hundred miles.

BS In the book, you used the terms sensuousity, pleasure, and, in listening to you talk now, *Babette's Feast* keeps coming to mind. You also talk about food and community, food and people talking, informal structures for getting food, selling food, and all of this goes back to the disconnect we discussed earlier. Do you see this shifting at all?

AT I'm hoping that we can have a new conversation about food that's connected to place and community. That is my ideal and in the book, when I explore that idea, what I'm talking about is what they call in France *cuisine de terroir* or regional cooking. I'm interested in the idea of regions and how we imagine our eating and cooking regionally because I think it's a really great way to cook. Here in Vermont (and in other regions) I see young people willing to invest their energy to make food that can be the building blocks of regional cuisine. So we have the cheese makers and the produce people, but we also have these amazing cooks and breadmakers and other food artisans—it's all here. Such availability has a huge impact on my quality of life.

BS In the 1970s, I worked on a planning study for the Golden Gate Nation Recreation Area located in the San Francisco Bay area including Point Reyes. I had always found that landscape to be one of the most profoundly beautiful, moving, evocative, sensuous places in the world. I have spent time in the area in the last year, and with food coming from the ranches out at Point Reyes, the relationship of food to place in this region is powerful. Again, it speaks to this disconnection and dissonance that I think exists to varying degrees in the way in which we inhabit the land.

AT The power of knowing a meal you've had your hand in and knowing the other people who put their hands in it—that's a landscape I believe in. It's an aspirational spiritual pleasure. In a way, it's why I wrote the book—because I love the agrarian landscape and I love cooking and eating. I was just in New York teaching a class and we went to this Latin American neighborhood, and I loved these tamales made by an Ecuadorian woman on the street...Because I live in an agrarian landscape now and because I've always been drawn to that landscape and because I love food, I just think it's an amazing way to eat and to live. I think that is something we might be seeing in the United States—the pleasure of eating the landscape and the importance of that pleasure is becoming a little broader.

A lot of what I attempt in *A Taste of Place* is to articulate the power of conversation in a community, and wouldn't it be great if landscape designers and planners started having conversations with cooks and cheesemakers and winemakers about creating a working landscape? I would love to see that. It's those conversations that I think would be so exciting for the future.

Amy B. Trubek is Assistant Professor in the Department of Nutrition and Food Sciences at the University of Vermont and previously taught at New England Culinary Institute. She is the author of *Haute Cuisine: How the French Invented the Culinary Profession* and of numerous articles that have appeared in *The Boston Globe*, *Gastronomica* and other publications. She lives with her husband and daughter in Cornwall, Vermont, where they own a small heirloom apple orchard.

