

Is this the year that the food movement finally enters politics?

By MICHAEL POLLAN

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One of the more interesting things we will learn on Nov. 6 is whether or not there is a “food movement” in America worthy of the name — that is, an organized force in our politics capable of demanding change in the food system. People like me throw the term around loosely, partly because we sense the gathering of such a force, and partly (to be honest) to help wish it into being by sheer dint of repetition. Clearly there is growing sentiment in favor of reforming American agriculture and interest in questions about where our food comes from and how it was produced. And certainly we can see an alternative food economy rising around us: local and organic agriculture is growing far faster than the food market as a whole. But a market and a sentiment are not quite the same thing as a political movement — something capable of frightening politicians and propelling its concerns onto the national agenda.

California’s Proposition 37, which would require that genetically modified (G.M.) foods carry a label, has the potential to do just that — to change the politics of food not just in California but nationally too. Now, there is much that’s wrong with California’s notorious initiative process: it is an awkward, usually sloppy way to make law. Yet for better or worse, it has served as a last- or first-ditch way for issues that politicians aren’t yet ready to touch — whether the tax rebellion of the 1970s (Prop 13) or medical marijuana in the 1990s (Prop 215) — to win a hearing and a vote and then go on to change the political conversation across the country.

What is at stake this time around is not just the fate of genetically modified crops but the public’s confidence in the industrial food chain. That system is being challenged on a great many fronts — indeed, seemingly everywhere but in Washington. Around the country, dozens of proposals to tax and regulate soda have put the beverage industry on the defensive, forcing it to play a very expensive (and thus far successful) game of Whac-A-Mole. The meat industry is getting it from all sides: animal rights advocates seeking to expose its brutality; public-health advocates campaigning against antibiotics in animal feed; environmentalists highlighting factory farming’s contribution to climate change.

Big Food is also feeling beleaguered by its increasingly skeptical and skittish consumers. Earlier this year the industry was rocked when a

blogger in Houston started an online petition to ban the use of “pink slime” in the hamburger served in the federal school-lunch program. Pink slime — so-called by a U.S. Department of Agriculture microbiologist — is a kind of industrial-strength hamburger helper made from a purée of slaughterhouse scraps treated with ammonia. We have apparently been ingesting this material for years in hamburger patties, but when word got out, the eating public went ballistic. Within days, the U.S.D.A. allowed schools to drop the product, and several supermarket chains stopped carrying it, shuttering several of the plants that produce it. Shortly after this episode, I received a panicky phone call from someone in the food industry, a buyer for one of the big food-service companies. After venting about the “irrationality” of the American consumer, he then demanded to know: “Who’s going to be hit next? It could be any of us.”

So it appears the loss of confidence is mutual: the food industry no longer trusts us, either, which is one reason a label on genetically modified food is so terrifying: we might react “irrationally” and decline to buy it. To win back this restive public, Big Food recently began a multimillion-dollar public-relations campaign, featuring public “food dialogues,” aimed at restoring our faith in the production methods on which industrial agriculture depends, including pharmaceuticals used to keep animals healthy and speed their growth; pesticides and genetically modified seeds; and concentrated animal feeding operations. The industry has never liked to talk about these practices — which is to say, about how the food we eat is actually produced — but it apparently came to the conclusion that it is better off telling the story itself rather than letting its critics do it.

This new transparency goes only so far, however. The industry is happy to boast about genetically engineered crops in the elite precincts of the op-ed and business pages — as a technology needed to feed the world, combat climate change, solve Africa’s problems, etc. — but still would rather not mention it to the consumers who actually eat the stuff. Presumably that silence owes to the fact that, to date, genetically modified foods don’t offer the eater any benefits whatsoever — only a potential, as yet undetermined risk. So how irrational would it be, really, to avoid them?

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Vote for the Dinner Party

Surely this explains why Monsanto and its allies have fought the labeling of genetically modified food so vigorously since 1992, when the industry managed to persuade the Food and Drug Administration — over the objection of its own scientists — that the new crops were “substantially equivalent” to the old and so did not need to be labeled, much less regulated. This represented a breathtaking exercise of both political power (the F.D.A. policy was co-written by a lawyer whose former firm worked for Monsanto) and product positioning: these new crops were revolutionary enough (a “new agricultural paradigm,” Monsanto said) to deserve patent protection and government support, yet at the same time the food made from them was no different than it ever was, so did not need to be labeled. It’s worth noting that ours was one of only a very few governments ever sold on this convenient reasoning: more than 60 other countries have seen fit to label genetically modified food, including those in the European Union, Japan, Russia and China.

To prevent the United States from following suit, Monsanto and DuPont, the two leading merchants of genetically modified seed, have invested more than \$12 million to defeat Prop 37. They’ve been joined in this effort by the Grocery Manufacturers Association, whose president declared at a meeting last July that defeating Prop 37 would be the group’s top priority for 2012. Answering the call, many of America’s biggest food and beverage makers — including PepsiCo, Nestlé, Coca-Cola and General Mills — have together ponied up tens of millions of dollars to, in effect, fight transparency about their products.

Americans have been eating genetically engineered food for 18 years, and as supporters of the technology are quick to point out, we don’t seem to be dropping like flies. But they miss the point. The fight over labeling G.M. food is not foremost about food safety or environmental harm, legitimate though these questions are. The fight is about the power of Big Food. Monsanto has become the symbol of everything people dislike about industrial agriculture: corporate control of the regulatory process; lack of transparency (for consumers) and lack of choice (for farmers); an intensifying rain of pesticides on ever-expanding monocultures; and the monopolization of seeds, which is to say, of the genetic resources on which all of humanity depends.

These are precisely the issues that have given rise to the so-called food movement. Yet that movement has so far had more success in building an alternative food chain than it has in winning substantive changes from Big Food or Washington. In the last couple of decades, a new economy of

farmers’ markets, community-supported agriculture (also known as farm shares) and sustainable farming has changed the way millions of Americans eat and think about food. From this perspective, the food movement is an economic and a social movement, and as such has made important gains. People by the millions have begun, as the slogan goes, to vote with their forks in favor of more sustainably and humanely produced food, and against agribusiness. But does that kind of vote constitute a genuine politics? Yes and no.

It’s easy to dismiss voting with your fork as merely a lifestyle choice, and an elite one at that. Yet there is a hopeful kind of soft politics at work here, as an afternoon at any of America’s 7,800-plus farmers’ markets will attest. Money-for-food is not the only transaction going on at the farmers’ markets; indeed, it may be the least of it. Neighbors are talking to neighbors. Consumers meet producers. (Confirming the obvious, one social scientist found that people have 10 times as many conversations at the farmers’ market as they do at the supermarket.) City meets country. Kids discover what food is. Activists circulate petitions. The farmers’ market has become the country’s liveliest new public square, an outlet for our communitarian impulses and a means of escaping, or at least complicating, the narrow role that capitalism usually assigns to us as “consumers.” At the farmers’ market, we are consumers, yes, but at the same time also citizens, neighbors, parents and cooks. In voting with our food dollars, we enlarge our sense of our “interests” from the usual concern with a good value to, well, a concern with values.

This is no small thing; it has revitalized local farming and urban communities and at the same time raised the bar on the food industry, which now must pay attention (or at least lip service) to things like sustainable farming and the humane treatment of animals. Yet this sort of soft politics, useful as it may be in building new markets and even new forms of civil society, has its limits. Not everyone can afford to participate in the new food economy. If the food movement doesn’t move to democratize the benefits of good food, it will be — and will deserve to be — branded as elitist.

That’s why, sooner or later, the food movement will have to engage in the hard politics of Washington — of voting with votes, not just forks. This is an arena in which it has thus far been much less successful. It has won little more than crumbs in the most recent battle over the farm bill (which every five years sets federal policy for agriculture and nutrition programs), a few improvements in school lunch and food safety and the symbol of an organic garden at the White House. The modesty of these

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achievements shouldn't surprise us: the food movement is young and does not yet have its Sierra Club or National Rifle Association, large membership organizations with the clout to reward and punish legislators. Thus while Big Food may live in fear of its restive consumers, its grip on Washington has not been challenged.

Yet. Next month in California, a few million people will vote with their votes on a food issue. Already, Prop 37 has ignited precisely the kind of debate — about the risks and benefits of genetically modified food; about transparency and the consumer's right to know — that Monsanto and its allies have managed to stifle in Washington for nearly two decades. If Prop 37 passes, and the polls suggest its chances are good, then that debate will most likely go national and a new political dynamic will be set in motion.

It's hard to predict exactly how things will play out if Prop 37 is approved. Expect the industry to first try to stomp out the political brush fire by taking the new California law to court on the grounds that a state cannot pre-empt a federal regulation. One problem with that argument is that, thanks to the bio-tech industry's own lobbying prowess, there is no federal regulation on labeling, only an informal ruling, and therefore nothing to pre-empt. (I believe this is what is meant by being hoist with your own petard.) To avoid having to slap the dread letters on their products, many food companies will presumably reformulate their products with non-G.M. ingredients, creating a new market for farmers and for companies selling non-G.M. seed. The solidarity of Monsanto and companies like Coca-Cola — which reaps no benefit from using G.M. corn in its corn syrup — might then quickly crumble. Rather than deal with different labeling laws in different states, food makers would probably prefer to negotiate a single national label on G.M. foods. Consumer groups like the Just Label It campaign, which has collected 1.2 million signatures on a petition to force the F.D.A. to label G.M. foods, thus far to no avail, would suddenly find themselves with a seat at the table and a strong political hand.

One person in Washington who would surely take note of the California vote is President Obama. During the 2008 campaign, he voiced support for many of the goals of the food movement, including the labeling of G.M. food. ("We'll let folks know whether their food has been genetically modified," he declared in an Iowa speech in 2007, "because Americans should know what they're buying.") As president he has failed to keep that promise, but he has taken some positive steps: his U.S.D.A. has done much to nurture the local-food economy, for

example. Perhaps most important, Michelle Obama began a national conversation about food and health — soft politics, yes, but these often help prepare the soil for the other kind. Yet on the hard issues, the ones that challenge agribusiness-as-usual, President Obama has so far declined to spend his political capital and on more than one occasion has taken Monsanto's side. He has treated the food movement as a sentiment rather than a power, and who can blame him?

Until now. Over the last four years I've had occasion to speak to several people who have personally lobbied the president on various food issues, including G.M. labeling, and from what I can gather, Obama's attitude toward the food movement has always been: What movement? I don't see it. Show me. On Nov. 6, the voters of California will have the opportunity to do just that.

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