

Drop That Flour!

BY TIM ROWLAND

Earlier this year, some of my green-leaning neighbors tried to hold a public “localvore” dinner consisting entirely of locally raised products. They soon hit a snag: the bread. Loaves don’t just grow on trees, you know, so how to mop up the gravy without resorting to flour produced by Big Ag?

After some searching, they found an area woman who grew her own grain and milled it into flour by cranking away on a grinder clamped to her kitchen table. Problem solved — or so it seemed. Because the dinner was open to the public, local health inspectors got involved and they didn’t take kindly to the hand-cranking miller. Because hers was now a commercial enterprise, the inspectors wanted a map of the premises complete with HAZMAT provisions and evacuation routes. Presumably, if she encountered some heat that she couldn’t stand, she’d simply get out of her own kitchen — but regulators can’t be too careful.

Some weeks later in Lancaster, Pa., Pennsylvania state troopers raided the home of Mennonite farmer Mark Nolt. They seized more than \$20,000 in equipment and placed Nolt under arrest for selling the white stuff. Not cocaine, but unpasteurized milk. It seems there’s a market for “raw” milk — some consumers believe it has health benefits while others think it tastes better than the cooked stuff. Nolt was simply satisfying the demand for milk straight from the cow.

Demand for such products isn’t — and I can’t imagine every will be — a mass phenomenon. But there is a growing segment of consumers who want to take a step or two beyond organic. Some want to shrink their “carbon footprint” by reducing how far their food travels and how much it’s processed. Others worry about the well-being of the animals that provide their ham and eggs. And others simply want to give an economic boost to the local farmers and other producers who furnish that great little positive externality called local green space. They are willing to pay extra for what they want, and that should be their right.

So why would health inspectors and regulators want to ruin their dinner parties? To be sure, food-borne illnesses can be nasty. But Nolt’s customers knew what they were buying — in fact, they explicitly *wanted* unpasteurized milk, regardless of its risk. So it’s hard to say the lights-and-siren government



intervention was to address some public health issue or other market failure. And it’s hard to say how welfare is improved by requiring a lady grinding grain at her kitchen table to have a HAZMAT plan.

It would be fun to link these stories to some grand rent-seeking scheme cooked up by those nasty villains at Big Ag. But I doubt they see much risk of competition from raw milk and “home-grown-and-ground” flour.

Much of human history has been about the struggle to escape famine and pestilence. Here in the United States, where land is fertile, farmers are industrious, and inventors and entrepreneurs

abound, we didn’t just outrace those apocalyptic horsemen, we ground them into the dirt. Even when much of the U.S. population migrated from the farm to cities and suburbs, we found ways to process, package, and transport food that kept it safe for consumption.

Along the way, we built up systems of regulation. Do you want fresh milk even though you live in the big city? No problem; require dairy farmers to bring their milk together in one place where it is tested, pasteurized and packaged, and then delivered by refrigerated truck to city supermarkets’ dairy cases. That’s why milk-induced poisoning is almost unheard of, except in bachelors’ apartments.

But what happens when some consumers want products that specifically avoid those systems of industry and regulation?

Government inspectors and regulators are like all other workers: they want to keep collecting their paychecks and avoid hassles. The last thing they want is an angry boss, media scrutiny, public criticism, and — God forbid — some sort of formal inquiry or court case about why they diverted from tried-and-true regulations that have governed health and safety problems for decades. Those unpleasanties can be avoided by sticking to — and being sticklers for — the rules. Why put yourself at risk to accommodate a small group of consumers with oddball tastes?

But though the localvore and raw milk movements are small, they include some people with clout: the suburbanite soccer moms and dads who’ve traded in their SUVs for Priuses and recumbent bikes. And they have some great photo-op heroes like Mennonite farmers who are being carted away in handcuffs.

It may all be enough to make some politicians and bureaucrats squirm — and rewrite the rules.

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