

Opinion: Saving America's small farms one apple at a time

By Chris Mittelstaedt

For more than 100 years, farmers in Graton and Sebastopol have been raising and harvesting the fickle and short-lived Gravenstein apple. In the 1940s, when this Sonoma County region shipped dried Gravenstein apples and applesauce to American troops, there were more than 10,000 acres in production. Today there are 900 acres, with only 15 farmers keeping this rare apple's production alive.



Saving the Gravenstein goes beyond the foodie arguments for preservation, the noble goals of sustainability or the sentimentality for things of yore. Saving the Gravenstein and other small farms and their unique products makes our cultural and economic immune system strong with self-sufficiency, draws on a legacy

of Grange hall independence that strengthens communities, and pushes back against the trend that values sameness.

Small agriculture defines a sense of place in a way that goes beyond food and straight to the meaning of democracy and capitalism. In our modern world, where from Beijing to Boston to Belfast you can order a burger and count on its exact reproduction, we often confuse the opportunity for material equality with freedom. The comfort that comes with sameness lulls us into complacency.

We forget how to do things for ourselves.

We assume that there is an invisible system running programs and that they (whomever they are) will make sure that things are done well and safely on our behalf.

We begin to value what is familiar rather than what is innovative or different.

There is some confusion and concern following the passage of the Food Safety Modernization Act, the sweeping reform of our food safety laws signed into law in April, as the FDA has yet to come out with rules to implement it. Small farmers we work with say, regardless of the final rules, the large buyers, insurers and other entities will hold sway over farming operations, and will raise the bar of compliance beyond what is reasonable for a small farm.

There are concern that animals, including birds, bats, deer, foxes, and even dogs, will be deemed hazardous. While I understand the food safety concerns, the concept of sterilizing the biodiversity of a farm only leads down one path: to no more outdoor farms.

There is discussion about accommodating small growers, but the trend is not good, and the mood is akin to an agricultural Patriot Act, where an over inflated concern about food safety puts at risk American agricultural life as we know it.

While food safety is important, the sameness that drives compliance threatens consumers, may not make food safer and muzzles the important and independent voice of small farms.

Yvon Chouinard, the founder of the company Patagonia said, "We are not citizens any more; we're consumers." But if what we can consume is hindered before it gets to us, then the vote we cast is no vote at all.

So when you shop, think about what you are voting for. Saving

the Gravenstein or the Blenheim apricot or the Fey Alberta peach or a small farm growing acres of greens is about creating environments and markets for that produce.

Laws and regulations shouldn't hand a competitive advantage to large farms. Small farms are more than just places that grow food – they are vital to our democracy.

Chris Mittelstaedt is the founder and CEO of The FruitGuys. He is working with the Russian River chapter of Slow Food to raise funds for the Gravenstein farmers.