

# Making Traditional Foodways Visible

By Hilda Kurtz

While the language of the Local Food and Community Self-Governance Ordinance (LFCSGO, see pages 18-19) is straightforward, the implications of the ordinance have been more complex. The passage of the LFCSGO in multiple towns has catalyzed political debate, legislative efforts, and litigation, leaving the future of the ordinance and small-scale agriculture in Maine uncertain.

Adding to the ambiguity, the intent of the ordinance seems misunderstood in many quarters. Mainstream media accounts commonly caricature the ordinance as a libertarian rejection of government intervention in order to privilege individual freedoms. While the ordinance finds support from across the political spectrum, my interviews with 30+ people thinking carefully about the LFCSGO, limit a libertarian interpretation and underscore the importance the ordinance places on relationships of trust and respect between members of communities. My interview participants suggest that it is a deeply populist policy instrument that radically challenges business as usual in food and agricultural regulation.

Two key themes around what the ordinance is intended to protect emerged from the interviews. First, it protects people's relationships and their own judgment. A majority expressed willingness to accept the consequences of any mistakes or accidents that might occur, and rejected the idea that they should allow a state apparatus to infantilize them by eliminating or marginalizing their own capacity for judgment about a neighbor's farming practices.

Second, the ordinance protects people's social networks built on trust, care and respect, which are fostered through exchanges of farm food. As

people come to rely on one another's care and judgment in producing food safely, they form strong and enduring social bonds with one another. Within the deeply localized food systems at stake in the ordinance struggle, people explained, any problems with a given farm's food can be quickly traced to their source, and the

farmer entrusted to remedy the problem. If the farmer doesn't do so, then social and economic networks will respond accordingly. What people are describing is the social embeddedness of market relations, in which non-market social relationships shape economic relationships, and vice versa. Such mutually reinforcing relationships in turn foster strong communities.

The social embeddedness of market relations is invisible to neoliberal capitalism, which assumes a deeply atomistic human existence, in which individuals act only in relation to themselves and their own needs. The neoliberal world view was starkly described by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher when she asserted that "there is no such thing as society, only individuals." If Thatcher were right, then perhaps extensive and intrusive agrifood regulations would be called for. But try as neoliberal capitalism might, Thatcher's vision of rank individualism does not hold water — except perhaps on Wall Street and K Street. The social fabric of mutual trust, respect and neighborliness in places like rural Maine, and countless others like it, embeds economic exchanges in social relationships, and sustains age-old mechanisms for sustaining rural communities and producing farm food safely.

Such multi-layered social relationships are not only invisible to neoliberal capitalism, they are also unrecognized by state regulatory apparatuses, which rely on schematic simplifications to control territory and populations, and in the case at hand, food and farming. The LFCSGO rejects these simplifications and calls for recognition of the socially embedded local food networks which enrich life in rural Maine. In this way, the ordinance has opened important debates about the character and capacity of populist politics now and in the future.

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## Transformative Right to Food

In Olivier de Schutter's final report as the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food in January 2014, called *The Transformative Potential of the Right to Food*, the conclusion is made that ensuring the right to food rests on developing food sovereignty at multiple geographic scales and levels of governance. The report notes that "empowering communities at the local level, in order for them to identify the obstacles that they face and the solutions that suit them best, is a first step."

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