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Guest essay: Back fair and healthy farms

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This 2010 photo shows Colleen McCray of Rochester working at Mud Creek Farm, a community supported agriculture farm in Victor. / TINA YEE/staff photographer

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When the average American goes grocery shopping, seldom does he or she ask the questions of where their food came from, how it was produced, who produced it and under what labor conditions. Unlike our older family members who were able to directly participate in the food system by growing and cooking unprocessed foods, or directly purchasing their food from farmers on the outskirts of the neighborhood, our generation is far removed from the slightest concept of a food system. However, the opportunity to reclaim the old consciousness of our food system is not impossible. Unfortunately, there has yet to be an effective state food council to provide oversight and raise awareness of the food system to the everyday consumer (which would be all of us who eat).

In the absence of oversight, nonprofits have stepped to the plate. Organizations like the Agricultural Justice Project (AJP) and Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York (NOFA-NY)

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Jerome Nathaniel, guest essayist / Provided photo

have accepted the responsibility of ensuring that consumers know which foods were produced with the utmost integrity for land, farmers, farm-workers, consumers, contractors and labor relations.

The AJP is a national organization that has been working for more than a decade to develop universal standards to raise the bar for the conditions in which our food is produced.

One of the founders, and a community supported agriculture (CSA) pioneer, Elizabeth Henderson, was eager to pilot AJP's Farm Justice Pledge program in Rochester through NOFA-NY, one of the four partner organizations behind AJP. So far, two farms, Mud Creek Farm of Victor and Fellenz Family Farm in Phelps, Ontario County, both of which operate CSAs, have qualified to pilot the Food Justice label for the 2013 season.

But, what does the pledge entail?

By purchasing food that has the Food Justice emblem, you can be sure that the food was produced by farm-workers who worked 40-hour work weeks and were paid overtime if they worked additional hours; the farm-workers were provided shelter (if necessary) and time off; that the farm allows farm-workers the right to collective bargaining and a living wage; that any economic growth will be reciprocated in the farm-workers' wages and the food price; and you will know that it was all produced locally.

Your health will also notice that the food is not highly processed and was grown organically.

For this first season of the Pledge in Rochester, its success lies in consumers' hands, hearts and bellies.

There may not be a food council, but there is a community that can shape the agricultural system as we know it. Visit Mud Creek Farm and Fellenz Family Farm websites (mudcreekfarm.com and fellenzfamilyfarm.com respectively) and remember that eating is a vital part of agriculture's cyclical system.

Nathaniel assisted with NOFA-NY's Food Justice Pledge Pilot Program.

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