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Asian choices in a local food movement



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Rice may not be the most sustainable choice - but it's an integral part of Asian culture. Photo by stvendepolo via Flickr (<http://bit.ly/jzmO7A>).



Reported by [Colleen Kimmitt](#)
Friday, June 10, 2011

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To Janine Pham, a bowl of rice is not just a side dish. It's intimately tied to culture and identity.

So even though she knows the environmental impacts of producing rice—the long distance it has to travel and the droughts, floods and storms plaguing the rice-growing regions of the world—it's hard for her to imagine giving it up.

"To me, rice is synonymous with family," she says.

At a panel discussion in Richmond May 24 that focused on Asian choices in a local food system, organizer and moderator Arzeena Hamir challenged audience members with this question: "Should we stop eating rice?"

It was the same question she had posed earlier this month in a [column](#) for the Richmond Review, which serves a community that is 60 per cent Asian. "I got a lot of emails about that," she says emphatically. "But I was hoping to make it quite provocative and so I was willing to kind of take that."

Hamir says she specifically picked this hot-button issue as a way to engage the Asian community in the local food movement—a movement she has helped build in the Lower Mainland as a farmer and chair of the [Richmond Food Security Society](#).

Richmond is home to many Asian farmers and a growing abundance of Asian food choices, particularly vegetables. But Hamir believes local production is not a real selling feature in the Asian community.

"Young Chinese activists we talked to said two main things that influenced food purchasing decisions in their house [were] price and quality... sourcing was never even discussed," said Hamir. "So I just wanted to at least bring that to the table and possibly start provoking conversations."

The evening featured three panelists, each of whom offered their own take on Asian food in a local food context.

Bard Suen presented a [photo project](#) called 'Thinking Global Buying Local', which features images of B.C.'s first wave of immigrants set against modern "sustainable" backdrops like a Capers produce aisle or fair trade coffee shop. He created these images to illustrate his research on "whiteness" in the green movement.

"Getting back to the rural life doesn't necessarily resonate well with immigrants," he says. "And how do you

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translate 'green'?"

Claudia Li, a first-generation Canadian whose parents immigrated from Hong Kong, says traditional Chinese values of "conservation, the value of not wasting, and community" fit well with the local food movement. She recalls eating mounds of chicken feet as a child, and how her grandmother told her that the Chinese used every part of the animal.

This memory, she says, later spurred her to launch [Shark Truth](#), a campaign against shark fin soup. She says more and more young Chinese couples are now opting out of this customary course at their wedding receptions.

Finally, Kevin Washbrook of [Rangi Changi Roots](#) gave attendees a snapshot of current global rice production, which is simultaneously contributing to and at great risk from climate change. Right now a quarter of the world's total caloric intake comes from rice, he says.

"In the future, there's going to be less rice to go around and that's the truth," says Washbrook. "If push comes to shove, should we be eating rice? Or should we be leaving it for people who don't have a choice?"

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Submitted by Lima Alazzeah on Mon, 2011-06-13 15:14.

Definitely a thought-provoking question. I'm Middle Eastern and rice is undoubtedly the main staple of our diet as well. Despite the fact that most other items we buy to accompany the rice (or I guess that the rice accompanies) is fresh, locally sourced food. We do shop at small local markets for our fruit and veg as opposed to the major grocery stores. Is a balance enough? I'd love to hear more opinions about this from Asian, Persian, Middle Eastern people as they're all cultures where rice is a staple.

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Submitted by arzeena on Fri, 2011-06-10 13:15.

Thanks for covering the event with such sensitivity, Colleen. We have much to learn from the Asian community but there are also some very tough choices that need to be made.

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