

From the Bottom Up: The Global Expansion of Chinese Vegetable Trade for New York City Markets **II**

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NEW YORK CITY presents an enormous and ever-changing market for a vast diversity of food products. In New York you can indulge your senses in sticky Jordanian pastries made with pistachios imported from Afghanistan, Amazonian *agáí* whipped into shakes, and a steaming bowl of Vietnamese *pho* with a fresh sprig of Thai basil floating atop. New York City prides itself on the ability to offer authentic tastes from distant corners of the world. This joy of urban life depends on a global order of trade. Traditional food products increasingly come from nontraditional places.¹ Chinese okra is grown in Honduras, rambutan in Guatemala, and longan in Mexico. New York, like most other cities, contributes to a supposedly efficient, industrial and corporately controlled food system. Such agribusiness developed in part to feed burgeoning urban populations. Yet within the same cities that support industrial agriculture, other systems are defined and redefined every day. The many spaces of New York City offer opportunities for alternatives to the seemingly dominant political economic reality of corporate globalization. Multilingual, transnational peoples find ways to use spaces not appropriated by corporate interests to create their own international systems of capital exchange.

Immigrant populations develop alternative food systems, yet they have not been adequately analyzed, empirically or theoretically, in the food system literature. Studies have analyzed the ethnicities of farm workers highlighting otherwise invisible aspects of production systems (Wells 1996). Ethnicity, however, has not been considered in studies of marketing and distribution (Friedland 2001). Researchers are finding that the activities of once seemingly ephemeral immigrant communities are playing an important and unnoticed role in global political and economic restructuring, particularly in New York City (Stoller 2002; Guest 2003) and that global circulation is not just the rhetoric of corporate expansion (Tsing 2000). The complexities and dynamism of cities in particular present a multitude of opportunities for activities alternative to dominant structures (Harvey 2001).



In this chapter I begin to sketch what I see as an alternative food system in New York City, the Chinatown food system. The Chinese control their own distribution networks, moving thousands of boxes of fruits and vegetables a day through warehouses in Manhattan and Brooklyn to be sold by independent greengrocers and street vendors in the city's multiple Chinatowns. While some Chinese merchants use Hunt's Point Terminal Market, the city's main distribution point and the country's largest terminal market for conventional fruits and vegetables, the vast majority of Asian products are traded by Chinese brokers outside of Hunt's Point.

The practice of fruit and vegetable exchange in Chinatown has historical roots. Since the development of a Chinese enclave in lower Manhattan over one hundred years ago, the Chinese have created their own networks of exchange. Local farms in New Jersey and Long Island operated by Chinese families grew and trucked fruits and vegetables preferred by the urban Chinese to be sold in Chinatown markets.

Currently Chinatown's fresh fruit and vegetable markets are part of a highly complex, global system of production and distribution. Fresh food products now come from New York state, New Jersey, Florida, California, Mexico, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic as well as Taiwan, mainland China, and other places. Although Chinatown's food system is undergoing rapid geographic expansion, it does not display the hegemonic tendencies of global agro-food systems (McMichael 1994; Lyson and Rayner 2000; Goodman and Watts 1997; Bonnano et al. 1994; Barnard 2002). The industry is neither vertically nor horizontally integrated, nor has it been subject to corporate appropriation. From farm to retail level, businesses are individually owned and operated. Transport is contracted by independent trucking companies, and as many as three brokers may be involved in international commodity chains. Individuals who grow, sell, import, and export Chinese fruits and vegetables employ their cultural knowledge about food preferences, language skills, and kin and ethnic ties to develop a food system to meet the demands of Chinese, other East Asian, and Southeast Asian ethnic groups.

Can a Global Food System Meet the Goals of "Alternative" Food Systems?

Food systems that contest, resist, and oppose global agro-food systems share a political agenda for ecological sustainability, economic viability, and social justice. Alternatives are united in the practice of reconstructing a locally situated, decentralized food system (Kloppenborg et al. 1996; Hinrichs 2000), or in the commodification of ecologically and socially responsible food production and trade (Guthman 2000; Murray and Reynolds 2000). Tensions between local and global processes are constantly negotiated and it is clear that the local-global binary is problematic. Although it has been recognized that the ideology of alternative food



systems has been better theorized than the practice itself (Allen et al. 2003), the tensions between the local and global have not been reconsidered in theory or in practice. The commitment to the relocalization of agriculture is indeed an important one, but I am afraid that it may obscure merits of other systems, particularly systems that feed people across class boundaries. We cannot ignore that farmers' markets, artisan slow foods, organic, and fairly traded foods can often be prohibitively expensive, and they may only appeal to certain demographics as well as class sensibilities. We continue to face the challenge of defining the many manifestations of "alternativeness" (Watts et al. 2005).

If we compare part of the mission of slow food and its sister alternatives—to conserve agricultural diversity and protect traditional foods—to Chinatown's food system, there is a clear commonality. Supplying a market with over one hundred types of fresh, culturally specific ingredients year round, as Chinatown's food system does, can very much help conserve biodiversity as well as gastronomic traditions. *Cittaslow* (slow cities), according to their website, seek to promote something "less frantic, yielding, and fast—no doubt more human, environmentally correct and sensible." Chinatown at any given moment is often frantic, but when you step back and think about how the community has retained so much of its cultural tradition while the city is constantly changing and hybrid cultures are constantly forming, you recognize the "slowness" of New York's Chinese community. The pace of immigration and trade may deliver change, but it can also slow change. New immigrants sustain old habits, and old habits are sustained by trade.

This chapter seeks to bring the global into the alternative food system discussion by exploring what Chinatown's food system looks like. While the Chinatown food system *in practice* displays part of the vision of alternative food systems, it does not share in its political agenda. The global expansion of the food system follows processes outside of the dominant industrial and corporately controlled food system, but not by consciously resisting it. I argue that Chinatown's food system constitutes an alternative global food system in which individual entrepreneurs are making new spatial connections through their lived experiences, and that this system contributes biological diversity to produce stands of the city, as well as helping sustain cultural practices of new and old urban inhabitants.

The Development of Chinatown's Food System

The development of Chinatown's food system is intertwined with the history of Chinese immigration and the development of the Chinese enclave in lower Manhattan. The first major wave of Chinese immigration to the United States was from Canton Province (now Guangdong) and began over one hundred years ago. Until this migration, only small populations of Chinese sailors, cooks, and others



involved in US-China trade were living in lower Manhattan in the mid-1800s in the multiethnic Five Points area. After the British forced open the ports of southeastern China in the Opium War (1839–1842), Chinese laborers from the port city of Canton (now Guangzhou) were transported to California to mine in the Gold Rush. They later went on to build the western spur of the transcontinental railroad. At this time Chinese “coolies” were also sent to the Caribbean and South America, and many Chinese immigrated to locations through Southeast Asia initiating the Chinese diaspora. As a result of these labor migrations, New York’s Chinese population expanded steadily in the late 1870s.

An economic recession heightened antipathy toward the Chinese. Many Chinese departed from California back to China or to the East Coast to escape California’s racially charged environment. Anti-Chinese sentiments were codified with the passage of the Exclusion Act in 1882. Chinatowns along the East Coast grew both involuntarily and voluntarily. Because they were denied structural assimilation, the Chinese developed enclaves for self-protection as well as social and economic improvement (Zhou 1992).

The food system arose out of the desire to preferentially feed the enclave. Like much of Chinatown’s social and economic activity, the food system operated outside of the mainstream food system in New York. Restaurants were one of the first business sectors to develop in Chinatown. Restaurants catered to Chinatown’s bachelor society. Tea houses and “chop suey” houses were places where men could get hot, homemade meals and socialize with others. Typical Cantonese dishes (which would come to be known as Chinese-American food) like chop suey, lo mein, chow mein, and fried rice were served because they were quick and inexpensive mixtures of meats and vegetables (Zhou 1992). The demand for basic Chinese vegetables like bok choy, *lo bak* (Chinese radish), *ong choy* (water spinach), and *dau mai* (snow pea shoots) encouraged Chinese farms to develop in the agricultural areas outside of New York City.

Much like the dominant food systems of the time, Chinese fruits and vegetables were grown in New Jersey and Long Island and trucked into Manhattan. It was also reported that greens for winter trade and some subtropical items were supplied from gardens in Florida and even Cuba (Porterfield 1951). Records of Chinese crops in the United States date back to the nineteenth century. The prominent American horticulturalist Liberty Hyde Bailey wrote about Chinese crops in the United States in 1894 and their great potential for assimilation into the American diet. Mainstreaming “ethnic” crops is a preoccupation of those interested in the economic potential of new crops. The Chinese cabbages (*Brassica spp.*) were among the earliest cultivated Chinese crops in the United States, possibly because they were regarded in this way. It is no wonder that bok choy and napa cabbage are seen on almost every supermarket shelf today. There were many more food items of



less interest to agronomists but regularly sold in Chinatown. In 1937 over forty types of plant foods were available in Chinatown, including dried items like fungus, fruits, and lily flowers in addition to fresh roots, tubers, fruits, and leafy vegetables (Porterfield 1937).

The First Chinese Farmers

A few of the vegetables sold, such as cabbage, found their way into Chinese markets in the United States many years ago, but a large number, because they do not appeal to American palates, because of difficulties raising them as agricultural crops or perhaps merely because they are as yet unknown to the American farmer, are cultivated for Chinese use, that is for their own benefit or for Chinese-American restaurants. (Porterfield 1951:5)

In Porterfield’s musings over why many Chinese plants were not more popular crops there is affirmation that the Chinese were not only selling and buying a wealth of crops but growing them as well. The first Chinese farm on Long Island, Sang Lee Farms, was founded by the Lee family in 1948.² The Lees were part of the Cantonese migration to New York City in the early 1900s. They ran a laundry business in which their son helped after school. After returning from World War II, George Lee, father of the current owner of Sang Lee Farms, went to the State University of New York at Farmingdale to study agronomy. His parents, immigrants from Canton, approved of his career choice. In an interview with the *New York Times*, George Lee’s wife said, “In those days, being a farmer was different than in China, where it was considered low. Here, they knew you had to have an education and know what you’re doing” (Toy 2003). George Lee and his cousin began Sang Lee Farms. At this point Chinese farms were well established in southern New Jersey, but the Lees preferred Long Island because of its extensive underground aquifer. Southern Jersey has a longer growing season, but the aquifer promised a competitive advantage during dry periods.

The Lees’ intuition was right. Sang Lee Farms quickly became the main supplier of Chinese vegetables for New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, as far north as Montreal, west as Detroit, and south as Miami. They established a reputation in Chinatown among wholesalers as well as market shoppers. The farm expanded to Hobe Sound, Florida, to produce during winter months in the late 1950s. At the peak of production the farm was double cropping six hundred acres in East Moriches, Long Island, and several hundred in Florida during the winter. Half of their acreage was bok choy, and the other half was a mix of about two dozen types of vegetables.



The farm grew alongside the immigration rates of the Chinese. The mid-1960s saw a boom in Chinese immigration. Although sixty years of Chinese exclusion ended in 1943 when China became allied with the United States in World War II, it was not until the year 1965 that there was a turning point in U.S. immigration history. In 1965 the United States government abolished nation-of-origin quotas that had favored immigration from northwestern Europe for eighty years. Whereas the first half of the twentieth century saw 85 percent of its immigrants from Europe, the second half saw the reverse: 85 percent from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Between 1961 and 1970, the number of Chinese immigrants to the United States was just over 100,000, more than four times that of the previous decade, and from 1971 to 1980 the number jumped to roughly 240,000 (INS Statistical Yearbook 1950–1988).

Chinese growers followed the Lees to Florida. Tommy Yee, the son of a New Jersey farmer, established a 110-acre farm in Loxahatchee in 1974.³ His father farmed in Warren County, New Jersey, during the summer and bought vegetables from Florida in the winter to hold over their New York and Boston customers until the next season (Snyder 2004). Prior to the establishment of his farm, Tommy drove a truck between Florida and New York for his father. During this time he gained a valuable insight. He noticed a broken link in the commodity chain. Brokers (wholesalers, also called jobbers) in New York could not supply a steady product, and farmers in Florida didn't have consistent buyers. He wondered why there was no stability, so he developed a business solution to this problem. Tommy found that "as long as I could supply an above average product, it didn't have to be superior, and the market was good, the wholesalers would consistently buy." He used independent truckers since they were fairly priced and reliable. Now 95 percent of his business is repeat business. He has worked with the same two wholesalers in New York since 1978. He attributes the longevity of his success to his business philosophy. He believes that "one hand washes the other."

One Hand Washes the Other: The Business of Expiration

Tommy's attitude toward the business of agriculture is one I have heard espoused numerous times from other successful farmers in Chinatown's food system. Trust and mutual respect in addition to a quality product (from the farmer) and a good price (from the broker) are necessary ingredients for long-term success. Getting paid, of course, is also crucial. Farmers are very vulnerable to market conditions because they sell highly perishable goods. Chinatown brokers in New York City work on consignment, which means they don't pay until after shipment is received. Farmers have to ship their product in good faith that they will get paid. From the



brokers' perspective, they don't want to pay for a product that they haven't yet seen. If it is of poor quality, they lose, plus they have to pay for disposal. Just about everyone has a story about how they were never paid by so-and-so, with whom they never worked again. The only way to survive in this type of market is to find buyers and sellers that can be trusted.

Some who have achieved stable business relations have done so by trial and error, taking risks and taking losses, but most have tried to preempt this gamble by partnering with trusted friends or family members. As agriculture in general has become a global system, and imports from Mexico, Latin America, and the Caribbean have challenged American farmers throughout the 1980s and 1990s, actors in Chinatown's food system have used social networks and practiced the philosophy of give and take to become global players.

Double Green

Double Green,⁴ for example, began with international ambitions. Double Green Farm, Inc.; Double Green Produce, Inc., in Florida City; and Double Green Wholesales, Inc., in New York City, were born out of the same idea: to supply the rapidly growing Chinese population in Flushing, Queens. From 1980 to 2000, the number of Chinese inhabitants in New York City grew by almost 250 percent (New York City Department of City Planning, 2000 Census). The rapid growth led to the development of satellite Chinatowns in the outer boroughs of New York City, the largest located in Flushing, Queens. Flushing was economically depressed in the 1970s and offered many opportunities for those with the capital to start their own businesses. Chinese investment turned the community around. Laura Huang, a Taiwanese immigrant and resident of Flushing, seized a rather serendipitous business opportunity to co-found Double Green.

Laura Huang's family fell from high society to the farming peasantry under wartime suspensions in Taiwan. Laura worked on her family's farm until she immigrated to New York in the 1970s. Through her church Laura met a Taiwanese family living in Haiti who was looking for a good school for their children in New York. Laura took it upon herself to help them. Laura took Mrs. Li and her children to get the appropriate forms for student visas, which must be acquired at the school one intends to attend. She also found them an apartment. The Lis were so appreciative that Mr. Li flew from Haiti himself to thank Laura. When they met, Laura and Li discovered that they were both interested in going into business. Li suggested importing fish from Haiti because it was plentiful. Laura saw the need for vegetables for the growing Taiwanese population in Flushing. Since Li had expertise in agriculture (at the time he was an agronomist in Haiti), Li and Laura



decided that they could open a production and distribution business. Li would run the farm and Laura would run the wholesale warehouse in Chinatown's distribution hub of lower Manhattan.

Li scouted locations where he could establish a farm and packing operation. He decided on southern Florida because it has the humid climate he likes and is accustomed to in Taiwan and Haiti. He drew confidence about his choice of location from seeing the other successful Chinese farms in Florida. Li, however, decided to go further south in Florida than the other farmers, like Yee, where more subtropical and tropical fruits and vegetables could be grown. He believed that he would have an advantage that way.

Li and Laura opened Double Green in 1985. They decided on a name that means "very lucky" in Chinese, yet they were quite unlucky in the beginning. The first year they lost money. The second year they also lost on many crops but made some money on papaya and bitter melon. However, it was not enough to keep them together. It was more difficult than Li expected to farm Chinese vegetables under Florida's ecological and economic conditions. In China, agriculture is very labor intensive. In Florida, however, it is too expensive to use the same labor dependant methods Li knew from China. He was forced to develop new techniques and needed time to learn how to farm in Florida City. Laura felt that she could not wait, so she went on to find new farmers. Although the partnership dissolved, Li and Laura helped one another realize their goals of opening a business. They both went on to build successful businesses.

Li used his experience and contacts in Haiti and Honduras to develop export agriculture. He was chief agronomist of the Taiwanese Mission to Agriculture in Haiti. There is also a Taiwanese Mission in Honduras. These missions began with the sole purpose to aid in rice production but have since diversified their interests. In Honduras, the mission is a key part of the Chinese vegetable industry. Haiti has more infrastructural challenges to exporting goods than Honduras, and Li's production there has waned. Production in Honduras, on the other hand, is growing. Li remains in close contact with both missions. Since he has established himself as a successful businessman and farmer in Florida he has been recommended as an importer and a consultant. The Honduran mission put a new exporter of Chinese vegetables in contact with Li. Now Li is importing three to four container loads of produce per week from Honduras. Li was recently invited to Honduras in October of 2004 to give a workshop to agronomists from all over Central America on growing Chinese vegetables for U.S. markets. Li also hosts his colleagues at his house in Florida and shows them his business. One Taiwanese colleague who was visiting while I was interviewing Li was interested in retiring from the mission in Haiti and beginning his own farm in Florida. Perhaps he will represent a new generation of Chinese agriculture in Florida.



After Laura left Li she took extraordinary risks to find new growers. She believes that it is important to take a chance with new growers. She looks for potential business partners through her social networks. Friends would go into partnership with her, or introduce others to her. If the grower turned out to be good, then she would take care of them. By taking care, Laura means giving her farmers a good price and keeping them aware of exactly what the market wants. Both of these aspects are critical to a farmer's and wholesaler's success. Ironically, while Laura has a wonderful reputation with "her" farmers, she has a terrible reputation with other farmers. Those who have tight relationships get paid, those who do not experience a cutthroat, perhaps unethical way of doing business. The famous line in Chinatown upon the receipt of a shipment is, "quality no good!" Farmers know that this means they are going to get paid poorly. Even if the quality is good, unless the farmer can get on a plane and fly to New York that minute (and that does sometimes happen), there is nothing they can do to prove it.

One of the growers with whom Laura took an extraordinary risk is Jack. Jack was up from Florida visiting his New Jersey farmer friend Johnny. Jack was a conventional grower.⁵ He had a good contract to grow chili peppers for Pace Foods. Johnny, on the other hand, grew Chinese vegetables for a woman in Chinatown. Jack had no interest in this, although he did have experience with Chinese growers. Besides Johnny, Jack was also a friend and neighbor of Tommy Yee in Florida. Jack spent a lot of time hanging around Yee's packing house because he borrowed the vacuum cooler to pack his peppers. Inadvertently, he was learning about farming Chinese vegetables at the time.

Johnny worked with Laura. Laura was looking for a new grower and requested to meet Jack. Jack, being a courteous fellow, agreed to the meeting, but his immediate reaction to Laura's request was "No way!" He knew nothing about Chinese vegetables and could not afford to take the risk, nor did he have the capital to expand. He gave Laura his ear until he could not listen anymore. He said straight out, "Laura, I am absolutely not interested. I don't know these vegetables and frankly I don't trust Chinese people." Laura calmly replied, "What would it take for you to trust a Chinese person?" Jack sarcastically said, "Laura, in America we have an old saying. Shit walks and money talks." Laura reached into her pocketbook and asked, "How much do you want?" Jack left that meeting with a \$25,000 check and a verbal agreement that he would learn to grow Chinese vegetables for Laura. Now he owns seventeen hundred acres on the south banks of Lake Okeechobee and packs a semi-truckload a day for Laura. He is the largest and only farmer of European descent to farm Chinese vegetables in Florida and it is because of Laura's leap of faith.

In Jack's opinion, the advantage of working with Laura is that she really knows the market, what people do and do not like. She is an avid cook and high-quality



produce is of paramount importance to her Jack says, "Laura taught me about the place of vegetables in the Chinese diet. If I can understand that, then I can understand how to grow and sell them." Once, she was complaining about a little sand on the cut end of the bok choy. She wanted to be able to open a box and see perfectly neat and clean bok choy ends. The Chinese pick many of their thick-stemmed vegetables by the quality of the cut end. The cleanliness of the cut that Laura was demanding was impossible, given the price the market was willing to pay for the vegetable. Laura did not understand the real production cost; she thought it was simple to change the harvest technique. She flew down to the farm to show Jack her idea. Jack recalls, "She opened a box of bok choy and started furiously pulling the vegetables out of the box, pulling off old leaves and cutting the butts. She cleaned off one-third of the box." Laura said, "For this type of packing job I would give you double the previous price, \$18 a box." Laura thought that sounded like a very attractive offer. Jack was still skeptical. He said, "Laura, that is still not worth it for me. Let me show you how we pack."

Jack took Laura out to the field, where his workers harvest and pack the bok choy. It took them one labor hour (\$6.00) to pack one box the way Laura wanted it. "Maybe my good pickers can do it in less time, for \$4.00, about two-thirds an hour of labor." Jack broke down the math on this new procedure for Laura. With all other costs the same (cost of the crate, postharvest cooling and shipping), the labor cost for the new approach increases from \$1.75 per box to \$5.00 per box, almost by three. The sales price doubles per box and the profit margin increases from \$4.65 to \$10.40. However, with the new procedure, fewer boxes are harvested per acre. In the end, the new way made only a little bit more per acre, much less than what Laura first perceived to be doubling Jack's profit. Jack would not honor Laura's request. He does not make agreements he does not believe in, but he does believe in open communication, as illustrated by this story. Because Jack and Laura have been able to have detailed interchanges like this, it has benefited both of their businesses. They keep each other aware of their strengths and shortcomings.

Yi Jen

The relationships I continue to find within Chinatown's Food System never cease to amaze me. In part it may be because the ominous term *globalization* once seemed so nameless and faceless. Or it may be that the environmental destruction and human exploitation associated with the globalization of agriculture has been so well documented. One of the most inspirational stories I was told comes from a now successful distributor in Homestead, Florida, who sells locally grown produce and imports produce from Honduras. Yi Jen⁶ used to be a farmer herself, so she understands its hardships, the insecurity of the harvest and the exhaustion that



comes with the work. However, she was not a farmer by choice. Yi Jen was forced to work on a farm in China during the Cultural Revolution. Someone in her family had to, and she was not going to permit her younger sister to do it. So she went, and she persevered. She found a way to study and get out of an imprisoned farm life. She left China when her grandfather gave her the chance to immigrate to the Dominican Republic, and she helped him open a hardware store. Yi Jen became familiar with business and recalls that she learned "mainly how to fight and not be afraid of people." Aspiring to open her own business, she got her grandfather's permission and moved to Florida.

Yi Jen worked for Li at his packing house, where she learned the ins and outs of the business. When she was ready to go out on her own, she raised \$70,000 in cash from friends and family and went into business packing and shipping produce. She had a friend in the Dominican Republic who had moved to Honduras to export vegetables. She began to work with him. They have been working together for over ten years, and they have the most stable export business in Honduras.

Yi Jen does not work with many people. Rather, she builds strong relationships with the few she does work with. Yi Jen treats her business relationships like long-term investments. She says, "one penny today is worth ten tomorrow." She has even gone so far as to take a loss so that her farmers could turn a profit. She has a handful of growers in Florida, one that credits her as the only reason he makes money on his longan harvest. Last summer there was a glut of longan on the market from Florida and prices bottomed out. Yi Jen took a smaller cut on her share of the longan sales so that her farmer, who depends on longan for his primary income, could make a more respectable profit. Yi Jen says, "after all, what was one season's loss on one crop with one farmer, when you have had that farmer working with you for many seasons and you will have them for many more?" Yi Jen has not only built a stable business, she has the best reputation for quality produce in Chinatown.

Changing Times, Changing Practices of Chinatown's Farmers

These examples show how entrepreneurs in Chinatown's food system have established and expanded their businesses. Through social networks they meet potential partners, and they strengthen and expand relations that prove to be mutually beneficial. These stories bring out the human side of trade relations. But I do not want to mislead you into thinking that relations never change and trust is never broken. Some observers perceive Chinatown's food system as insular and difficult to penetrate. This may be true in some cases; however, it is not a niche system immune to the challenges of international competition. There are many farmers and distributors who have sought to duplicate the business success achieved by entrepreneurs



in the system, but who have failed. There are constantly new farmers and brokers coming in and out of the system, and at some points there are more than the market can bear. This pressure can cause once stable businesses and business relations to crack.

Sang Lee Goes Chi-Chi

Sang Lee Farms has a new shingle outside the farm gate. It announces Sang Lee's positioning in the farm-die rurality of the north fork of Long Island. On their website they boast "over 250 varieties of naturally grown produce"; *naturally* meaning "utilizing sustainable agricultural practices and integrated pest management." Their competitive advantage is their Chinese twist. On-line or at the farm stand you can buy premium baby greens like mini bok choy and shanghai choy for premium prices (\$4.50 for 12 ounces and \$5.99 for 24 ounces, respectively). Bok choy is usually \$1.00 per pound in Chinatown! Or how about purple opal microbasil for \$6.99 a quarter ounce? They claim that it will add intense flavor to any recipe! The farm, and its image, has drastically changed since its inception as the first Chinese farm on Long Island in 1948. But of course, agriculture on Long Island has changed. Now it is an industry that fosters agrourism and caters to the elite summer lifestyles of Long Island's East End.

Fred Lee, son the founder of Sang Lee Farms and current proprietor, just gave up their last account in Chinatown. It was a hard decision, he says, but he could not emotionally or financially stand having truckloads of harvest returned, unpaid. This practice became more and more frequent when Fred's wholesaler could not sell his produce; it was simply too expensive in the face of Mexican-grown products. Fred's long-time associate offered him the chance to go to Mexico and set up a farm, but it was against Fred's own idea of farming. He wanted to stay on Long Island, so he did what the other farms around him were doing. He began to diversify his product line and market directly to restaurants, consumers, and caterers. He went into baby vegetables, herbs, cut flowers, and heirloom tomatoes. He kept his array of Chinese vegetables, and now assembles bags of ready-to-cook stir fry greens and sauce. He set up a farm stand and began to advertise his own organic philosophy (he did not want to bother with certification; too much bureaucracy). Maybe Fred and his wholesaler no longer shared the same goals or vision of agriculture. But one thing was definitely true: internationally grown produce was undercutting Fred's business, and he had to change.

Losing Faith in Chinatown Markets

Jack was also getting restless. His relationship with Laura lasted for ten years, but it has come to a close. When I last visited him, Jack told me the news. He



said, "I had a divorce with my Chinese broker!" In Jack's opinion, Laura lost her aggressiveness in the market. It may be because she has realized that her son will not take over the business. Without Laura fighting for a good price for him, working closely with him to understand his needs, and keeping him informed about market demands, Jack could not continue to work with her. Jack clearly emphasizes that the Chinese vegetable market is not a niche market. There is no added value in growing Chinese vegetables, and competition is growing every day, particularly from Mexico, where high-quality vegetables can be grown at a fraction of the cost. If he does not have a broker working for him, pushing his product and demanding the prices that he needs to make a profit, then he will not continue growing Chinese vegetables. In fact, in the 2003-2004 growing season Jack lost money on his Chinese vegetables. The other vegetables he grew carried his farm. Jack's divorce with Laura, however, did not end his tenure as a grower of Chinese vegetables. Jack's decision to leave Laura was provoked by a common event in Chinatown markets: Jack was offered better prices by another broker. Because Jack had been growing tired of working with Laura, the offer helped him make up his mind to leave her. As Jack believes in honesty and integrity, instead of deceiving Laura and selling to another broker behind her back (a more frequent practice), Jack flew to New York to settle the divorce in person.

Conclusion

There are over one hundred fresh fruits and vegetables for sale in New York City's Chinatown year-round. Old and new Chinese immigrants, as well as Vietnamese, Thai, Malaysian, Cambodian, and Laotian immigrants make a living within Chinatown's food system. Countless other first-, second-, and multi-generation Americans patronize Chinatown's shops and street vendors. The cultural heterogeneity of the system is iconic of New York City. The abundance, freshness, and cost of produce in Chinatown are unrivaled in the city. Where else can you get a pound of baby bok choy or Chinese eggplant for a dollar?

The marketing channels that deliver the great diversity of products to Chinatown are constantly growing and changing. Entrepreneurs continually enter and leave the system and continually look for new suppliers as well as new products. Thai guava is the new popular fruit among Florida growers, and longan, available practically year round, was once only available in July. The shift in product availability is as much a result of international competition as it is inter-regional competition. When a product grows well in an area, others also want to grow it. Because of this dynamism and competition, the successful farmers as well as brokers are always experimenting with new items and new places. Brokers do not shy away from global trade but use their social networks to develop new trade relations. The globalization



of Chinatown's food system has happened like a groundswell, in a bottom-up rather than a top-down fashion.

Chinatown's food system exemplifies an alternative globalization that some scholars call globalization or transnationalism from below (Glick Schiller 1999; Basch et al. 1994), globalization from the margins (Appadurai 1996), or transnational urbanism (Smith 2001). As a process it is not something extrinsic to daily life, or imposed by regulatory bodies, but rather it is a result of new spatial arrangements made by individuals. Globalization, in this sense, is the means of conducting business over widening distances and distended social relations (Flusty 2004). As Smith (2001) points out:

Specific collectivities—local households, kin networks, elite fractions, and other emergent local formations—actively pursue such strategies as transnational migration, transnational social movements or transnational economic or cultural entrepreneurship to sustain or transform resources, including cultural resources, in the face of the neoliberal storm. (167)

Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs have indeed transformed their cultural as well as economic resources in a way that has led to globally distended networks of trade. What remains exceptional is that they have done so in a way that *remains* outside of the dominant modes of food trade.

There is no single explanation for this; rather, there are several contributing factors that begin to explain Chinatown's food system as it exists today. The people who control access to the markets are the wholesalers based in urban Chinatowns. As Chinese people they fully understand the food preferences of their community. Some non-Chinese people have told me they would like to deal in Chinese vegetables but are unknowledgeable about them. The wholesalers also largely do business in Chinese. Of course many are multilingual, but I have often seen Chinese wholesalers hide behind feigned language difficulties as a way to protect themselves from people to whom they are not interested in talking. The closed ethnic character of the entrepreneurs, whether created or real, may have protected the food system from appropriation by American and European food giants.

Extreme competition, particularly on the retail end, keeps companies within the system from getting too big. It also keeps quality high but prices low. In Manhattan's Chinatown alone there are eighty-five small vendors (green grocers and street vendors) and eight wholesalers. An informal system of apprenticeship serves to sustain this tradition of doing business. Many "new" entrepreneurs have gotten their start by working for others in the system, are family members sent to open an independent branch of the business at another point in the commodity chain, or are children who inherited the family business. Finally, Chinatown wholesalers

and Florida brokers, as we have seen, drive expansion of the system by networking, rather than through buy-out and consolidation. They have set an example that is in perpetuation.

The global, fast-food systems that most slow food advocates oppose are not the only global food systems in existence. Far from leading to simplification and loss of diversity, global trade can help preserve traditions as well as foster innovation. New business ambitions can thrive without inevitable cooperation or appropriation by larger, more powerful global giants. Variety and diversity can exist in a food system at competitive prices, and without the sophisticated rhetoric that many people are unaware of, disenfranchised from, or completely skeptical about.

Notes

Acknowledgments. This research has been completed through the support of the New York Botanical Garden and the NSF Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Award 0425734. Fieldwork could not have been undertaken without the help of Louis Putzel, Andrew Roberts, and Karen Jiron, who not only assisted in interviews but helped in the conceptualization of the project. Most invaluable has been the academic advice of Christine Padoch, Charles Peters, and Roberta Balstad, and the editorial advice of Richard Walk.

1. The production of nontraditional agricultural exports (NTAEs), also known as high-value exports, is an economic development strategy prevalent in Latin America. NTAE refers to those products that (1) were not traditionally produced in a particular country for export (traditional exports are soybeans, sugar, bananas, and coffee); (2) were traditionally produced for domestic consumption but are now exported; (3) are traditional products now exported to a new market. NTAEs are generally high-value or niche products. Fresh fruits and vegetables and fair trade coffee are examples of NTAEs (Thrupp 1995).

2. I conducted an interview with Karen Lee in July 2003. She is the wife of George Lee, the son of the founder of Sang Lee farm. Karen now works full-time with her husband on the farm. About a month after the interview an article on the farm came out in the Long Island section of the *New York Times*, covering much of what Karen had told me in addition to other things. I use my interview data supplemented with the *New York Times* article in this chapter.

3. I had the fortunate experience of visiting Tommy, his wife, and most of his nine fields in February 2004 with Ken Schuler. Ken used to be the vegetable specialist at the Palm Beach County Agricultural Extension Office and was especially active with the Chinese vegetable growers. Although he is now retired, he works as a pest scout for Tommy, visiting his fields once a week. He invited me along and shared much of his expertise about Chinese vegetable farming in Florida. He also created a very comfortable interview atmosphere for Tommy, who needed reassurance of the validity of my study.

4. All of the individuals discussed in this section are protected by the use of pseudonyms. They were interviewed between August 2003 and October 2004. Li was interviewed on two occasions, once in Florida and once in Honduras. I also interviewed his son, who





now runs the packing house. In addition to Laura, I interviewed her long-time employee. Because all of these people have worked together and remain in contact, it was very easy to cross-reference data.

5. Laura put me in contact with Jack. On my second trip to Florida in February 2004 I visited his farm and interviewed him.

6. Yi Jen is also a pseudonym. My first try at interviewing her in August 2003 failed; she flat out refused. Fortunately I subsequently interviewed her friend, a fruit grower who had been supplying her for several years and largely attributes his financial success to her. When I told him that Yi Jen refused to speak with me, he called her and told her I was harmless. That afternoon I had a four-hour interview with her.

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