**Pandemic at the grocery can strength America**

My, how our daily lives have changed since Covid-19 reached America. All of us have experienced moments when the urgency of this pandemic hit home. For many, myself included, one of the first scenes that indicated our lives were about to change, occurred at the grocery store. Yes, we all noticed the empty toilet paper aisles. But accompanying the void of toilet paper were empty shelves of many “convenience foods”. Shelves normally stocked with lunch meat, shredded cheese, sliced bread, cereal, milk, eggs, hamburger, and hamburger’s friendly helper that comes in a box were left barren. While these staples of American’s diets were gobbled up by shoppers, I couldn’t help but notice that the fresh produce section was left unscathed. Indeed, many of the unprocessed foods and meat other than hamburger and boneless chicken breasts were still plentiful…. That is until lately, when I’ve noticed a wind of change sweeping through the grocery.

It seems Americans are rediscovering the joys and benefits of cooking and baking. Now, it is the produce and baking sections of the store that are hit hard by shoppers. Accompanied by a rise in Instagram posts of people’s fresh baked bread and other creations from the kitchen.

The drastic swing in food purchases perfectly characterizes America’s food culture. As a nation of immigrants, we have never settled on a stable national cuisine. Each wave of immigrants brought its own food culture to America, but none dominated enough to take-hold across the land. Our constantly changing American diet may explain why we continually fall prey to one fad diet after another. Over the past few decades our national food culture has increasingly leaned toward convenient foods, e.g. fast food, ready-made microwavable meals, simple meat products such as hamburger and boneless chicken breasts, and processed foods. While the Covid-19 pandemic has created havoc in many areas of our lives, a silver-lining may be that it is awakening within us the importance of nutritious food and food culture in America. The pandemic at the grocery store has brought us to a fork in the road for America’s food culture, and the path we take can have profound benefits to the well-being of the nation beyond the kitchen.

America has dealt with diverging choices during calamities in the past. Our reaction to these historic moments has shaped our nation’s identity as one of reverence in moments of turmoil. Reverence was on display with our emergence from the Great Depression and focus to win WWII, which also led to the prosperity of post-war years. However, we have not always chosen such a noble path, as seen in our choices following the civil war to neglect fully resolving major racial and social issues. Leaving these problems to linger for later generations to resolve. The Covid-19 pandemic we face today will undoubtedly reveal many issues we need to resolve as a nation. Food culture is emerging as one of the few bright spots in the pandemic. An issue we can choose to rally behind, acting in reverence to improve the well-being of our nation.

As we renew/gain an interest in baking and cooking during social distancing, it is easy to notice the many positive symbiotic associations that manifest with a culinary renaissance in the kitchen. Whether this is the smell of fresh baked bread filling your home with its’ inviting aroma, or the self-satisfaction found in preparing a meal from scratch as your grandmother did/does. These are the beginnings of a deeper appreciation of food and food preparation, and the start of developing a food culture. One that can gather us around the dinner table for family meals. Sparking conversation, debate, constructive arguments, and laughter (sometimes all in the same meal). In a time of social distancing, food can be something that unites us in our homes, and can link us to the world outside.

Food culture does not end at the edge of the kitchen. It involves all aspects of food, from preparation, meals, and growing, hunting, or gathering food. Many Americans are showing a renewed interest in gardening during social distancing, with many vegetable garden seeds flying off the shelves of stores. Gardening is a great way for people to appreciate the effort required to nurture a plant from seed through harvest, providing us insight into the responsibilities accepted by the farmers and ranchers that produce the food we buy. Thus, food culture is more than cooking in the kitchen. It links together friends, neighbors, and people from different sectors of our society to bring Americans together, and gives us an understanding of how we want our food to be raised.

Farmers today have a wealth of knowledge and technology they can pursue and apply for producing our food. As a scientist studying insects on farms and ranches, I’ve had the pleasure of meeting farmers from around the world that are practicing a wide array of farming techniques. One group of farmers that I am most impressed with are Regenerative Farmers. Regenerative farmers practice a holistic management philosophy on the farm, seeking to produce food at a fair price for themselves and the customer, while rebuilding natural resources of the farm. Thus, helping farmers to earn a living wage, while helping the environment, and producing more nourishing food for society in the process. Regenerative farmers are some of the most inventive and thoughtful individuals I’ve met, and more and more farmers are switching to this philosophy as they seek to heal their land for future generations and produce nutrient dense food for the nation.

So, whether you are growing food in your garden or looking at the ingredients around your kitchen, ask yourself if this food was raised the way you expect it to be. The way our food is raised is as much a part of our food culture as what we prepare in the kitchen. Farmers markets are not only a great way to spend a Saturday morning, it also gives us the chance to speak directly to the farmers that produce our food. I would encourage everyone to research the farmers or companies that brought you your food. Upon getting to know them better, you can understand if it was raised in a manor fit for yourself and your family. If you have not heard of regenerative farming, I would encourage you to learn more about regenerative farmers (information about regenerative farming can be found at ecdysis.bio and bluedasher.farm), and look for them in your area. This will build stronger ties in your community, and build a stronger American food culture as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic.