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### **Food Politics and Reform at Middlebury College from the 1970s to Today**

Food-related issues have become increasingly important at Middlebury College for many students, in academics, extracurricular activities, and daily meals in the dining hall. Located in the rural state of Vermont and boasting the oldest Environmental Studies program in the country, Middlebury attracts many students with an interest in sustainable food production and consumption. When comparing food-related events and articles in *The Middlebury Campus* newspaper from the 1970s to food issues at Middlebury today, it is apparent that the College has taken steps to become more sustainable and to encourage further conversations about food-related issues. However, the College can continue to make many more improvements. This academic year, 2014-2015, marked some important changes in Middlebury College's operations regarding food education and sustainability.

During the 1970s, as evidenced by articles in *The Middlebury Campus* newspaper, the student organization Environmental Quality (E.Q.) organized events to discuss food issues and take action to make the College's dining plan more sustainable. Environmental Quality was a generic environmental organization on campus, but as time has gone on, groups devoted to specific environmental issues have proliferated to create a whole coalition of environmental groups. A few of these are devoted exclusively to food issues. These groups organize events similar to those that E.Q. organized in the past. These include EatReal, a student group that encourages Middlebury College Dining Services to provide food that is produced in an ethical and sustainable manner, Middlebury College Organic Farm (MCOF), a student group that manages the College's Organic Farm and organizes farm-related events on and off campus, and

the Food Subcommittee of the Environmental Council, which recommends policy to the College and advises the President.

Over the years, vegetarianism has been a topic of debate on campus. Articles in *The Campus* in the 1970s show that some students promoted a diet with fewer animal products. At the Student Forum meeting on January 12, 1975, a student named Terry Bouricius (who later became a member of the Vermont House of Representatives) proposed that the College offer vegetarian main courses at every meal in addition to the meat-centered dishes. This was intended as a solution to the global food crisis; it would reduce waste during food production. The proposal “emphasizes that Americans eat more meat than their bodies can assimilate and that much food grain is wasted to fatten meat-producing animals.” Proponents stated that students would be able to eat in a more ethical and sustainable way if the College were to provide more main courses without meat. The Forum voted to recommend to the Community Council that the dining halls experiment with this plan to find whether or not it would be successful.<sup>1</sup> Another *Campus* article that appeared a few months later discussed the same issue with similar rhetoric, stating that “America’s meat-centered diet is not feasible” and “18,000 tons of protein are wasted each year by feeding livestock grain that could go to human consumption.” This issue was discussed at the Middlebury College Food Conference on March 20 of that year.<sup>2</sup> The recommendation to provide more meat-free options has become a reality; today, every dining hall not only offers vegetarian dishes but has a “Vegan Line,” which often includes foods rich in protein such as quinoa and beans.

EatReal takes a different approach but focuses on similar issues. EatReal has encouraged the administration to sign onto the Real Food Challenge, which is a challenge for universities to

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Votta, “Forum Recommends Vegetarian Alternative,” *Middlebury Campus*, January 16, 1975, <http://www.middarchive.middlebury.edu>.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Gross, “Are You Eating Responsibly?”, *Middlebury Campus*, January 16, 1975.

provide a certain percentage of food that meets standards in at least one of four categories: local, ecologically sound, fair, and humane. Rather than promoting a vegetarian or vegan diet, EatReal promotes humane practices regarding the treatment of domesticated animals. It also promotes local food, and because Vermont produces a significant amount of dairy products and other animal products, many of the local products that EatReal promotes are animal products. In Vermont, it is debatable whether or not a vegetarian or vegan diet is more sustainable than a diet that includes animal products. For the members of Weybridge House, who eat local food, dairy products are a significant part of their diet. The issue is not black and white; in certain cases, it may be more sustainable to eat local animal products than to eat non-local vegetables and fruits. Therefore, EatReal takes a holistic approach to eating a sustainable and ethical diet, and Weybridge focuses on achieving sustainability through a different pathway than eliminating animal products.

That being said, EatReal has sponsored discussions about vegetarianism or veganism. A prominent speaker that EatReal brought to campus last year during Real Food Week was Dr. Breeze Harper, also known as Sistah Vegan. During her talk, which she called “On Ferguson, Thug Kitchen, and Trayvon Martin: Intersections of [Post] Race-Consciousness, Food Justice, and Hip Hop Vegan Ethics,” she discussed veganism and promoted a vegan diet while raising issues about race and poverty and people’s ability to access vegan food. Prior to the event, members of EatReal cooked a vegan dinner for Dr. Harper. While EatReal does not specifically promote a vegetarian or vegan diet, it promotes conversations about eating ethical and sustainable diets. Vegetarianism or veganism can be a part of this, but EatReal does not see it as the only solution.

The recommendation to provide vegetarian options was rooted in the issue of food waste during the production of food; Middlebury students have also attempted to decrease food waste within the dining halls at various points across the years. In March of 1969, the college held its annual conference on the issue of poverty, with a range of speakers and events addressing aspects of American poverty and possible solutions. A student's March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1969 Letter to the Editor in the *Campus* made a start connection between the realities of poverty and dining hall food waste. Kathy Bohr poetically connected two experiences: on the one hand, sitting in Mead Chapel hearing speakers talk of "of places and of things that are—and not so far from the 'here' in which we often stagnate. Farmhouses—people bitten in the cold—and hungry people; on the other hand "Over to the dining room—to eat....Scraping food from half-empty plates. Plate after plate of half-touched food—into the garbage bin. We sat. We talked. And nearby—in a farmhouse."<sup>3</sup>

Six years later, in a Letter to the Editor published on March 6, 1975 titled "EQ and Food," Aaron Abend, Class of 1977, discussed the issue of food waste in the dining halls, and he writes that E.Q. and the Food Convention planned to take action. According to Abend, the primary cause of the issue is that servers put too much food on students' plates. He writes, "I propose that the regular portion given out by servers be decreased."<sup>4</sup> EQ organized in 1996-97 as well to have students weigh their waste and recognize the volume of discarded food.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kathy Bohr, "Face to Face?" *Middlebury Campus*, March 20, 1969, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Aaron Abend, "EQ and Food" *Middlebury Campus*, March 6, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Students in Environmental Quality in 1996-97 pursued a "Weigh Your Waste" program as well, with mixed results. *The Campus* featured articles exhorting students to waste less food; other students complained and protested when presented with barrels of smelly rotting wasted food in Proctor while they ate. See *Middlebury Campus*, Nov 6, 1996, p. 2; Nov. 20, 1996, pp. 3-4; Feb. 14, 1997, p. 11; Feb 16, 1997, p. 9; March 5, 1997, p. 6; March 19, 1997, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Emily Singer, "Students Seek to Reduce Waste," *Middlebury Campus*, Oct 2, 2013.

Today, students serve food to themselves, but the food waste problem has not gone away. Even though students can choose the amount of food they want, students often overestimate their hunger. Some students may not feel inclined to put less food on their plate because they do not have to pay more or less depending on how much food they eat. One solution to the food waste problem may be to implement a dining plan that charges students based on how much food they eat. However, this is extremely controversial among the student body.

In the Fall of 2013, Cailey Cron and Molly Shane started the Weigh the Waste program. On certain nights in the dining halls, students hand their plates off to students who are involved in Weigh the Waste. These students scrape off leftover food into a bin. Cron and Shane began Weigh the Waste after completing their MiddChallenge project, Share the Surplus, which redistributed unserved food from the dining halls to community organizations and events like the Community Supper. They wanted to make food waste more visible to students.<sup>6</sup>

The Weigh the Waste project fits in with EatReal's mission, and EatReal has expressed interest in becoming involved. Singer writes, "Cron and Shane see similar potential benefits of waste reduction, noting collaboration with members of other on-campus food organizations, such as 'Eat Real,' as a means of achieving shared goals."<sup>7</sup> By the end of this past academic year, members of EatReal felt that the organization had achieved its main goal: the College's administration is supportive of the Real Food Challenge. EatReal has largely passed on the task of increasing the percentage of Real Food on campus; this is now the job of the administration. Because of this, EatReal is considering playing a larger role in the Weigh the Waste campaign next year. Weigh the Waste can help students to become more aware of their own eating habits.

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<sup>6</sup> Emily Singer, "Students Seek to Reduce Waste," *Middlebury Campus*, Oct 2, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Emily Singer, "Students Seek to Reduce Waste," *Middlebury Campus*, Oct 2, 2013.

Members of the aforementioned student organizations and other Middlebury students who are involved in food issues seem to have a desire to reconnect themselves with the food that they consume. On February 14, 1974, activist and author James Hightower gave a lecture, sponsored by Environmental Quality, called “Has the Agricultural Revolution Gone Too Far?” Hightower warned that large corporations have gained too much control of American food production and consumption. He stated that “large corporations are willing to transform the American diet,” and he criticized genetically modifying crops to make harvesting more efficient but with the result of a worse-tasting product.<sup>8</sup>

The issue of large corporations controlling food is still relevant on campus and is apparent in the missions of groups like EatReal, Weybridge, and MCOF. Among other goals, these groups aim to reconnect consumers to their food. The Organic Farm provides students with an opportunity to produce food themselves on a very small-scale farm, and the farm visits organized by the group allows students to see what small-scale farmers experience on a day-to-day basis. Weybridge purchases food from local farmers to follow a diet based on smaller local farms, not large corporate farms. EatReal does not directly condemn large corporate farms, but these farms are less likely to fit the requirements of the categories of the Real Food Challenge. EatReal also encourages students to connect directly with the eating experience. This past semester, Spring 2015, EatReal sponsored an event called “Mindful Munching with Russell Comstock.” Russell Comstock of the Metta Earth Institute facilitated a discussion about the sensations of the eating experience, followed by an activity in which participants gave foods to blindfolded participants. The idea was to heighten other senses while sight was blocked so that the participant could discover which food he or she was eating as he or she was experiencing it by texture and taste rather than by sight.

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<sup>8</sup> Gary Slutsker, “Vertical Integration,” *Middlebury Campus*, February 21, 1974.

Beginning in the Fall 2015 semester, the Middlebury Faculty will include a Professor of Food studies for the first time, Prof. Molly Anderson. Considering Middlebury's focus on Environmental Studies and the interest in food issues demonstrated by many students, it seems natural for the College to extend this interest to its academic program. The College began to discuss this possibility a few years ago, when Ben Blackshear, Class of 2012 and former director of the Organic Farm, taught a Winter Term course called "Food Justice in Vermont." The Middlebury College Organic Farm club was the primary supporter of a Food Studies program.<sup>9</sup>

Many of the same food-related issues that were relevant on Middlebury College's campus in the 1970s are still relevant today. Not only are they still relevant, but their prominence has increased; this is reflected and reinforced by the increased number of student organizations that tackle food issues and the commencement of the Food Studies program in Fall 2015. The College has made concrete steps towards reducing certain problems; for example, the dining halls now offer more vegetarian and vegan options than in the past, servers no longer put food onto students' plates, and the administration has recently agreed to take on the Real Food Challenge. With a Food Studies professor teaching next semester, only time will tell what role this will play in preparing Middlebury students to be educated citizens regarding food issues. Middlebury has come a long way in the past forty years or so in tackling food issues, but the College and its students are still capable of becoming more sustainable, ethical, and educated on the topic.

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I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.

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