
EDIBLE NATION

BY ANNA LAPPÉ

DINNER PARTIES ON THE FRONT LINES

Hungry for company.

Beneath the shadow and the rumbling of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, I found myself recently with a gaggle of 20- and 30-some-things convening for a monthly “grub dinner.” (That my most recent book is called *Grub*, too, is a coincidence, although the organizers of this dinner agree that the word conveys down-home, sustainable, and delicious—the exact spirit that my coauthor Bryant Terry and I celebrate).

This night’s meal included fresh zucchini salad, blue corn *churro* with nutty mole sauce, Mexican lasagna, garlicky kale, mashed broccoli and cauliflower, and scrumptious desserts, including a delectable apple pie. There were seconds if anyone wanted them, more than enough for the nearly 50 of us. Here was the hook, nearly everything on offer, as it is every month, was from found food, discarded by New York City supermarkets and scavenged by resourceful volunteers. Yup, the food was free. Or, if you’d prefer, it was from the trash.

Ingredients are easy to come by, the organizers stressed to me. Stores often toss out perfectly edible food: a day over expiration, cans that are only slightly dented, produce that’s ill-sized. Sometimes they even find a treasure trove, like the time they stumbled upon 40 pounds of Ghirardelli chocolate.

This grub dinner, with its über-sustainable gleaning methods, is just one of dozens of gatherings I’ve discovered in the past couple of years that are making the connections between big picture concerns about food, health, and sustainability and what we’re actually eating. From squatters in Brooklyn to artists in Berkeley to parents in Chicago, these gatherings are as diverse as their creators, but they’re all driving home the same point: the medium is the message.

As food fights rage on—with the fast food and junk food industries getting decidedly nervous about the increasing public awareness of our disease-creating national diet—these gatherings illustrate how we can bring people on board with pleasure. We can build community through food—even food, as the grub dinner organizers showed me, found in dumpsters. We can help people understand otherwise abstract concepts, through food itself. As my favorite high school writing teacher would scrawl in the margins of our papers, we can “show, not tell!”

Leaving the grub dinner that night with a very full belly, the statistics about food waste in this country that had been tossing around in my mind for years were now, finally, real. Of course it shouldn’t have been hard to find perfectly edible food being thrown away, this



Above and opposite: A Grub Party in a Brooklyn loft with Anna Lappé and friends.

is a country in which nearly half of all food ready for harvest never makes it to our plates, let alone our bellies.

In Berkeley, California, a one-man operation has taken a different approach to the sustainable dinner party. Inspired by a gathering he went to in Montreal, J. Moses Ceaser started Frugal Foodies just over a year ago. Now every Tuesday, you can sign up to join a dozen guests in his modest apartment for a four- or five-course meal. All you need to bring is seven bucks and a knife; everyone helps cook. A recent menu included curried squash and pear soup, orange and beet salad, sweet and sour cabbage, spicy tempeh sausages with roasted yellow pepper sauce, and “magic bars” for dessert. Ceaser buys most of his food locally, selecting top-quality organic ingredients when possible. Most nights people take home leftovers. “People are amazed we’re able to pull off a five-course, organic meal for this price,” Ceaser told me. Did someone say eating well was expensive? In a tasty way, with weekly frequency, Ceaser is tearing down the myths of sustainable dining.

And what about the connection between the environment and our diet? We may celebrate Mother Nature’s birthday annually, but still many forget the very real connection between her health and ours, between the food we eat and the environment. So several environmental organizations and the farmers cooperative Organic Valley decided to team up a few years ago to begin a new tradition: Earth Dinners on Earth Day. The vision is “to get people to sit down at

least one time a year and have a meaningful discussion of food and farming and their connection with each other,” explained an Earth Dinner organizer. Thousands have now participated in Earth Dinners, from a charter school in Chicago to Bon Appétit cafés across the country. A beautifully illustrated deck of cards is offered to spark conversation with questions like, what is your earliest food memory? Who in your life knows how to cook the food you love? “It gets people to tell stories from as far back as they can remember. It creates common ground at the table,” shared one Earth Dinner organizer.

I first became interested in sustainable dinner parties, and the power of bringing people together around a table, when I was working on the text of *Grub* and chef Bryant Terry, was concocting the book’s menus. We, too, wanted to bring the book’s principles to life and, well, we like to host parties. Like the rest of the gatherings I’ve since uncovered, we inaugurated our Grub Parties just a couple of years ago, one dark and stormy night in a loft in SoHo. Our dinner parties are small affairs, with at most 12 people. We encourage people to make up their own traditions, although our meals have a couple of key ingredients:



Be Bold with Your Guest List. Invite friends, but invite strangers, too. Someone you’ve always wanted to have a conversation with? The head of your school board? Give them a shout. Invite your neighbor. Invite your mayor, your hero. Invite folks who otherwise might never find themselves in a room together.

Get Your Grub On. Source as much of your food as possible from local farms and locally owned businesses. At our Berkeley Grub Party, we got the tortillas from a nearby Mexican restaurant and most of the rest at the bustling Berkeley farmers market. If you’re bringing people

together who live near you, share a community food audit—where you’ve done the leg work to source grub in your area. (Find downloadable audits at eatgrub.org.)

Host a Gift Exchange.

We invite each guest to bring a gift—material or immaterial—with personal significance. At the evening’s beginning, we put everyone’s name in a basket and begin

with a guest pulling a name and offering his or her gift to that person. We continue until everyone has given, and received. Gifts have ranged from home-baked cookies, to poetry, to a DVD of a friend’s just-released documentary and a reciting of “Five Arguments against the Central American Free Trade Agreement” by an international trade and debt activist. At one party, a friend who that very day quit her job to pursue a singing career gave a beautifully rendered *a capella* song.

Bless the Night. We include a blessing at the beginning of each meal to thank everyone who helped get our food to the table, from the farmworkers, farmers, and food processors, to the chefs.

Take Action. We always include an action component, sometimes simply asking people to support a locally owned business, or speak out about a current food policy battle. Or, we’ll ask our guests if there’s a project they’re working on that needs support. We’re at two job offers, and counting!

Grub Party goes, Frugal Foodies, Earth Dinner advocates: what do we have in common? According to our critics, those of us promoting healthy, sustainable food are “killjoys” or “food nannies” taking the fun out of eating. But the truth is that real pleasure from the American fast-food diet is short-lived and illusory. Too bad the food industry doesn’t seem to care about true nourishment and sustainability. It’s waging a war and the arsenal is ideas, true or not. The battlefield? The hearts and minds of millions of Americans. The collateral damage is our bodies, our farmland, and our farmworkers and farmers.

In the face of industry misinformation, what do we have on our side? Yes, we have taste, health, and goodness, but we’ve also got bliss. Eating grub—local, healthy, sustainable, fair food—is best for our bodies, best for the earth, and tastes best, too. Grub parties—in whatever form yours take—are an entertaining, grassroots tactic to bring the pleasures and politics of eating home to your friends, neighbors, even local power-holders. So throw your own, invent your own traditions, be creative and quirky, and save me a seat at the table. □

National bestselling author Anna Lappé’s new book is Grub: Ideas for an Urban Organic Kitchen (Tarcher) with recipes by Bryant Terry and a foreword by Eric Schlosser. She lives in a brownstone in Brooklyn, where she loves to throw parties.

