

# Nature-based Food Cultures and Farming for Whole Health

by Soil Sisters

Miche Fabre Lewin and Daphne Lambert

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*Miche and Daphne have been working together as Soil Sisters for over two decades. Daphne is an eco-nutritionist, founder of Greencuisine Trust, and Visiting Tutor for the Forest Food Garden at University of Sussex. Miche is an artist-philosopher, co-founder of Studio Fabre Hardy, and Research Associate with Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience at Coventry University, and Sustainability Institute, Lynedoch, South Africa.*

## Overview

Soil Sisters' ecological gastronomy sees the living soil as fundamental in supporting the interconnected health of ecosystems, agroecological farming, cohesive communities and human well-being – what is known as whole health. The perspective we give here is in response to George Monbiot's book *Regenesi*s and his disturbing vision of a new future for food and farming. He claims to solve ecological degradation and prevent animal cruelty by stopping livestock farming in order to release land for rewilding, and by manufacturing bio-engineered 'replicates' to replace animal proteins and fats. Soil Sisters offer two interconnected contributions to add to those of others who have presented strong cases against Monbiot's arguments (Meirs, Langford, Smaje, Young). Firstly, we consider the nutritional and human health implications of eating the laboratory-derived foods he advocates. Secondly, we highlight how mixed farming which combines growing crops and animal husbandry is integral to the genuine regenesi

s of both agriculture and human culture. Disregarded by the narrative of *Regenesi*s are the life-affirming connections between the health of humans, soil and food, and the vital interdependence between small-scale farming and regenerative cultures. It is these relationships that are the lifeblood of agroecological farming. Soil Sisters acknowledge the challenge of providing health-giving food for increasing populations, notably in urban environments. However, across the globe, rural and urban small-scale initiatives already contribute to viable and ethical models of sustainable food-cultures. This is a vibrant food justice movement which integrates traditional knowledge and indigenous wisdoms with science and practice-led research to produce nutritious food from fertile soils that restore whole health.

## **Healthy Nutrition**

Human beings are evolutionarily adapted to eat and thrive on diverse foods grown in soil. A healthy soil biology is the foundation of the entire food web, affecting both the quality and quantity of food grown. The complex nutrition in nature's food arises from the reciprocal health-giving relationships between soil, food and animals which have been evolving over millennia. When humans are in direct contact with a richly diverse soil ecology that is teeming with microbial life, this relationship benefits the health of the human gut. Biologically we are capable of digesting and benefiting from a vast number of compounds found in these natural foods, many of which work not in isolation, but synergistically within a whole food matrix, where all components interact. Fundamental to a healthy gut microbiome and strong immune system is the diversity of compounds provided in the diet by soil-grown plants. Around 150 compounds are now known to be beneficial, with countless others yet to be fully understood in how they support and enhance human health.

Agroecological practices evolve within the biodiversity of indigenous habitats. Flourishing local food cultures support these intimate inter-relationships between soil, plants, animals and humans. In stark contrast, Monbiot proposes using the technology of precision fermentation to manufacture 'replicates' to replace the proteins and fats lost from farmed livestock. This energy intensive process feeds bacteria in a bio-reactor and their harvested waste is turned into an ultra-processed powder. It is this sterile product which becomes the substitute for foods of animal origin. However, this removing of animals from our farming practices eliminates the health-giving aspect of this living ecology between our bodies, the soil, animals and plants. It is not possible to transfer the complex synergies found in nature-based food with laboratory-derived processes without adversely affecting the nutritional quality of the food, and thereby our human health. Growing food in a factory alienates us from, rather than reconnecting us to the soils that feed us, potentially impoverishing gut biology, compromising the immune system, and negatively affecting our emotional, mental and physical well-being.

## **Cultural Resilience**

Here we raise the question of whether substances produced by chemical engineers meet the full extent of people's physical and cultural needs? It is within the embrace of whole health agriculture that human health and cultural resilience lies. Human interactions and the sharing of life-supporting skills which arise from mixed, small-scale farming and animal husbandry contribute to individual and community well-being and are deeply embedded within our cultures and traditions, our stories and language, and within the human psyche. The activities of tending, feeding, growing, harvesting, preparing, cooking, presenting, eating, digesting and composting involve us humans in a vital and sensuous relationship between the earth and our

own body, mind and soul. The ultra-processed food from the precision fermentation technique will have profile which is predictable, repeatable and lacking in the variety of place-based taste – the *terroir* of soil. The objective of efficiently feeding the world with technological solutions reduces our global food cultures to experiences lacking in ancestral wisdom, memory and instinct. A bio-engineered food future devalues the mythic dimension and vital expression of our human relationship within the natural order of the cosmos. It is often said we become what we eat. If that is so, how will laboratory food influence our actions, ways of being, feeling, and thinking? Will human identity become more synthetic, automated and lacking in energetic vibrancy if we are further disconnected from the soil?

## **Conclusion**

Human beings are part of a complex and relational web of life, and we need to recognize that there is no single story which will restore balance within the ecosphere. With humility and respect for collective knowledge, Soil Sisters advocate for citizen-led ways of living which cultivate connections between food, and environmental and social justice. With this comes a shift in our responsibility and relationship to food and the land. Access to nutritious food is a human right, and by becoming active food citizens, rather than passive food consumers, we can re-orient our relationship to sustainable foodscapes for all, and reclaim our food cultures. At the heart of the food sovereignty movement is a vision of co-operation between citizens, farmers and growers to determine ecologically sound and culturally appropriate food and farming systems. Re-orienting agricultural policy and investment to extend these existing small-scale food economies is the pathway to flourishing and bountiful landscapes. These resilient farming practices provide nutrient-dense diets which are plant-rich from vegetables, pulses, seeds and grains, and, for those who choose, a modest amount of food from animals reared within the ecological resources of the farm. There are many lineages of agroecological food and farming systems worldwide with an ethos that supports biodiversity, healthy communities and thriving food cultures for ethical futures. It is these abundant, courageous and nourishing stories of interdependence that are the stories to live by.

## **About Soil Sisters**

Soil Sisters' practice honours the living soil. Miche and Daphne's convivial food experiences are thanksgiving feasts of the season which have been shared on the land, in kitchens, in warehouses, in a greenhouse and in a geodesic dome. Drawing on artisan traditions from diverse cultures combined with fresh produce harvested from farms of the region, local gardens and mindful foraging, they make visible the living food cycle from seed to compost. Their work is commissioned by art galleries, food festivals, educational institutions, environmental conferences and cultural gatherings. Daphne has written *Living Foods, Feast for Soil and Soul* and *Fermenting*; she is a contributing author for *The Cancer Revolution*, *The*

*Role of Nutrients in Mental Wellness* in *Mental Wellness* by Neals Yards Remedies, and has co-authored a series of papers for Beyond GM with Pat Thomas including *Food Sovereignty, GMO's and Farm Animals*, and *GMO and Corporate Control*. Miche's PhD explores the artful bodymind through food rituals. She authored 'The Art of Food Rituals as a Practice in Sympoiethics' in *Subtle Agroecologies: Farming with the Hidden Half of Nature*; and 'Soil Culture at Create: Soil Saturdays and Food Happenings' in *Soil Culture: Bringing the Arts Down to Earth*. Other image-text works appear in the online journals, *The Learned Pig*, *The Ecological Citizen*, and *The Environment* magazine of the Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management. [www.greencuisinetrust.org](http://www.greencuisinetrust.org) [www.studiofabrehardy.earth](http://www.studiofabrehardy.earth)

## Resources

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