



FoodHub in the News

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By Jen Dalton

Faces & Visions of the Food Movement: Deborah Kane

Deborah Kane is the Vice President of Food and Farms for Ecotrust, a Portland, Oregon-based conservation and economic development group that has their hands in a variety of powerful pots including a USDA-backed online service called FoodHub that helps connect farms of every size with schools, hospitals, caterers, restaurants, and distributors. Deborah is also the publisher of Edible Portland. She was invited to the White House a few weeks ago to brief President Obama on FoodHub, which she hopes will go national next year.

What issues have you been focused on?

I'm very focused on connecting producers to domestic markets. While I'm making sure that farmers are meeting restaurants, grocers, caterers, hospitals, we also have a specific expertise in school food service directors. I've been focused on creating market opportunities in general and more specifically on schools.

What inspires you to do this work?

I just get a thrill from the e-mail or the phone call from the farmer that says they have a new customer, account or client because of the work we do. For me, it's all about farmers, ranchers, and fisherman operating viable business that will be around in the future.

What's your overall vision?

That good food be available wherever people shop and congregate. That it would be unthinkable to sit down at a meal in any context, whether on an airplane, your aunt's house or in a school cafeteria and not know where the food came from. Unthinkable in the context that it would be such the norm in our country. I want to live long enough to be alive for the day when most people don't remember it any other way.

What books and/or blogs are you reading right now?

I'm always reading Edible Portland, of course. And, I'm lucky to read it a season ahead, in advance of its publish date. I look at COMFOOD, Eater PDX, and the FoodHub blog daily, and the Capital Press weekly. I'm addicted to checking FoodHub membership growth; I'll log in every 10 minutes.

Who's in your community?

Farmers, ranchers, and fisherman of all shapes and sizes. Right now my community is primarily the FoodHub community, all the sellers, buyers, and also the associates (freelance writers, NGOs, farmers market managers, etc.) plus the distributors from the Syscos to the small mom and pops that use the service. We're trying to create a hub that's neutral and for everyone from Republicans to Democrats, and from small farmers to big; it's a dynamic community. With FoodHub we have an opportunity to daylight the fact that not all organic farmers are small and unsophisticated in their business practices and not all large corporate farmers are irresponsible in regards to their environmental practices; I'm constantly trying to bridge these perceptual differences.

What are your commitments?

Getting more sleep. Trying to practice what I preach both professionally and personally. On the professional side I work for Ecotrust, which is focused on the triple bottom line, so I'm constantly managing those parameters and looking at how to create a sense of balance and sustainability in my daily as well as professional life.

What are your goals?

To contribute to making the vision I described a reality. I want to create a world in which it is the norm that everyone has access to truly authentic, nutritious food. My goals are related to that vision on the food access side and also to making sure that the next generation, since they live in a world that knows no other way, will be food literate, that they understand that food is from a natural system. Food literacy is a big goal, especially with my own children.

What does change look like to you?

Change needs to be sweeping. I feel like we're on the verge, but we're nowhere close. Food has never been more in the national spotlight, but we need to increase our efforts tenfold for the vision to come to fruition.

Regarding the practicalities of enacting change, what planning is involved? What kind of outreach?

Having just returned from D.C., I think I'm more motivated than ever to work on policy change. We have this debate at Ecotrust all the time, should we focus on consumers and eaters or just on policy makers and decision makers? But I think we need to do both. I feel like we have a tremendous opportunity to influence change through policy at a federal level. But, we also have a lot to work on at the state level. The grassroots movement has to push toward something specific, policy-wise. It can't just be a movement in service of the culinary delights of good food. It has to be a movement toward viable systems that make equitable access to better food front and center.

What projects are affiliated with yours?

The National Farm to School Network. Ecoturst serves as the Western Regional Lead Agency.

What projects and people have you got your eye on or are you impressed by?

I have my eye on some of the food festivals right now, like Eat Real and Slow Food Nation. We're hosting a significant food festival in Portland in 2012, name TBD—it will have the word Portland in it, I can tell you that. I've been watching The Good Food Awards. I'm really into the festivals and awards, things that get us out of the advocacy world and into the world of tastemakers. SXSW, that sort of thing.

Where do you see the state of agriculture/food policy in the next 5-10 years? Is real policy change a real possibility?

I absolutely think real policy change is a possibility. I point to the school food legislation that just passed in Oregon. Even in the legislative year before, we passed legislation that allows state agencies to state a preference for Oregon grown, processed or manufactured foods. There are great examples of state policies across the nation, whether for preferential sourcing or for supporting food policy councils. I've seen lots of really creative policies and increasingly ones that are less of a one size fits all approach; more recently I've been encouraged by the sense that legislators recognize our agricultural landscape is diverse so we have to shift policy to meet that diversity. In our county we spent the last 18 months creating a really detailed vision for our food future. There's no lack of energy around policy.

What does the food movement need to do, be or have to be more effective?

I think it needs to get over itself a little bit. I think it needs to work across the aisle. A little less finger pointing. Don't let perfect be the enemy of pretty darn good. I'm fascinated by the negative backlash against Whole Foods, for example, when we have so many bigger fights to fight.

What would you want to be your last meal on earth?

I would have a mixing bowl full of fava beans with lemon olive oil, a little bit of shallots, a little bit of goat cheese. A mixing bowl that someone else shelled and prepared. The meal would have to include pork of some kind, a beautiful, farm fresh cheese and a fresh green salad with fennel and asparagus. Lots of vegetables. Hopefully I can have it in the spring time.

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