

I Never Promised You a Learning Garden

Critical Reflections on the Ill-Timed Launch and Uncertain Future of a Fast Food Outreach Project in Orlando, Florida

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In this article, I consider the complexities and contradictions that characterize the recent launch of a Chipotle Mexican Grill community outreach project in Orlando, Florida from both a reflexive and autoethnographic perspective. Specifically, I document a local gardening advocate's efforts to develop and operate a chain-affiliated learning garden near the campus of the University of Central Florida (UCF) where I work as an Associate Professor of Anthropology. Over subsequent pages, relevant biographical information collected through interviews and other data elicitation techniques is presented alongside my own personal observations in an effort to more fully delineate the actors and events at the center of this burgeoning and recurrently problematic partnership.

Paying particular attention to the various challenges that have beset the collaboration almost from its outset, this work adds critical depth to current understanding about new directions in community and urban gardening. It similarly probes the efficacy of these local approaches both for project stakeholders and the wider community. While findings presented in the following sections are arguably as theoretical as they are data-driven, they, nevertheless, provide new insights into what happens when corporate fast food aligns itself with local food interests as a form of public outreach. At a deeper level, they help unpack some of the discursive dimensions that characterize ethical food consumption amid the foregrounding of individual agency and other neoliberal solutions to food issues related to the public good.

In many ways, this work highlights some of the tensions that characterize recent academic debates within cultural food scholarship about the utility of individual agency in (re)shaping or descaling aspects of today's industrial food economy into something more environmentally sustainable and nutritionally sound (Koch 2012:3). Significantly, it appears that food scholars are of two minds when it comes to assessing the effectiveness of such individual activism in response to the entrenched hegemony of the global agro-food apparatus. Some argue that informed consumers are vital to correcting or effectively mitigating ongoing asymmetries within various sectors of industrial food production including corporate fast food (Halwell 2004, Lockie 2002).

Shopping at farmers' markets, buying organic products, and supporting community agriculture are but some of the approaches that "citizen-consumers" can utilize to affect real change within the agro-food system (Johnston 2008). Others question the utility of such consumer activism as it is increasingly articulated within corporatized contexts (Koch 2012:3). That is, rather than pursuing individual agency as a viable means to ameliorate problems within the current food system, these scholars call for a reengagement of the state through increased regulation and more active involvement promoting the public good (Roff 2007). Out of these debates emerges a real need for reflexive and

(auto)ethnographically based studies that examine the lived experiences of those engaging corporate entities as they work towards of a transformed and more locally responsive global food system.

Chipotle and Ethical Food Consumption

The role of the state in promoting the public good has steadily eroded over recent decades as neoliberal ideologies that emphasize individual agency, markets, and private interests over government-based solutions to ongoing social concerns continue to gain ground within the U.S. and other parts of the world. Various segments of the global political economy have been affected by this prevailing hegemonic regime including the industrial food sector (McMichael 1994). As corporations and other private enterprises become more assertive in shaping the discursive conditions through which notions of ethical food consumption are articulated (Kolleck 2013), state interests are rendered seemingly less accountable in championing such matters of public good (Soper 2007). By the 2010s, state involvement in the agro-food system has declined to the point where consumers now arguably privilege “corporate knowledge” on what constitutes ethical consumption over other more traditional sources (Johnston and Szabo 2011).

This privileged position, however, does not preclude a reassertion of state intervention over corporate food interests as recent developments within the U.S. fast food industry suggest. In response to mounting public pressure and the looming possibility of new government regulation, many leading restaurant chains have taken modest to significant steps over recent years to shed their image as purveyors of questionable food sourcing practices and unhealthy eating habits. Consumers and policymakers have become increasingly attuned to the ill-effects of corporate fast food at both the individual and societal level, thanks in part to the mainstream success of critical exposés such as journalist Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (2001) and filmmaker Morgan Spurlock’s *Super Size Me* (2004). This newfound awareness about fast food’s contributive role in rising “globesity” (Matejowsky 2009) and widespread environmental degradation (Robbins 2011:199-201) has, among other things, compelled quick-service eateries like McDonald’s to alter or refocus aspects of their operations to better align with shifting public sentiments. Whether it is offering healthier dining selections in popular kids’ meals, showcasing calorie information on restaurant menu boards, or phasing out controversial sales tactics such as over-augmenting portion sizes for nominal price increases (i.e., “supersizing”), today’s fast food industry has made appreciable strides, however calculated or dubious, towards rehabilitating its public image amid ongoing levels of scrutiny.

Against this backdrop of market repositioning and corporate strategizing, it is important to recognize that not all quick-service eateries have necessitated such major rebranding efforts. In fact, some restaurant chains have emerged well ahead of the curve when it comes to crafting a positive public identity based around ethical business practices. Perhaps no quick-service restaurant exemplifies this tendency better than Chipotle Mexican Grill, a fast casual taquería launched in 1993 by Culinary Institute of America graduate Steve Ells and known for its assembly-line production of gourmet-style tacos, burritos, and salads. With over 1,400 outlets operating across North America and Europe, the

Denver-based Chipotle is widely recognized as an industry leader committed to natural and organic ingredients, sustainable food sourcing practices, and fair labor standards (Bittman 2013).

Such perceptions persist even as some disconnect remains between the company's principled stance of "Food with Integrity" and its track record of managing the day-to-day logistics of a successful restaurant chain. While Chipotle has sometimes fallen short of its well-publicized corporate ethos, especially with regards to supply chain labor issues (Klein 2011), its innovative approach to producing fast casual Mexican food demonstrates that quick-service eateries can still earn sizable profits without relying exclusively on industrial agribusiness and America's factory farm system.

The restaurant's progressive business model resonates with many non-traditional fast food customers, especially those urban, web-savvy college types who also appreciate the restaurant's austere postmodern aesthetic and sometimes quirky promotions. In much the same way that supermarket giant Whole Foods Market both "articulates a discourse of ethical consumption" (Johnston 2008) and maintains a loyal following of health conscious and environmentally-minded shoppers who do not mind paying a little extra for natural or organic products, so too does Chipotle retain a dedicated base of consumers who crave relatively inexpensive on-the-go meals that do little to compromise their left-leaning political sensibilities. In short, by offering a quick casual dining alternative to the seemingly identical corporate burger joints that continue to dominate the industry, Chipotle fills a viable market niche for those for whom conventional fast food is too boring, too tasteless, or too heavily enmeshed with the interests of agribusiness and factory farms.

Chipotle's ability to differentiate itself from the competition in this way appears essential to the company's long term success. The company posted upwards of \$3 billion in corporate earnings for 2012, with fourth quarter sales up 17% from the same period in 2011 (Bittman 2013). Even as the field of fast casual Mexican eateries continues to expand nationwide, Chipotle is able to project a coherent brand identity that relies on ethical business practices almost as much as it does tasty food and fresh ingredients. While its more immediate rivals such as Qdoba, Baja Fresh, Taco Cabana, El Pollo Loco, and Moe's Southwest Grill vie for market position by offering similar types of cuisine in comparable restaurant settings, their commitment to local food sourcing, organic and natural ingredients, and family farms does not approach that of Chipotle's. So, even while America's top-selling Mexican fast food brand Taco Bell now emulates aspects of Chipotle's culinary prowess by creating artisan-style burritos and other fare that approximate Chipotle's more sophisticated menu items (Brash 2012, Choi 2013), the "Live Más" chain does little to surpass or even match Chipotle in terms of embracing sustainability.

Chipotle's forward-leaning cachet is articulated in various ways beyond those directly related to restaurant food sourcing and production. For example, the chain actively collaborates with like-minded organizations and individuals who share a common commitment to healthy and environmentally sound food practices. Chipotle has thrown its marketing muscle behind a number of causes or undertakings related to food sustainability at the national level. In 2008, the company helped promote the critically acclaimed documentary *Food, Inc.* which exposes the dark underbelly of America's industrial food

system and serves as a veritable touchstone for today's Slow Food Movement. Chipotle not only distributed promotional material for the film in their restaurants, it also sponsored free theatrical screenings of the movie in over 30 major U.S. cities. More recently, Chipotle partnered with an Ohio-based non-profit that promotes school nutrition and sustainable agriculture, "Veggie U," to debut a comprehensive educational program that integrates experiential scientific exercises about food sourcing and vegetable gardening into existing elementary and special-needs curricula (Fast Casual.com 2012). In such ways, Chipotle, again not unlike Whole Foods Market, creates a space where important information about alternative food movements can be readily accessed by consumers (Johnston and Szabo 2011).

At the local level, Chipotle also engages in public outreach by supporting community events and ventures that are consistent with its "Food with Integrity" principles. This includes sponsoring in-restaurant school fundraisers, student essay contests, and neighborhood harvest festivals. Potential collaborators can pitch their ideas to company representatives through an online application on the corporate webpage. If approved, Chipotle provides applicants some type of material support or endorsement, usually with the understanding that the resulting partnership may be publicized in company marketing. In many ways, Chipotle represents the most logical choice for grassroots-level projects seeking small infusions of capital or corporate name recognition. Surely among all of the U.S. quick casual and fast food eateries operating today, no other restaurant chain has more credibility with those in the local food movement seeking capitalization than Chipotle. It is probably not that much of an overstatement, then, to suggest that Chipotle effectively serves as the go-to corporate sponsor for nearly all homegrown slow and ethical food events.

One cause in which the chain has taken an active interest lately is community gardening. The conversion of vacant or underutilized land into productive spaces for vegetable cultivation, especially in urban areas or near Chipotle restaurants, is something the company increasingly embraces as it parallels Chipotle's commitment to family farms and fresh produce. While by no means ubiquitous, Chipotle sponsored community gardens have recently cropped up in several large and mid-size U.S. cities including Dallas, Louisville, Denver, and St. Paul (Real School Gardens 2011). These agricultural plots are utilized primarily for educational purposes and do not supply Chipotle restaurants with fresh produce, as such practices would violate safety laws based around routine food inspections. Similarly, much, if not most, of the labor that goes into community garden construction and maintenance does not come from Chipotle employees, but is rather provided by local volunteers. A number of online profiles documenting these gardening projects' development and featuring color photographs and commentary have appeared on various social networking sites such as Facebook (Daily City 2013).

Creating community gardens in this way seems equally advantageous for all parties involved. For Chipotle, these ventures reinforce the company's brand identity as the ethical and sustainable bellwether of quick-casual restaurants. For its local collaborators, the gardens not only offer a quaint venue for educating consumers about food origins, they also help foster community ties among participants as plots require continual upkeep, irrigation, and harvesting. When considered in tandem, it is easy to see how this kind of public outreach represents a win-win situation for Chipotle and its

urban gardening counterparts. Yet, these increasingly publicized collaborations may lack genuine consensus as relations among stakeholders are also shaded by a certain degree of nuance that effectively belies such upbeat appraisals. In broader sense, they may reveal how state promotion of the public good on issues related to ethical food consumption has ceded ground to prevailing neoliberal ideologies whereby privatized and corporate interests are accorded greater currency in knowledge dissemination within the agro-food system.

However mutually beneficial dealings between Chipotle and its community gardening partners ostensibly appear, they are also subject to various kinds of growing pains. Efforts to implement these learning projects, much less ensure their long term viability, are often susceptible to competing agendas that, if not directly at odds with one another, are certainly not always perfectly aligned. The subtle frictions that arise out of such incompatibilities, particularly those related to the collaboration's future direction, can accrue and eventually stymie whatever forward momentum the ventures initially experience. In many ways, these minor rifts reflect the understated tensions that can emerge when corporate fast food intersects, however tangentially, with community agriculture at the local level. Negotiating this sometimes complex interplay raises some intriguing research questions for anthropologists, folklorists, sociologists, food scholars, and others interested in understanding how such seemingly disparate domains as quick-service restaurants and local food interests can coalesce and diverge over a common cause.

Questions worth considering include how do fast casual eateries like Chipotle engage local groups in this type of community outreach or vice-versa? How do the complementary, if sometimes competing, interests of both sides develop over time, and who benefits the most from these unfolding partnerships? What, if any, are the drawbacks for local food groups for partnering with corporate chains at the grassroots level, given the industry's longstanding association with unhealthy eating habits and unsustainable business practices? How do these projects ultimately impact the wider community in terms of enhancing food knowledge, health, and well-being? When considered altogether, these questions not only offer a viable starting point from which to begin exploring the new learning garden, they also call attention to the role of "consumer engagement with the corporatized arm of ethical consumption - a realm of concern to food scholars as alternative agricultural initiatives are absorbed (both materially and symbolically) into corporate institutions" (Johnston and Szabo 2011).

Background

As a matter of disclosure, my familiarity with this particular Chipotle location probably owes more to the fact that one of my former neighbors used to work there as a line cook than any regular patronage on my part. While I eat there rather infrequently, I still appreciate Chipotle's "Food with Integrity" ethos and really enjoy their fresh menu offerings, especially the grilled steak tacos. That said, my campus commute along University Boulevard takes me right past this east Orlando Chipotle almost every day. With a clear street view of the learning garden effectively obscured by the restaurant's bustling parking lot and mostly redbrick construction, I only first became aware of the project one

evening in early February 2013, while dining with my family at a Steak 'n Shake located directly next door.

From the vantage point of our red cushioned booth, I noticed what appeared to be some new development in a vacant lot behind the Chipotle. My view through the restaurant's plate glass window was partially obscured by several parked cars and palmetto shrubs so I was initially unsure what had been constructed. Perhaps it was a special expansion of the Chipotle parking lot or more likely the groundwork for a new outdoor seating venue. Whatever this development entailed, it scarcely resembled anything previously established in this part of suburban east Orlando with its various working or middle-class neighborhoods, at least in terms of aesthetics or possible functionality. After dinner, my wife and I decided to amble over with the kids and take a closer look.

A quick walk-around inspection revealed 12 raised garden beds enclosed by a simple wire fence. These individual plots were neatly arranged in four rows of three along a freshly laid carpet of shredded cypress mulch. With the notable exception of a blue plastic rain barrel stacked atop some cinderblocks in a corner nook, the garden's symmetrical layout and handcrafted fixtures were all but elegant in their rustic simplicity (see Photo 1). I noticed that, unlike other urban agricultural spaces that I have seen, this one did not incorporate found and recycled objects such as old tires or wooden shipping pallets in its design. Rather, all building materials looked new, if only slightly weatherworn in appearance. Best I could tell, the modest tufts of leafy winter greens that sprouted out of the dark garden soil were the only produce currently under cultivation (see Photo 2). With a rich earthy aroma of organic compost tingeing the cool evening air, I quickly became intrigued by how this garden came to be, especially what possible role Chipotle played in its development.



Photo 1: Chipotle Learning Garden, March 2013.



Photo 2: Raised garden beds with winter greens, Chipotle Learning Garden, March 2013.

What sparked my interest was not so much the surprise of finding a productive green space quietly nestled among the various chain eateries, retention ponds, and interchangeable office plazas that line this stretch of University Boulevard. Rather, my curiosity was piqued by the fact that this agricultural effort seemingly mirrored aspects of my ongoing ethnographic research in the provincial Philippines detailing the globalization of local foodways. Over the past several years I have documented manifestations of corporate fast food and community gardening initiatives in several urban centers across north-central Luzon. Among other things, this work has compelled me to consider how such operations emerge and retain their viability within various socio-cultural contexts including the U.S. In this way, the location of this Chipotle gardening project, only a mile or so from where I work, seemed too fortuitous not to explore it in more detail.

No Garden-Variety Learning Garden

As luck would have it, a local daily ran a feature on the Chipotle learning garden in its online edition about a week later (The Daily City 2013). My wife emailed me the link and I was surprised to find that the article was only a few paragraphs long. Despite its brevity, the piece was quite informative, especially since it contained an embedded three minute video detailing the project's construction and underlying rationale. Professionally shot and edited, the video serves as much as a mission statement for the learning garden developers as it does a calling card for Chipotle's community outreach efforts. When considered in retrospect, it is easy to see how viewers would perceive the project as having an auspicious future.

Amid the soothing sounds of delicate acoustic guitar fingerpicking and images of compact bulldozers clearing brush and debris from the vacant lot behind Chipotle, I learned the following details from the video. First, the gardening project was conceptualized by “A Local Folkus” and constructed with the help of “My Yard Farm.” The former is an organization that, according to its website, is “dedicated to showcasing the work of musicians, artists, business owners, farmers, and other folks in the Central Florida area” (alocalfolkus.com 2013). The latter is an Orlando based firm that assists local businesses and homeowners with the planning and installation of vegetable garden plots in underutilized urban or suburban spaces. Second, the garden itself is comprised of organic fill soil and fertilized with mushroom compost. Third, garden plots are kept continually moist through a gravity-fed irrigation system that collects rainwater in a plastic barrel and distributes it without electricity to the raised beds through a network of PVC pipe and drip soaker hoses buried only a few inches beneath the soil. Fourth, the garden bins are constructed out of untreated cedar wood that is both rot resistant and designed to last upwards of ten years.

Significantly, the video also includes commentary and sound bites from the project’s creator, John Riley, a community gardening advocate and natural foods entrepreneur of sorts who, among other things, launched several local initiatives and events in greater Orlando related to his “A Local Folkus” organization, including the Winter Park Harvest Festival and the East End Market (ibid). The latter is a multi-million dollar development entailing the conversion of a former two story office complex into a neighborhood market and cultural food hub in which Central Florida artisans and farmers can rent space to ply their wares to consumers. Probably what intrigued me most from the video were Riley’s comments about the learning garden’s overall purpose:

to create a place where people can dialogue about... [food] issues. What does ‘Food with Integrity’ mean? [The Learning Garden is designed] to give Chipotle and... ‘A Local Folkus’ an opportunity to bring people into a space where we can show documentary films, where we can bring schools in for workshops, where we can do garden demonstrations. But [ultimately our goal is to] create a place where community engagement [can occur]. We have lost a lot of that in our hectic, fast paced world. But to take a chance to unplug and...get your hands dirty and really...wrestle with some of the issues of...sustainable farming and growing seasonally...gives [us] a much more profound respect for how food comes from field to plate. Our goal here is to basically make that a physical reality and we are super excited to be able to partner with Chipotle and ‘My Yard Farm’ to make that whole thing happen (Buffington 2013).

After watching the video, I felt doubly compelled to find out more about the learning garden and Chipotle’s involvement with it. Since Riley is quite tech savvy about promoting all of his local gardening efforts, maintaining a considerable social media presence on sites like Facebook and Twitter, it was fairly easy to track down his contact information and email him my request for more information about the learning garden. Impressively, Riley got back to me in less than a day saying he would be happy to chat but that he was currently attending the Georgia Organics conference and had plans over the next few weeks to check out Birmingham, Alabama’s local food scene and meet with representatives from

Southern Living magazine to discuss some of his work. If anything, his busy schedule confirmed my hunch that he was a real mover and shaker within Orlando's natural food community. After a few more email exchanges, we agreed to meet for an informal tour of the learning garden one Friday afternoon in early March 2013. Our appointment coincided with UCF's spring break, so not much was happening around campus or along University Boulevard's belt of quick casual eateries.

Who is John Riley?

The weather was clear and surprisingly cool when I left campus to meet Riley at the nearby Chipotle learning garden. I arrived to find him unraveling a knotted water hose in the restaurant parking lot. Smartly attired in a Patagonia fleece, jeans, and desert boots, his understated appearance and stubble beard called to mind a dressed down Matt Damon or Brad Pitt. In many ways, Riley seemed to personify the forward-leaning, food conscious urbanite that Chipotle actively targets in its marketing and restaurant operations. The gardening equipment loaded in the back of his late model Ford pickup suggested nothing if not a hands-on approach to urban farming and a strong commitment to D.I.Y. community engagement.

Over the next few hours Riley revealed details about his local roots and educational background as well as some of the influential events that steered him towards urban agriculture and natural foods advocacy. A graduate of Winter Park High School, Riley received a B.A. degree from Furman University, a private coeducational liberal arts college in South Carolina, in 1998. Twelve years later he earned an M.A. in Digital Media from UCF. Besides an ongoing interest in playing music and competing in triathlons, he has also traveled extensively overseas with trips to almost 40 countries including Malaysia, China, and Indonesia. With many varied interests and an extensive network of local contacts, Riley was well positioned to pursue any number of community outreach projects in the greater Orlando area. The fact that he ultimately pursued urban agriculture may reflect his ability to match a newfound sense of conviction with many of his skills and talents.

It was Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (2006) that inspired Riley to try his hand at organic gardening. Starting off small, he grew his first tomato plant from seed at home after reading this soon-to-be-classic. He then moved on to other cultivation projects over subsequent months, before shifting his energies to something more profound. Riley, never one to dream small, began conceptualizing a local food event that would eventually become the Winter Park Harvest Festival. His interests lie in making gardening appealing to everyone from "the penny loafer crowd to those who have full arm tattoos." With no comparable festivities in this part of Central Florida, Riley was able use many of his local business connections to carve out an important niche within the regional organic food scene. The Winter Park Harvest Festival was launched in 2010 and has grown every year to become an important fixture on the greater Orlando social calendar. This success reflects his "big picture" entrepreneurial approach to local food advocacy. As he would later tell me, "I like to throw a lot of shit against the wall and see what sticks."

After introductions, I followed Riley to the restaurant's patio area where he turned on a water spigot partially hidden behind some shrubbery along the building's edge. He then hurried over to retrieve the now gushing tube from the asphalt and begin filling up the garden's blue rain barrel. Once the streaming hose was firmly installed in the near empty container, we began walking around the site, discussing the recent challenges he has faced in keeping the project operational some six weeks after its initial debut.

As we chatted I noticed that the undeveloped property just beyond the garden's perimeter was strewn with trash and intermittent piles of unused mulch and soil, as if no one had tidied the place up in a while. Riley informed me that up until the January 2013 site renovation, the lot behind Chipotle served as a frequent campsite for local transients. Aside from the litter and materials left over from construction, the garden itself appeared fairly well-kept, although some of the plants seemed in better shape than others, possibly reflecting the lack of manpower to oversee operations. Open space in the garden's center is sizable and, according to Riley, designed to accommodate benches and tents. Since the space is primarily designed for educational purposes, Riley has yet to determine what to do with the winter greens currently under cultivation, although donating them to Second Harvest, a local food bank that serves distressed Central Florida families, remains a distinct possibility.

While I snapped pictures and jotted down notes, Riley did some weeding and other odd tasks around the garden, continually checking his iPhone and sometimes answering calls or texts about ongoing "A Local Folkus" projects. Clearly, he maintains a busy schedule, something he readily concedes by admitting to having "many plates spinning at once." Since I originally envisioned our first meeting as something of a fact finding mission, I had not really prepared formal interview questions for Riley. Basically, I wanted to get a feel for him as a possible ethnographic informant and determine whether or not the Chipotle venture held real research potential. Riley's passion for the learning garden as well as his other Orlando-area initiatives quickly convinced me that the undertaking did indeed have promise and that my best approach was probably to just let him speak. This decision proved astute as he soon brought me up to speed about the project's background and current status.

According to him, Chipotle agreed to capitalize the agricultural space with \$6,000 of its own funds. Riley was well-situated to pursue such collaboration, both for his success as a local gardening advocate as well as the surprising amount of sway he already maintained over the site. The ground leases for many of the commercial properties located along University Boulevard, including those on which the Chipotle restaurant and neighboring Logan's Steakhouse now stand, are held by Riley's family. Since they also control the undeveloped acreage immediately behind the taquería, the transformation of some its underutilized parcels into a functional learning garden seemed promising for Riley, albeit not a foregone conclusion. The construction of a restaurant-affiliated garden at this location appeared mutually beneficial for various reasons. Not only did it reflect the chain's "Food with Integrity" philosophy, it also paralleled other Chipotle's community outreach projects around the country. Moreover, it provided groups like "A Local Folkus" an attractive and functional setting to engage locals in east Orlando about issues related to food sourcing and sustainable production.

Rather than approach Chipotle online through its community outreach application, Riley was able to pitch the learning garden concept to the company in a more personalized way. Through his work with “A Local Folkus,” Riley had established a working relationship with Chipotle vis-à-vis the chain’s ongoing sponsorship of the Winter Park Harvest Festival. In particular, he developed a strong rapport with the Chipotle representative whose job entailed overseeing restaurant operations in Florida and across the U.S. Southeast. Their successful promotion of this annual event over a three year period helped cement the burgeoning partnership, laying the groundwork for future collaborations that reflect shared philosophies about organic foods and urban agriculture. Since Riley and the Chipotle representative got along so well professionally, they began contemplating new and innovative ways to expand this working relationship over the long term.

Riley informed me that his decision to expand the partnership with Chipotle into something beyond their previous festival sponsorship was partially inspired by an animated Chipotle advertisement that debuted at the 2012 Grammy Awards. The “Back to the Start” commercial featured a Willie Nelson cover of the Coldplay song “The Scientist” and depicted the gradual transformation of a small family farm into a giant industrial factory farm before progressively reverting back to the original family operation. He showed me the two minute spot afterwards on his iPhone as we dined inside the restaurant.

Beyond this well-received marketing effort, Riley was similarly influenced by Chipotle sponsored outreach projects in other major U.S. cities. One was the chain’s collaboration with “Truck Farm Tampa,” a community organization in nearby Tampa, Florida dedicated to promoting natural foods and urban farming at area schools through a mobile garden in the back of an orange pickup truck. The objectives of this educational program which include raising awareness about food origins are almost identical to Riley’s learning garden initiative. Another was Chipotle’s annual “Cultivate: Food, Ideas, and Music Festival.” This free public event is staged each summer in San Francisco, Denver, and Chicago and attracts thousands of D.I.Y. farmers, food conscious urbanites, innovative artisans, and indie musicians to celebrate healthy and environmentally sound food practices in a festive atmosphere. The success of these Chipotle-affiliated ventures seemed to bode well for his proposed gardening concept.

By late fall 2012, the idea of a community learning garden on the vacant property had effectively taken shape. Riley noted that the project’s original goal was “just to get it built and figure out the operational aspects later.” This is almost precisely what happened as Riley secured the Chipotle funding and with the help of his “My Yard Farm” colleagues designed and constructed the agricultural space over several days in January 2013. The learning garden’s smooth installation which was documented rather optimistically in the three minute online video belied unforeseen developments that quickly called the project’s future viability into question. Indeed, the positive expectations that characterized much of the agricultural space’s planning would over time prove largely premature.

Chipotle initially pledged around \$200 in monthly wages for someone to oversee the agricultural plots. In effect, the chain would pay a garden hand to weed, irrigate, and maintain the space. This fell

through when the Chipotle representative with whom Riley initially worked unexpectedly left the company for another job. Her abrupt departure, just as operations were getting underway, effectively brought learning garden activities to a standstill and placed the project, as Riley states, “in stasis.” Without a detail-oriented person in upper-management to advocate his vision about how the plots could best serve the interests of Chipotle, “A Local Folkus,” and the wider community, the learning garden’s future direction assumed a much less certain footing. Similarly, with his collaborator no longer around to help translate his aspirations about public outreach to company higher-ups, it seemed Chipotle was poised to disregard its initial investment in the project.

As things currently stand, Riley is searching for ways to move forward with Chipotle to get operations back on track. It seems that the main sticking point involves questions about who will manage the garden over the long term. Riley is interested in securing more external funding in this regard or possibly rallying volunteer help from the nearby UCF community. The latter option appears somewhat more feasible as the university is Riley with student groups and organizations whose unpaid labor could go a long way towards rehabilitating the project. While the possibilities of providing such service learning opportunities to students holds potential, Riley has yet to find a viable UCF connection to broker such an arrangement.

With his immediate attention focused on the fast approaching launch of the \$3 million East End Market, the Chipotle Learning Garden has become increasingly relegated to the backburner for Riley. When I asked him if he is hopeful that the Chipotle project will ultimately succeed, he confirmed that he was indeed optimistic since he “has enough social capital” in greater Orlando to make sure that it doesn’t fail. In a follow-up email, he reiterated such sentiments by stating that the “media buzz” generated by the East End Market’s successful opening in fall 2013 could be effectively leveraged “to get some renewed interest in the Chipotle garden” (email to author, June 14, 2013).

As if to illustrate the challenges Riley is now facing in breathing new life into the learning garden, a college-age Chipotle employee approached us as we were concluding our informal tour to nervously ask if Riley could stop watering. Evidently, customers were complaining that the hose filling up the blue rain barrel was only partially attached to the spigot, spraying the much of the outdoor seating with water. He directed us over to the side of the restaurant where, sure enough, a pair of mop-wielding wage-earners was awaiting the chance to attend to the patio which by now appeared drenched by artificial rainfall. Riley quickly switched off the valve. This awkward exchange compelled us to continue our chat inside the eatery over veggie burritos and iced tea.

As we ate, Riley acknowledged that the complexities and contradictions of partnering with a fast casual corporate chain like Chipotle were not lost on him. Such self-awareness and individual reflexivity assumed particular depth as he readily admitted that some company practices are neither fully sustainable nor really all that appealing to environmentalists or local food activists. Basically, he stated that the shared interests between corporate chains and local gardening advocates like himself will never perfectly align. Despite these admitted incongruities, he is still committed to “moving the ball down the court,” viewing inaction on his own part as little more than a cop out. He drew very real

distinctions between Chipotle and its fast food competitors, noting that at least the quick-casual taquería had embraced sustainable and environmentally conscious food from its inception, unlike chains such as McDonald's, who were arguably compelled by public sentiment to adopt more pro-social practices.

With our meeting concluded I headed back to campus to type up my field notes. The overall impression that I took away from this initial encounter with Riley was one of appreciation for his big picture approach to urban gardening and community engagement. Taking the initiative and seizing opportunities as they arise seems an essential aspect of his entrepreneurial style. Similarly, the ability to cultivate relationships with a variety of volunteer and commercial interests including corporate restaurant chains to develop projects and events that inform the public about the benefits of local foods and organic cultivation demonstrates a real knack for realizing his personal vision.

In many ways, his background and business ties in Orlando and elsewhere leave him well positioned to get such schemes up and running. Doubtless, it takes someone with considerable initiative and grit to seek out new opportunities for promoting these issues, especially in communities where such undertakings are largely uncommon. Yet, I could not help but wonder if he risks becoming overextended with so many projects operating concurrently and at various stages of development. Whether or not his "if you build it, they will come" approach to the Chipotle learning garden will ultimately succeed was something I could not anticipate at this juncture.

Growing Pains

My daily commute along University Boulevard throughout spring and Issue 2 revealed little or no activity behind the Chipotle restaurant. Not only were there no grand opening or ribbon cutting ceremonies to commemorate the learning garden's launch in the days and weeks that followed its construction, the space has, thus far, failed to host any community events or activities. Even online there has been a conspicuous lack of fanfare surrounding the endeavor, with no updates or information from "A Local Folkus" or Chipotle about recent developments in the project's status. By nearly all outward appearances, it seems that efforts to get the learning garden fully operational have proved ineffective.

When I stopped by the eatery to see how things were progressing in July 2013 some four months after meeting Riley, I was ill-prepared for the excessive overgrowth of intrusive plant life that awaited me out back (see Photo 3). Perhaps it was the inescapable effects of the oppressive summer heat, but the garden appeared decidedly less manicured with noticeably more weeds and fewer signs of tending. If anything, I was surprised by how much work and cultivation the plots now seemed to require. None of the raised garden beds had been harvested of greens and the mulch floor that blanketed the space was difficult to discern amid the dense clumps of weeds that pervaded the entire enclosure. Even the "My Yard Farm" banner attached to the wire fence near the garden's gate appeared soggy and warped from

prolonged exposure to the elements. Possibly the only real hints of progress were the large mounds of wood bark recently deposited on the garden's overgrown periphery.



Photo 3: Chipotle Learning Garden, July 2013.

Despite my initial sense of optimism, it now seemed that the impasse confronting the learning garden collaborators had firmly taken root with no foreseeable way to capitalize on its construction other than Riley's expectation that favorable East End Market publicity will subsequently resurrect the project. I suspect that this lack of forward progress can be attributed to a variety of factors rather than any one single issue. Of the two partners, it seems that Chipotle is the less committed as the company's decision to green-light the agricultural space presumably entailed considerations not wholly aligned with community outreach. Rejecting a venture like this runs the risk of undermining the chain's tenant status in the aforementioned ground lease agreement. With such an outcome arguably too impolitic to fully pursue, it seems reasonable to suspect that company support for the project was partially predicated on maintaining smooth relations with the owner of the property on which the restaurant stands. In this way, its start-up capitalization may have only seemed a small outlay for retaining such goodwill.

Once the garden was built and the chain's involvement initially publicized online and in print, Chipotle appeared to reevaluate its "A Local Folkus" affiliation, especially after the manager with whom Riley had originally collaborated left the company. Her unexpected departure effectively recast the learning garden into something of a pet project that only she seemed prepared to champion. Without her to assertively promote the agricultural space, detail its ongoing development to Chipotle colleagues, and shepherd it through the growing pains that arise amid new public outreach initiatives, the garden's future assumed a much less secure footing. So much so, in fact, that subsequent communication between project collaborators became sporadic at best. It probably goes without saying that her pivotal role in the garden's approval and advocacy for Riley cannot be overestimated in light of the struggles that have plagued the project following her exit.

Beyond Chipotle's apparent aversion to further collaboration, the current impasse confronting the learning garden presumably owes something to Riley's continued involvement in multiple local projects. By dint of his ongoing work and volunteer commitments in and around Orlando, it seems almost inevitable that some of his obligations would take precedence over others. In this case, the learning garden has been persistently eclipsed by Riley's responsibilities overseeing the Winter Park Harvest Festival and East End Market; a situation further complicated by the fact that he lacks viable partners or assistants to whom he can delegate various tasks. These large scale ventures have perhaps deservedly occupied most of his attention given their significant capitalizations and prominence in Central Florida's growing organic food scene. Yet, if the continuing difficulties besetting the Riley/Chipotle collaboration are any indication, it is that more modest undertakings such as promoting and managing the learning garden also require a comparable amount of effort by all invested stakeholders.

No less problematic is the learning garden's location some distance away from Riley's established sphere of influence in the more affluent Winter Park. Both the Harvest Festival and East End Market, along with many of his volunteer commitments, are situated in this former resort enclave which is known for its upscale shopping districts, Rollins College, and scenic homes nestled amid a series of picturesque lakes and navigable canals. Most of Riley's success has been concentrated in and around this exclusive Orange County suburb. By contrast, the Chipotle agricultural space is located over ten miles away in a former vacant lot that lacks clear curbside visibility for drivers on University Boulevard and seems rather far removed from Winter Park's ambience and aesthetic charm. With work and volunteer obligations that only sometimes require his presence in the UCF area, Riley cannot keep as watchful an eye on the learning garden as he does other projects. Had the opportunity to develop the learning garden emerged at a time when Riley was not so fully occupied by his other professional commitments or in a space more proximal to his Winter Park base of operations, things might have progressed along an entirely different trajectory. Similarly, had the east Orlando Chipotle partnered with a nearby school or community-based organization such as the Y.M.C.A. as they have in other cities (Real School Gardens 2011), the project might have generated more initial success.

Conclusion

In many respects corporate fast food and community gardening exist on opposite ends of a long and complex continuum. On the one extreme is the American fast food industry, which has come under increasing scrutiny for its questionable food sourcing practices, promotion of unhealthy diets, and contributive role in advancing “globesity.” Recent public criticism of these ill-effects has, among other things, compelled industry players to rethink aspects of their operations, with some chains pursuing new directions in corporate marketing and community outreach. So far, Chipotle Mexican Grill has felt little pressure to revamp its overall image, as it remains one of today’s most progressive and socially engaged restaurant brands. Yet, its links to industrial agribusiness and factory farms persist, despite Chipotle’s well-publicized commitment to natural ingredients and sustainability.

On the other end of the spectrum is the loosely knit web of family farmers, entrepreneurially-oriented organic food producers, gardening cooperatives, community advocates, and health conscious consumers that comprise today’s local food movement. Despite a lack of consistent state support, their grassroots efforts continue to attract growing numbers of followers in communities across the U.S. and elsewhere. As a deliberate return to simpler modes of food production, this non-corporate model eschews the hierarchical supply chains that insulate consumers from industrial food manufacturers just as it readily embraces sustainable practices including community gardening and urban agriculture. Ostensibly, support of locally produced food provides better access to fresh produce at the community level and fosters more personalized interactions between farmers and their customers. While such ideal outcomes are not always so straightforward in reality, they do help explain local food’s rising popularity over recent years. Similarly, they also anticipate the beginnings of a more paradigmatic shift away from the hegemonic food system that continues to dominate the global economy.

However incompatible corporate fast food and community gardening appear at the local level, there are instances where they converge and coalesce around common objectives. Essentially both are couched within neoliberal frameworks whereby market solutions and individual agency effectively undermine the potency of state solutions to persistent problems related to the global food system. As the unfolding case of the Chipotle learning garden in east Orlando attests, community outreach offers a viable context for complementary interests from these distinctive domains to raise their respective public profiles through collaboration. For a forward-leaning chain like Chipotle, sponsoring this type of initiative not only reinforces its “Food with Integrity” ethos, it also infuses restaurant operations with a deeper sense of mission. Besides leading the competition in crafting tasty and relatively inexpensive on-the-go Mexican cuisine, part of Chipotle’s corporate clout stems from its documented support of such non-profit endeavors. Just as these commitments situate the restaurant brand within a broader framework of public engagement that is variously recognized as both ethical and efficacious, they also cast the relative absence of state involvement in such issues into rather stark relief.

For community gardening interests like John Riley’s “A Local Folkus,” chain-affiliated partnerships hold genuine promise by creating opportunities for outside capitalization. The launch of these collaborative efforts assumes new levels of public credibility when such funding is considered alongside the publicity derived from its now popular brand associations. The fact that a well-known company would deign to support such agricultural undertakings can help elevate a project’s standing for many within the wider

community. Efforts that might otherwise go unnoticed can suddenly accrue a greater deal of cachet when juxtaposed with the corporate logos and other trappings of popular restaurant chains. If anything, they reinforce the growing power of private interests in foregrounding food issues related to ethical consumption and the public good. Whether or not these collaborations are positively received within the more insular and perhaps politicized confines of the local food scene is probably another matter altogether.

The initial enthusiasm that characterizes these burgeoning partnerships may fail to anticipate the growing pains or sudden rifts that can ultimately reverse whatever forward momentum they originally experience. As Chipotle learning garden operations now languish in apparent stasis, it becomes evident that these associations are probably more tenuous than would otherwise be assumed. Lack of sustained commitment from either side can easily derail or upend prospects for long term success without an invested stakeholder to effectively manage project details. Indeed, if what transpired in east Orlando provides any real indication of how fast food community outreach efforts can stall or fail to achieve their prime objectives, it is that, barring a binding contractual agreement between project collaborators, factors such as timing, personalities, and geography can all influence how these partnerships ultimately unfold.

At this stage, it seems that neither Chipotle nor Riley are able to devote the requisite time and energy to restore the project to some semblance of its initial potential, much less fully transform it into a showcase of urban agriculture and public engagement in this part of Orlando. Without an unexpected breakthrough, the complex interplay that developed between collaborators over recent months renders the prospect of a resurgent learning garden in the foreseeable future into something of an open-ended question. With no definitive resolution on the horizon, it is hard to predict whether or not this gloomy outlook is only temporary, or leaves open some possibility of a relaunch in the months or years to come. Likewise, it is difficult to anticipate which party would be the first to broach some kind of renewal effort, however tentative, should the project regain sufficient currency. Future research that compares these kinds of top-down approaches to urban gardening with those where local communities are involved in such efforts at their inception may reveal new ways to sustain these projects over the long term.

Suffice it to say, the learning garden signifies something of a missed opportunity not just for Riley and Chipotle but also for the surrounding community of mostly college students and working or middle-class families. In an area of Orlando where strip malls and fast food eateries predominate, a space dedicated to the promotion of organic farming, healthy eating practices, and enhanced food knowledge represents a vital if not long overdue community asset. Once up and running, the venue would help publicize these issues by providing a focal point for sustainable community development as adjacent neighborhoods remain largely devoid of such amenities. In a more far-reaching way, it would serve as an important resource for larger community efforts that strive to empower individuals and households through educational opportunities and skill-based training. Perhaps the biggest drawback related to the learning garden's still unfulfilled promise as a model of community outreach is that those it was meant to serve are denied the chance to encounter urban agriculture in such a new and experiential way.

With few opportunities for local urbanites to detach from the demands of everyday life and reconnect with nature by getting their hands dirty through simple vegetable cultivation, this dormant resource stands as a vivid reminder of what can happen when the interests of corporate fast food and those of the local food movement fail to properly align in collaborative community outreach. Unfortunately, since the public never really got the chance to experience the learning garden in a direct way, it is unlikely that they will greatly miss its presence. Arguably, as the promotion of ethical consumption and other agro-food issues related to the public good are increasingly abdicated to private sector interests, it is underserved communities and households who remain most vulnerable to the vagaries of this prevailing neoliberal model of development.

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1. “Reflexive ethnographies range along a continuum from starting research from one’s own experience to ethnographies where the researcher’s experience is actually studied along with other participants, to confessional tales where the researcher’s experience of doing the study becomes the focus of the study” (Ellis and Bochner 2000). Autoethnographies entail “a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field investigation and writing” (Maréchal 2010:43).
2. In this article, I adhere to Catherine Broom’s definition of the public good which understands this concept as “an imagined and communal space in which goods valued by society become collectively owned and shared through respectful and open contestation and negotiation” (Broom 2011).
3. Here and throughout this article the term “ethical” qualifies those practices and products that are variously believed to promote both social justice and sustainable environmental practices (cf. Johnston and Szabo 2011).
4. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the zip code in which this Chipotle restaurant is located is predominately “White,” with a sizable “Hispanic” population. Perhaps unsurprisingly given its proximity to UCF, the median age is 26 years old. The average household income is \$46,087 (U.S. Census Bureau 2013).
5. This is a pseudonym.
6. Besides spearheading the Winter Park Harvest Festival, he is also involved in numerous Orlando area enterprises and events that promote natural foods and sustainable farming. These include acting as the urban agriculture liaison for “Keep Winter Park Beautiful,” a local program dedicated to promoting green spaces and urban aesthetics, and serving on the advisory board of Edible Orlando, a homegrown magazine that covers Central Florida’s organic food scene. Beyond these volunteer responsibilities,

Riley also works full-time in commercial real estate with his father. The family firm developed the Mall at Millennia, a sprawling upscale shopping center located in west Orlando along the busy I-4 corridor. He even moonlights as an adjunct instructor of urban agriculture at Rollins College in nearby Winter Park. Riley's various commitments, I would later find, made follow-up interviews somewhat difficult to schedule.

7. Later, I discovered that "Back to the Start" was Chipotle's first national television ad. The company has almost completely eschewed conventional marketing techniques over its 20 year existence (Morrison 2012). In fact, it was only then that I realized that I had never seen a Chipotle television commercial as the chain does not rely on this advertising format to promote its restaurants; an achievement few major fast food eateries can claim.

8. He mentioned the fact that only 40% of the restaurant's pork is free range with the rest coming from factory farms.

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