

ANCIENT WISDOM

Chia is enjoying great popularity, along with other ancient grains. It is said to have been originally domesticated by ancient Mexicans around 2,600 B.C. Chia was cultivated by the Aztecs on their *chinampas*—floating gardens—surrounding the city of Tenochtitlan.



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From Farms to Factories and Back Again

by **John Grubb**, Managing Partner at Sterling-Rice Group

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Provenance, the unique place of ingredient origin, is a clear casualty of the industrial-scale growing and processing of our modern food system. Despite that system's many virtues—food safety, shelf stability, consistency, convenience, great taste, and the fact that we spend such a small and unprecedented fraction of household income on food—its “sea of sameness” gave direct rise to the innumerable food designations and certifications we've watched sprout up in recent years. Whether it's organic; local; ethically sourced; genetically modified; heirloom; farmed versus wild-caught; flax-, sardine-, krill- or salmon-derived omega-3s, the heated conversations about the sources of our foods and nutrients will only grow in importance to an increasingly large segment of the consumer population.

If all this feels rather sudden, it certainly is. To put this into the context of what I will call agricultural anthropology, let's briefly consider the historical timeline of our modern food supply. To help set the scale, let's use one cycle of our standard 12-hour analog clock, say from midnight until noon.

■ **00:00** // The first tick of this 12-hour cycle represents the earliest evidence of domesticated agriculture in approximately 10,000 BC. A warming climate and melting ice from the last period of glaciation had submerged the land bridge between North America and Asia, but migrating humans had transported seeds and were planting and artificially selecting plants for desirable

traits. It wasn't until five hours later on this clock, however, that widespread cultivation of millet, rice, soy, wheat, flax, maize, and barley took hold around the globe.

■ **06:30** // In roughly 3,500 BC, domesticated animals were yoked and fit with plows for greater leverage and scale in agricultural production. Irrigation systems were designed and built. These advancements facilitated the creation of agricultural surpluses, one of the necessary precursors to the development of our first cities. Yet change to the food supply was still limited to natural selection and selective breeding of crops and livestock.

■ **10:00** // The height of the Roman Empire brought to life massive technological innovation around food—the still remarkable Roman aqueducts, water-powered mills, and control of the Mediterranean Sea to link Rome to its crucial grain supplies in Northern Africa and Egypt. Jump forward aggressively to the late 1700s for the Industrial Revolution in Europe and its harnessing of “borrowed” natural capital from coal and timber at scale.

■ **11:52** // Late in the 1800s, two discoveries made possible the support of a massive increase in population, famously proving Thomas Malthus wrong about the limits to growth. We learned to fix nitrogen from the atmosphere, leading to the manufacture of inorganic fertilizer. We invented the internal combustion engine, leveraging

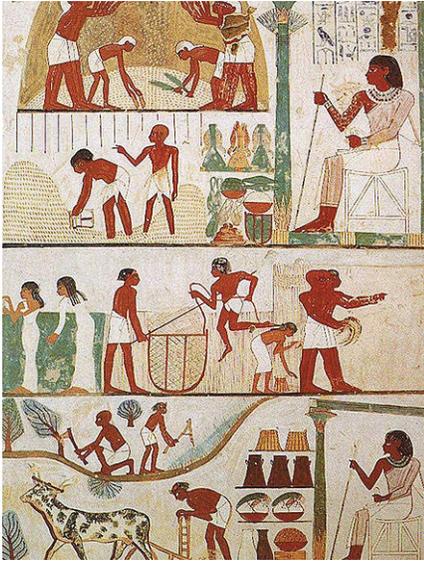
yet another form of natural capital derived from oil. As inorganic fertilizer and internal combustion tractors were gradually commercialized in the early 1900s, agricultural output exploded, supporting ever greater population growth and increasing urbanization. Technology was proving a great companion to biology and agriculture.

As agricultural production soared—and specialization increased in farming—expanded supply met diminished demand in the Great Depression. Since most Americans still lived on farms, the economic impact of the Depression had great reach. Ultimately, a set of government stimulus initiatives were enacted in the form of agricultural subsidies, direct payments to farmers, crop insurance, and price controls. While rational interventions under the circumstances, these legacy initiatives have endured as the foundation for modern agricultural policy.

World War II helped stimulate the advancement of food technology with large-scale factories producing a wide assortment of shelf-stable foods through disaggregation and recombination of macronutrients, with additives and preservatives to support shelf stability. The center of the modern grocery store is a testament to these food technology advancements.

■ **11:58** // Only in the 1970s did a quiet backlash against industrial food form the basis of an incipient food revolution. In 1990, the USDA organic food standards

became law, in many ways a nod to a more pre-industrial approach to food. In 1993, the first genetically modified foods were approved for commercial production. This milestone took place just after 11:58 on our 12-hour clock. Technology and biology had finally merged. What should be obvious by a quick glance at the clock is this: In the context of evolutionary biology, we are living in the very first minutes of some profound changes.



A FAIRLY MASSIVE FOOD FIGHT

So here we are, still short of 11:59 on the clock and fully engaged in a fairly massive food fight as a society. This is stimulated in no small measure by profound and recent changes in our health. In 1900, the United States was still an agrarian society with more than 80% of the population living on farms. Infectious disease and malnutrition were the largest public health concerns. A mere century has passed—just under 6 minutes on our clock—for nutrient excess and chronic diseases to become the dominant concerns.

Two-thirds of the nation is overweight or obese, 100 million people are diabetic and pre-diabetic, 100 million people have elevated cholesterol, and more than 80 million people are now living with some stage of cardiovascular disease. Seven in 10 deaths in the United States are related to chronic disease and are fundamentally preventable—to a point.

The rise in obesity has been as sudden as it is profound. As we seek to understand and manage the causal factors, there is rising temptation to demonize particular

foods, ingredients, companies, and even industries. What is the role of added fats and sugars in our obesity crisis? Have the manipulation of proteins in genetically modified foods accelerated food allergies? How has farming monoculture and chemical herbicide and pesticide application contributed to the depletion of soil and the pollution of groundwater? Why is cancer such a problem and, in many cases, a mystery? Will a soda tax help limit obesity or is it just a crude anti-business reaction to a much more complex set of forces?

THE REBIRTH OF PROVENANCE

For many consumers, the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of engineered, mass-produced, and globally sourced foods and ingredients. Without attempting to adjudicate the many rich and complex issues around our modern food supply infrastructure, we see attention growing from an increasingly large segment of the population—not just the lunatic fringe—around the provenance of the products that consumers put in and on their bodies. Consumers want to know precisely about sources and values—who are the growers, what methods are employed in raising crops and animals, where was the product sourced, and how sustainable is that sourcing?

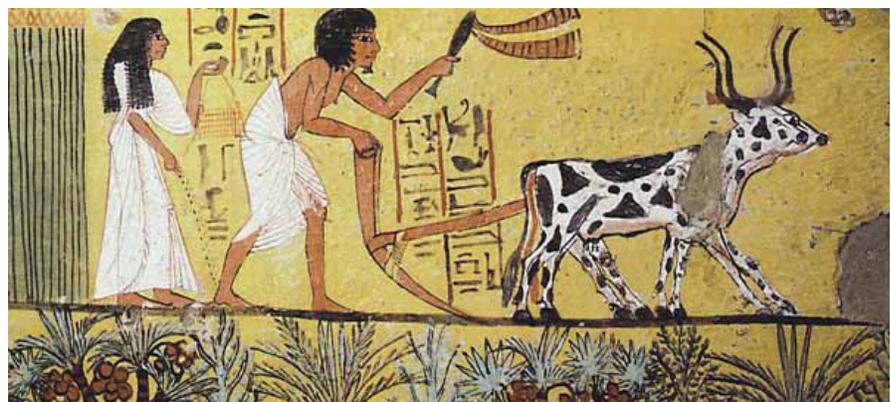
In an interconnected global market, there is rising interest in our connection to food sources—local tastes, regional economic implications, reduced carbon footprint, and reliable and personal reassurances about the integrity of the supply chain. The world of wine offers a relevant and enduring analog in the notion of terroir—not only the particular soil, microclimate, and variety of grapes grown, but also the winemaker's personal choices and style with yeast, oak, sugar content, etc.

In the domain of food, there is persistent debate about whether a growing global population can realistically survive with organic methods alone. There is debate about the relative nutritional value of organic versus conventionally grown food. And there is sometimes vitriolic debate about the nutritional integrity and safety of genetically modified foods. Quite often, the same science is invoked by both sides to reach very different conclusions.

These concerns are not going away—nor will the increasing interest and attention consumers place on the particular attributes of the products and ingredients they use and ingest. While this suggests opportunity for smaller-scale, local, organic, artisanal producers, the implications and opportunities are perhaps even more profound for large-scale CPG and ingredient companies.

Ingredient integrity and source verification, short and comprehensible ingredient labels, transparency in the supply chain, and an open dialogue with consumers are imperative. These are not fad-driven considerations, and they ladder directly to some of the Futures macro trends that we have identified in our longitudinal research and analysis. Consumers are suspicious of large-scale institutions—both private and public—and seek trust in an uncertain world. And being an always-on and interconnected consumer base makes them at once a potent ally or digitally armed and dangerous.

The opportunity and imperative for brands is all about authenticity and transparency. To establish or re-establish trust, consumers need to know who you are and what you really stand for. And be prepared to prove it. ■





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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