

"The first supermarket supposedly appeared on the American landscape in 1946. That is not very long ago. Until then, where was all the food? Dear folks, the food was in homes, gardens, local fields, and forests. It was near kitchens, near tables, near bedsides. It was in the pantry, the cellar, the backyard." ~ Joel Salatin

Welcome to Vintage Americana, exploring and restoring Rural American culture. I'm your hostess, Holly, and this is episode 34 - Food Freedom! Before we get into the meat of that topic, do me a favor and go follow the podcast on your favorite app. And, if you have time, leave a review! You can visit the podcast online as well at [vintage americana podcast.com](http://vintageamericana.com)

Now that we have the housekeeping done, let's talk a little bit about food freedom. I admit, some of my reason for choosing this to talk about today is that I still have my nose a little bit out of joint about missing the Homesteaders of America conference. Which was, in turn, what I was planning to do because I couldn't make it to the Rogue Food Conference.

This has been a season of "no," for me, where I don't seem to be able to get to anything I've been striving for. And, that segues a little bit into some of the many books written and talks given by Joel Salatin. With titles like "Everything I Want to Do is Illegal," and "The Marvelous Pigness of Pigs," Joel is the Apostle of Food Freedom.

We should probably, however, define our terms. When I use "food freedom" I do not mean in the psychological sense, where people with eating disorders work on separating their emotional needs from food. I'm talking about the freedom to choose to eat what we want to eat, and get that food where we want to get it.

Currently, most Americans exist in a centralized food system, the depth, breadth, and degree of regulation for which runs well below our awareness. But it's there, and it interferes with choices we might make, were they available.

Layer upon layer of regulation has been placed onto the food system in the name of "safety." But, of course, none of this is really about safety. And none of it has really made us "safer." Overprocessed, yes. Overcentralized, yes. But not safer.

Let's look at some of those regulations, and talk about why they exist, and why they're problems.

Probably one of the most regulated portions of the food market is meat. Every step of the process is regulated. And the crimp this puts in the ability to get meat became very clear over the last year. Both a Covid outbreak at one of the major processing plants and a cyber attack at another threw major monkey wrenches into the works. Availability went way down, and prices went up.

Why? Because USDA regulations require all retail cuts of meat to be processed in an inspected facility. And those facilities must use all sorts of equipment and engage in all sorts of specified practices to meet the USDA requirements. This is very expensive. And so there are very few, mostly very large facilities that are USDA inspected. Which means that one problem at one of these places trickles down into the supply rapidly and widely. Whether that's a problem with supply, or a problem with contamination.

The alternative to these large facilities are custom processors. If you live somewhere where your neighbors raise freezer beef or everybody goes deer hunting, you're probably familiar with these places. BUT because they don't have that USDA inspector on site, they're generally not allowed to process meat into retail cuts for sale, say, at the local supermarket. They can only process the meat for the consumption of the person who owns the animal.

The usual work-around to this is for farmers to sell the animal to his customers prior to processing - and since they now "own" it, they can have the meat. They pay the farmer directly for the meat, and usually pay the processor directly for their services. This is generally how things work if you buy a 1/2 or 1/4 beef, pig, or lamb. And, at some point, I'll do an episode on how to plan and deal with your annual meal planning when you've bought your meat this way.

However, there are lots and lots of people who lack the freezer space to make use of this as an option. But direct farmer-to-consumer sales of single cuts of meat are, in most places illegal. Everything in MY freezer is clearly marked, "Farm dressed - not for retail sale."

Why? Is the ground beef at the supermarket safer than the ground beef in my freezer? Well, my freezer has never contained any meat contaminated with E. coli. So, there's that.

And, of course, those of us who buy our meat once a year as a quarter or side were not

nearly so inconvenienced by the hiccups in the system caused by both Covid and cyber attacks. Right up until everyone else got the same idea, and overloaded the small processors. At the moment, it make take you 6-12 months to get on a their schedule. Although that problem seems to be easing, somewhat.

In fact, it would help quite a lot if the various bureaucracies could see their way clear to easing the regulations on custom processors, as well. There is certainly space in the market for them. They provide a service to small producers. If you're raising 20-30 cattle a year for beef, none of the large processors can be bothered with you. They want truckloads coming all day long so that their lines run at capacity... all day long.

This can create other problems. Michigan, for example, no longer has a full scale pig processing facility, ever since Thornapple Valley left some years ago. As a rule, this isn't all that troublesome for the few pork agribusiness outlets still here - they just truck things over the border into Indiana or Ohio.

HOWEVER, it's a significant vulnerability. Michigan does also have a small but present feral pig problem. Should that feral pig population ever develop pseudorabies - a viral disease of pigs - the first likely step would be a quarantine. No pigs could leave Michigan. Which means... none of the market hogs at large production facilites have anywere to GO.

Now let's take a brief look at the world of dairy products. Dairy is one of the most difficult animal products to market. It's fragile, it's hard to transport and store, and the possibility for contamination is always there. So, on the surface, it seems like a good idea to have rules in place.

However, as with anything that is regulated, those rules go from sensible to insanity as more and more of the accrue over time, in response to this or that incident or industry pressure.

For instance, in a lot of states, it's illegal to sell raw - or unpasteurized - milk. Why? Well, initially it was largely due to tuberculosis. Cattle can (and still occasionall do) carry a pathogen called Mycobacterium bovis, which can cause TB in cattle and in people. It has largely been eradicated from the cattle population in the US, although it does pop up from time to time, usually from exposure to infected wild deer. Michigan has had issues with this for the last... hmmm.... over 20 years.

So pasteurization was instituted largely as a means to kill off TB organisms that might be present. However, other things also happen when you pasteurize milk. You kill off ALL the other bacteria. And some of those are beneficial to our gut health. You change the protein structure, and actually make milk less digestible. Any time you heat protein, you denature it. This is like scrambling an egg. The same thing happens to the casein in milk. And the heat can also inactivate various other substances and enzymes present in raw milk that could have beneficial effects as well.

The messaging from the food regulators, however, attempts to convince people that consuming raw milk is tantamount to death. This is hogwash. As a species, we've been drinking raw milk for thousands of years. Can it be a source of food poisoning? Sure. Is it a bigger source of food poisoning than, say... hepatitis virus on green onions, just to choose a random example? Well, there's a question.

It's also true that if you regularly drink raw milk from the same herd of cattle, you adapt to those strains of bacteria present - and they even provide protection from other GI pathogens.

Are there people who shouldn't drink raw milk? Sure. Lots of them. But is this a good reason to prevent EVERYONE from being able to choose to drink raw milk? Certainly not. Nor to consume raw milk cheeses, or yogurts, or cottage butter, or anything else that might strike their fancy. (Don't worry, we're going to circle back around to some of this.)

And THEN there are the labeling requirements. Grade A. USDA. USDA Organic. Grass Fed. No rBST. No antibiotics.

So many people look for and shell out extra money for these labels. And don't even know what they mean. Grade A milk meets certain standards for levels of fat, protein, and allowable somatic cells. Organic? Well, that's a whole topic all its own. And probably doesn't mean what you think it does. Grass fed? Means that they meet the USDA definition of "Grass fed" - not that the cows in question are entirely fed on nothing but grass as they happily stroll green pastures, unencumbered.

No rBST. There's a label that's on almost every dairy product you'll find today. Because Consumer Demand!! While most consumers don't have the faintest idea of what it is or

whether they should be concerned. Consumer Reports says they should avoid it, so it is anathema! What is it? An injectible form of bovine growth hormone. When administered in tiny doses to dairy cattle who are already in milk, it raises their production - a very small amount. I very much doubt ANYBODY is using it anymore. It was always an expensive drug. And to make it pay, the herd had to be managed to its maximum production level to start with. Everything from nutrition, to cow comfort, to mastitis management had to be absolutely correct for rBST to increase profits, rather than end up as an added expense that just made everything else go off the rails.

But so many people feel SO good about themselves that they know to look for that on the label!! And consider themselves to be doing an excellent thing by buying the \$1.99 store brand gallon of milk that says "No rBST!" on the label.

Newsflash: You did not do a good thing. Nobody in the dairy world is using rBST, so you did not make a "choice" that had any impact whatever. What you DID do was choose to support the rapidly vertically integrating Dairy Agribusiness sector. The one that is willing to produce milk at a loss, because they own the supermarket AND The cows. And they know that when you go all the way to the back of the store to grab that \$1.99 gallon of milk, you'll fill your cart with a dozen other items before you get back to the register. They made money.

Meanwhile, they (and you!) have driven down the price of milk below where anybody can break even. Driving more and more smaller dairies out of business. While federal regulations hinder their ability to get out of the centralized food system and market their milk directly to their neighbors.

Congrats.

What about fruits and vegetables? This is a segment of the market that isn't quite as over-regulated. You can generally sell your produce without too much government harassment. Although it is possible to run afoul of various labeling laws. And the one that leaps most to mind is the infamous "USDA Certified Organic." There are lots and lots of people who think this label is ensuring them superior food. It's not. Mostly it's ensuring that the producer paid quite a bit of money to go through the inspection and get the label. What does that label really mean? That certain, specified products can't be used on the fields and products to which the label applies. That's it. It does not prevent someone from, say, buying an apple orchard that has been soaked in copper

fungicides and pesticides for apple pests for 60 years, cut down the trees, plant vegetables, and sell that produce as "organic" - even in soil that may be heavily contaminated with things not on the USDA's list of things to be concerned about when issuing certification for vegetables.

Baked goods. We're all familiar with bake sales, or tables of homemade bread at the craft bazaar. And, while there are often cottage food laws in place to make it a little easier to sell home baked goods - they're rather limited in scope. So it may be that making cupcakes to sell on Facebook in your (nonState-inspected) home kitchen - is breaking the law in a lot of places. Because, clearly, it's better and safer for your health to buy a loaf of bread at the store with a dozen unpronounceable ingredients than to buy a loaf of sourdough from your neighbor that contains flour, water, salt, and the sourdough starter.

Even doing some light processing of fruits and vegetables can get you into trouble with laws and regulations. Jams and jellies? Fruit pie fillings? Pickles? Better check those regs! Unpasteurized cider? Heaven forbid!!

Alright, now that we've taken a look at why some of this is a problem (and it's just a little look at the problems), let's take a look at ways to circumvent the power of the Fed to impose its will on your food choices.

The first, most obvious option is "change the law." But, our modern, centralized, behemoth of a bureaucracy makes that exceedingly difficult. Congressman Thomas Massie, of Kentucky, has been trying since his election to Congress to introduce bills that increase food freedom. Massie raises grass fed beef, so he knows whereof he speaks. And he speaks a lot. If you get the opportunity to attend a Rogue Food conference where he's on the speaker list - go listen!

Attempts, thus far, to change those laws at the National level have failed. So lots of folks have attempted to change them from the other direction. A movement started in Maine a number of years ago, where small municipalities passed local laws granting food sovereignty to residents. It picked up enough steam that eventually the State of Maine brought forward a law to expand that food freedom to the entire State.

At which point the USDA stepped forward with a threat - remove the provisions covering meat and dairy food sovereignty, or they would pull all their inspectors from the State.

Which, due to federal law regarding interstate trade, would prevent meat and dairy products from Maine from being sold in other states. The State blinked first and removed the offending provisions.

Because most of the general public is either ignorant or just indifferent to the reasons why food freedom might be desirable, it's pretty hard to get any sort of popular support built to change laws. That means that the most viable way forward is to... find the cracks, and exploit them.

Most of those cracks in the centralized food system exist to allow for the fact that people who are producing food are going to eat it themselves. Or, rather, that even the modern love of safetyism isn't enough to impinge on the right of people to eat things they have grown or raised themselves.

For instance, that rule we talked about earlier, where small meat processing facilities are permitted to process animals for the people who own them. And exploiting the loophole by selling the animal "on the hoof," so to speak.

A similar concept developed to allow people to buy and consume raw milk, even in states where that is technically illegal. It's called a "herd share," and it works mostly by semantics. Customers buy a "share" in a cow, which is a one-time purchase. And then they pay a "boarding fee," that covers the feeding and care of the cow. In exchange for this, they are entitled to a portion of that cow's milk production.

You know, and I know, that these folks are buying milk. However, by the letter of the law, they own the cow and therefore are legally permitted to drink its milk however they like.

The other major place where there are "chinks" in the food regulation fortress is cottage food law. Cottage food law is a catch-all term for the state and local level rules that carve out space for people to buy and sell food products produced in very small batches in a non-commercial setting. And the ins and outs of cottage food law vary massively by location. You're going to have to do your research.

I don't even recommend that you get ALL your information on cottage food law from a single source. For instance, my state university's extension program does offer a class on navigating cottage food law. Which is great, and I recommend it. But, you do have to remember that extension services are effectively government programs. So all of that information is going to come along with a slant toward what government wants. Which

means, nobody FROM a government indicate is going to point out the chinks and spaces within your local cottage food law that will effectively allow you to circumvent it - and be able to buy and sell food the way you want.

And, while they will insist that ONLY their way is "safe," the truth of the matter is that their way often is more about giving an advantage to their corporate donors. This is not new. Anthony Esolen tells the story of a local dairy where his family got their milk when he was a boy. The farmer had an artesian well that created a pool of cold water where he would store his milk. He went out of business when the regulation was changed to require specific types of cooling equipment. Was his well unsafe? No. Did it create a greater hazard for bacterial growth in the milk? No. But he couldn't afford to buy the required equipment. And the larger dairies (who were doing some back-door campaigning FOR the new regs) COULD afford it - and could look forward to picking up all the new customers of the small dairyman when he sold off his farm.

MANY of the supposed "food safety" regulations exist not because they make the food system more safe, but rather because they make the industry more competitive for the large companies who pay the lobbyists to write those regs.

On the other hand, it's also best to be cautious when getting information for HOW to circumvent regulations via activist. Because they, too, have an axe to grind. And you might end up being misled into doing something that is actionable and can get you into trouble.

Instead, realize that the truth is probably somewhere in between. Listen to both, and find the space in between where you feel comfortable.

Stepping around regulations and the centralized food system also means that you need to take more responsibility for ensuring that the food you are buying from your neighbors really is safe.

For instance, if you are considering joining a herd share and adding raw milk to your family's diet, you need to be completely comfortable with farmer, cows, and all their practices and procedures for milking, milk handling, and sanitizing equipment. They should be testing their own milk for pathogens regularly. And if you're thinking about starting a herd share program, I recommend Six S Dairy and their farmer mentoring group. I'll link it on the website for you.

Another chink in the armor of the Food Regulation juggernaut is buying clubs. Also known as food co-ops, these are member-run organizations that pool their resources to buy in bulk and provide food to their members at a reduced cost. They can also sometimes provide foods that aren't available through more traditional outlets. Anything from raw milk (yet again) and grain free baked goods to wild-caught seafood and grass fed meat.

Again, co-ops, buying clubs or "food churches" as they are sometimes designated now, work by NOT operating as a store. The general public is not allowed to come in and buy. You must be a dues-paying member. And the rules and management of these organizations are created and performed by those members, as well. Which makes it not a "store," or a retail outlet.

Most of the time, vendors at larger farmer's markets have jumped through all the hoops and checked all the boxes required by federal, state, and local law. Or they wouldn't be selling at those markets. Smaller markets, however, that often amount to nothing more than a few vendors setting up tables and pop-ups in a church parking lot, can be less... formal. It can be well worth getting to know some of these vendors and their wares. Again, you're responsible for your own vetting when you're buying food outside of centralized channels.

What I always find somewhat odd about this situation is how few people have ever actually bought food at somewhere other than a store or formal market. And this was, I suspect, due to the way I grew up. We always bought a side of beef from my grandparents. If I want to truly shock the "Antiseptic Baby and the Prophylactic Pup" (That's a poem... go look it up and give it a read...), I could tell stories about that process, too. Because we, for years, did our own slaughtering on farm, broke the carcass down as far as 2 sides, and only then took it into town to have the local grocer cut everything down into the directed cuts - and hold it in a freezer locker until we were ready to come back out for it. And - this will date me, I'm sure - back in my college days, one of the requirements for my degree program in Animal Science was a class called "Animal Products." For that class, we were required to show up at the meats lab for slaughter day. And then each lab group was tasked with taking a side of beef, half a pig, and half a lamb from that state down into the retail cuts we'd been assigned. The rest of the class also included making sausage, smoked meat products, and other "value added" items. It was, hands down, the most useful class I took.

Now, we lived in town. So we didn't have our own cow, or drink raw milk. Although both of my parents did, before they left home to go to school. Dad even recalls being yelled at for pouring the cream off of the milk onto his raspberries. My maternal grandparents milked a small herd of Guernseys, whose milk went to the local cheese factory.

Gardens and orchards were always a part of everyday life. My mother's garden was extensive. And large amounts of produce from it went into either cans or freezer boxes. I learned those arts from my mother. And, I'll be entirely honest, I don't always follow the USDA recommendations for canning down to the letter. Because, again, they push things well past the point of necessity and overcomplicate processes. And I have both the experience and the microbiology degree to know when certain things are necessary and when they are not.

We always used to buy food from our neighbors. Or trade. Or just gift them with things that we had in abundance. Why, now, do we feel that everything must bear the federal government's seal of approval before it can pass our lips? Goodness knows, they haven't exactly covered themselves with glory when it comes to nutritional advice, over the years.

If you're interested in "rogue food," I have some resources for you.

The first is John Moody's Rogue Food Conference. It looks like the 2022 version (or at least one of them) is going to be in Florida this year. Consider going.

Another is Joel Salatin. Any of his books are worth reading. Most of them are worth having.

Neither Joel nor John hosts a podcast, that I know of. But both ARE regular guests on other podcasts. Do a quick search and you'll find lots to listen to.

The Homestead Meatsmith has all kinds of good information about home processing of meat.

Visit the Weston A. Price Foundation website for information on Traditional Foodways.

There are a lot of resources available, but - and this is always the case, but particularly

with food safety - read and evaluate with a critical mind. Do I think that a diet change can heal every ailment from congestive heart failure to cancer? No. Do I think that alterations in our gut microbiome, an over-processed food supply, and one that has become sterilized and dunked in antiseptics has led to increases in allergies and a general deterioration in health? Yep. Does that mean I never drink a soda? No. But I'm working to get more and more of my food locally, from sources that don't feel a need to spray chicken with chlorine or coat apples with wax.

The other things we should have - and largely did not - learn in 2020 is that our food production and distribution system is extremely fragile. It takes only a very small shock and extremely small period of time for shortages and price hikes to propagate through the whole system.

Which means that it really is in your best interest to exert more control over your personal food supply. Produce what you can. And then don't just source things locally, but build relationships with people who do produce the other things you need. Why? Because, when push comes to shove, they are more likely to keep YOU supplied with their product if they know and like you and you have supported THEM when there was no crisis.

The problem, in my mind, with the idea of "self-sufficiency" is the "self" part. It isn't possible to produce everything you need, all by yourself. Or, if we all did that, we could all scrape out a subsistence level existence. Specialization creates wealth. On the other hand, real relationships used to guide the exchanges between neighbors. Corporate agriculture, on the other hand, isn't the least bit interested in you. Your neighbor with the 4 chicken tractors on his 15 acres is much more likely to put real effort into making sure you have eggs.

I'm sure you're not surprised that I have circled back again to the idea of community. And REAL communities buy more food from their neighbors than they do from MegaAgCorps from 5 states away. Even if they have to get creative to do it.

I hope I've inspired you to at least think about where your food comes from - and what you might be able to get more locally.

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brambleberry meadow.com

Right now, I have some new heritage Red Fife wheat flour to try. And some local apples that might want to be a pie. I'm also waiting on a call from my cousin to let me know when my beef quarter is ready for me to go pick up. The custom processor is 2 hours away, but it's a pretty drive!

Are you coming?