

Food is a controversial topic these days, and it is common to hear people in agriculture lament this fact, saying it is because so few people grow up on, or even visit, a farm. The public's ignorance about agriculture is sometimes made a source of amusement, like the advertisement for the Los Angeles County Fair when a city girl says, "All wool comes from a cow," or the farcical news videos where marshmallows are depicted as growing from trees (all are on YouTube.com). Here at Oklahoma State University we have catered to this interest by offering a free online course called Farm to Fork, in which we give virtual tours of farms and confront the many agricultural controversies, such as farm animal welfare and genetically modified organisms. Teaching this course has shown me that, although few people grow up on a farm, city people know a considerable amount about agriculture and want to learn more. Farmers markets are booming and so is community-supported agriculture. People want to see the farm and meet the farmer. Vegetables ignored 30 years ago are experiencing a renaissance, like Swiss chard in salad and turnips in soup. Homeowner associations are having problems with residents raising chickens in their backyards and collards in their front yards. Fruits and vegetables are being planted in abandoned urban lots and people are raising bees on top of buildings in New York City. Regular consumers feel so comfortable with agriculture they periodically boss farmers around. Several states have passed laws restricting the types of cages livestock producers may use and how farmers apply livestock manure. Consumers no longer defer to authority in terms of nutrition, and though sometimes we act a bit silly, that silliness has some advantages. The anti-gluten movement may have questionable scientific validity, but as people seek alternatives to wheat they have learned buckwheat makes great porridge and teff makes great bread. In the process, people have diversified their diets, which might diversify agriculture and make it easier to manage pests. Another positive I see is that this new passion for food has made us more empathetic for the poor. We once discarded our leftover food with abandon, but now we

feel guilty because we know some children (even in the U.S.) are hungry. Consequently, an app has been created to help us find people to trade leftovers. We used to be satisfied knowing that most American children have enough calories, but now we know those calories are not very nutritious, and though our efforts to improve kids' diets hasn't experienced any great victories, our desire for such a victory is commendable. As a professor in an agricultural college, I can tell you this interest in food is almost overwhelming. I cannot keep up with all the new books and documentaries about farming and food. The science behind agriculture is so advanced that just trying to understand the big picture is a daunting endeavor. An agricultural college is among the most diverse academic units you can find, containing physical scientists, social scientists, and engineers – not to mention actual farms to get your hands dirty, real kitchens to cook bread, gardens to nourish flowers, and multimillion dollar labs to explore the world of DNA. There is a wide diversity of individuals as well, and with the common goal of feeding the world sustainably, you'd be surprised how well our conservatives and liberals get along. There is no better time to be a student of agriculture. It isn't just for farm kids anymore. No matter who you are, no matter what your interest, there is a place for you in agriculture. Like building machines? Please, come help us develop drones to locate cattle. Big into biology? We need your help turning switchgrass into fuel. Love chemistry? There is too much phosphorus entering Oklahoma waters and we need your help to stop it. Want to stop obesity? Great, so do we. People may have left the farm, but food is still in our souls. Food is a hobby for many, and that is great, but it can be their occupation as well. F. Bailey Norwood, associate professor in OSU's Department of Agricultural Economics, has been named among the Top 20 more influential farm animal veterinary professors. He is co-author of Compassion by the Pound: The Economics of Farm Animal Welfare. Subscribe to Daily Headlines Sign up! \*

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