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Opinion: Immigrants and food: another way to shape the national conversation

By Robert Gottlieb
Special to the Mercury News
Posted: 02/21/2011 08:00:00 PM PST

How do we get beyond the hostility and negative associations regarding immigrants and shine a light on their contributions to our economy and culture? One way is to see how immigrants provide for a healthier and more diverse food system.

Immigrants and food are joined in the fields and at the plate. When it comes to agriculture, immigrants are our farm workers, but they are also many of our new food growers. Many of them draw on their rich relationship to the land that they brought from their countries of origin.

In the past couple of decades, immigrant gardeners have been able to renew small slivers of unused or abandoned land and now constitute one of the most rapidly growing groups of food growers in the U.S.

Immigrant farmers have also swelled the ranks of those interested in farming here. Many of the new farmers in the U.S. are Hispanic and Asian immigrants. They have brought about the first increase, albeit modest, in the number of farms in the U.S. since the Census of Agriculture began to record what was happening to our farmland.

These are farmers like Guilebaldo Núñez, whose Núñez Farm in Las Lomas near Watsonville sells organic fruits and vegetables at 13 farmers markets.

Or María Catalán, of Catalan Farms, another Salinas Valley organic farm whose 14 acres provide direct-from-the-farm produce not only to Bay Area farmers markets but also to high-end restaurants in San Francisco.

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Charlie Chang, one of the hundreds of Hmong farmers in the Fresno area, whose inspirational story about his love of farming is recounted in our book, "Food Justice," among stories of other farmers who are part of the narrative about immigrants and food.

There are a number of reasons for this important shift, including how farming, for immigrants, connects to their food experience.

These are not simply the immigrants from Mexico, but also war-related or political refugees from places like Cambodia, Vietnam, Somalia, Burundi or Senegal, or economic refugees from Guatemala, Haiti, Togo, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Ecuador or the Dominican Republic.

A connection to the land, whether as farmers or backyard gardeners, has been part of their cultural and economic heritage. It's also part of the continuing changes and diversity of our own food experience.

Perhaps what's best about the American food experience today is its hybrid nature, its multiple and fusion cuisines, whether in the tiny community ethnic (read: immigrant) restaurants in Los Angeles, New York and San Jose or the new Latino and Asian cuisines that are beginning to follow the

path of immigrants settling in places like Nashville, Tenn., or Portland, Maine.

These immigrants are also engaged in innovative food justice groups.

These include the Salinas-based Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association, which is helping current and former farmworkers such as Guilebaldo Núñez transition to become farmers, and the National Immigrant Farming Initiative, for whom the connection between immigrants and food is at the heart of their agenda.

For those who are concerned about the food in our lives, immigration reform and immigrant rights should be part of the discussion. Immigrants should have the right to grow food and contribute to our food culture, increasing the capacity of a vibrant local food economy and a love of food that we can all celebrate.

ROBERT GOTTLIEB is professor of urban & environmental policy at Occidental College and co-author with Anupama Joshi of "Food Justice" (MIT Press "" www.foodjusticebook.org). He will be speaking at Santa Clara University's Saint Claire Room at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday and at UC Santa Cruz's Oakes College Mural Room at

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