

**Show Transcript**  
**Deconstructing Dinner**  
**Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY**  
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**Title: Michael Ableman – Fields of Plenty**

**Producer/Host: Jon Steinman**

**Transcript: Erika Steeves**

*Jon Steinman:* And welcome to another broadcast of Deconstructing Dinner, a syndicated weekly one-hour radio program and podcast produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio in Nelson, British Columbia. I'm Jon Steinman.

As Deconstructing Dinner is a program designed to help unravel the mysterious world of food, in doing so we often hear from the innovators, the people who are working towards creating new and alternative means through which food can make its way to our dinner plate. These alternatives act in opposition to the industrial food system that more and more is seen as one that sacrifices nutrition, environmental sustainability and social justice.

One of these innovators is Salt Spring Island's Michael Ableman. Located in the Gulf Islands of British Columbia, Michael settled on Salt Spring not long ago, where he began walking the talk that led him into the world of food in the first place. Michael currently farms at Madrona Valley Farm producing organically grown fruits, vegetables, herbs, flowers, free-range eggs, and lamb. Michael has also recently, along with some partners, acquired a 120 acre piece of land called Foxglove Farm, on which he is working to create a farm which will include mixed grain, livestock, and fruit and vegetable production. The surrounding forest will be managed using eco-forestry principles, and any harvested trees will be milled and produced on-site into furniture products. He intends to create an environment for learning, and one that will act as a model that will challenge the industrial forms of agriculture that dominate Canada's food system.

We heard Michael Ableman speak on the March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2006 broadcast of Deconstructing Dinner, and he is often in high demand to speak at events across North America. And it was back in November 2005 that Vancouver's Necessary Voices Society recorded Michael speaking to an audience at the Vancouver Public Library. This talk was recorded shortly after the release of his book *Fields of Plenty*, and while the powerful forces within the Canadian food system often suggest that humane and sustainable practices result in a loss of production capacity, the book chronicles a three-month journey across the United States where he meets with fellow farmers and looks to reassure himself that abundance is *enhanced*, and not sacrificed, by using humane and sustainable practices.

**increase music and fade out**

JS: In this first clip from Michael Ableman's talk, he looks back to when he was first introduced to farming.

*Michael Ableman:* Well I've been on the road since October 1<sup>st</sup>, home for five days since October 1<sup>st</sup> so it's nice. Two days ago I was in New York City. I was telling someone I had the most remarkable experience. I saw this couple arm-in-arm walking down the street, and they each were on their cell phones talking to someone, maybe they were talking to each other, I don't know. (audience laughter) It was pretty interesting. I hadn't really seen that before. If you haven't had the opportunity to go to that amazing metropolis, you don't need to ever attend a single theatre performance, or movie, or anything. It's all happening right there.

But actually I spoke at a wonderful event called Eco Metropolis a few days ago. One of the things I learned, and I'm going way off my script here but that's okay, was it occurred to me after attending this event, what a relatively and incredibly sustainable place New York City is. Now that's exactly the opposite of what you might imagine, but consider the fact that 80% of the population does not have cars; they all take public transport. The way the housing is structured is terribly efficient, cluttered and stacked. Of course there's also something like 44,000 pounds of food that arrives via an armada every day from elsewhere, and about 20,000 pounds of waste that leaves everyday. But that's another story.

Almost 35 years ago I joined a commune in California that was based on agrarian principles. We had three different parcels of land totaling some 4,000 acres on which we raised row crops, orchards, operated a complete goat and cow dairy, and produced grain and fiber. We supplied our own natural food stores and bakery and juice factory and restaurant as well as feeding ourselves. We even made our own backpacks and our own shoes and our own clothing. After only four months living in that community, I was given the responsibility of managing the 100-acre pear and apple orchard located in a High Desert Valley. At the time this was one of just a handful of commercial orchards in the country that was being farmed organically. And here I was at the age of 18 with no orcharding experience, having never managed anything, directing a crew of thirty people most of whom were older than I. The orchard had been abandoned for fifteen years. The branches between the trees had become so intertwined that you couldn't see the alleys down the middles of the roads. I had a 1930s copy of *Modern Fruit Science*, the journal from the guy who ran the place before and gave up in frustration, and a copy of Goethe's famous quote, "Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it," attached to the door of my twenty foot unheated trailer.

Now, as you might imagine, this could have ended up really bad and under most similar situations I probably would have ended up spending the rest of my life working in some high-rise office building. But there was something that took place down those rows of apple and pear trees, something very different than what is happening in most agricultural fields and orchards in North America. I went to work each day with thirty of my friends, and while we worked we joked and we talked and we discussed our dreams. We tried out our latest theories and philosophies on each other, speculated on the fate of the earth and

ate our lunch together under the shade of the trees. In the winter, we pruned everyday for four months straight. In the spring, we thinned fruit, and in the fall it was a ten-week harvest marathon. It was repetitive work, but at the end of each day instead of feeling like I had been chained to some mind-numbing drudgery, I felt like I had attended an all-day party. The work got done, the orchard thrived, and those apples and pears gained a reputation around the country. And while the cold nights and hot days of that high desert provided ideal growing conditions, I am sure that that fruit was equally infused with the energy of that group of people and the pleasure they found in each other and in that land.

Now this was my introduction to agriculture, and this community experience has informed all of my agricultural endeavors since. It demonstrated that good food is more than just the confluence of technique and fertile soil. That it is the result of men and women who love their land and who bring great passion to working with it. For a long time I wanted to pick up where I left off with my first book and visit and write about and photograph this movement – tell the good story, hold my heroes up for all to see. So a couple of years ago my 24-year-old son Aaron and I left our own farm for a three-month journey across the U.S. and Canada to document this quiet revolution. We visited farmers who were growing high quality artisanal foods who had gone beyond organic, who were redefining that movement, using their farms as platforms for social and ecological change and for education. We went to see folks who are happily married to a place, many of them master farmers, innovators, their farms incubators for the new agriculture. Folks who are demonstrating that farming is not just some lowly form of drudgery, but that it's an art and a craft and an honourable profession.

I'd like to very briefly introduce you to some of these folks. I'm going to tell you a little bit about their story, show you their faces. The images I'm going to show you and the text that I'm going to read are directly from my newest book, which just came out, actually November 1<sup>st</sup>, called *Fields of Plenty*.

Well, what's interesting is that for every person that we were able to visit in this wonderful journey there are hundreds more that are doing great work. We just touched on it. As you might imagine, that journey provided some incredible insights. First of all, I was reassured to discover that I am not alone in many of my challenges with farming. That everyone has their moments when they wonder whether they chose the right profession, and some of us even consider quitting once or twice a year. But it's amazing. Every time I have that thought something happens that not only pulls me back from the edge, but reminds me why I'm alive in doing this work.

There was the woman at the Farmer's Market who after tasting one of our mulberries started to cry. When I asked her if she was okay, she told me that the taste brought her back to Eastern Europe to a village and a mulberry tree that she had not returned to for 22 years. Or I'm out walking on the farm alone. It's fall and the watermelon field I'm passing has finished, but there in the middle of the field I spot one. With total abandon I pot myself down, cut it open, and eat the heart out. Or the first year on our new land here on Salt Spring Island, I'm bent over planting asparagus crowns, and it's wet and it's cold and my hands are cramping up and I'm starting to wonder what the hell I'm doing here.

Then all of sudden I hear this whoosh, so close that I can feel the air moving around my head. I look up and there just above me, with its majestic white head turned towards me, and a wingspan large enough to block the sky, is an eagle. Now these are those very special moments, simple gifts to those who immerse themselves in the natural world. Moments when I realize that there's no other place I'd rather be, no other work I'd rather be doing. That extraordinary journey that I took with my son to see my colleagues reminded me that what we are doing is more than just growing food. That this movement embodies many of the most critical elements of a healthy society: reverence, mystery, humility, ecology (in its wider sense), and community. It is amazing to consider what a recent phenomenon our society's departure from the natural world is - a mere blip. In such an extraordinarily short period of time, we have forgotten where we came from, that we are a part of - not apart from - nature. For the first time in the history of human evolution there is an entire generation of young people who are, for the most part, completely denatured.

So I wonder, who are we going to be able to seek out to guide a society that has become so completely disconnected from the natural world, from the most fundamental necessities such as food and water? What will happen if there are most Katrinas? What will happen when the oil runs out? I think we desperately need leaders, real leaders. I'm not talking about managers or actors or dictators or manipulators, leaders. Folks who have compassion, respect for diversity, creative vision, and understanding of our true place in nature. Now John Thurman who you met in those slides told me, "If you farmed, you can run the world." I thought about that. I think he may be right. In a time when our primary connection tools to the world around us are the computer and the cell phone, those who have maintained an intimate connection with the land, whose daily work is inextricably tied to biology and botany and animal husbandry, those who know how to restore and nurture soil, care for animals, coax food from the earth, may become very very important. In the hysteria over arugula or heirloom tomatoes, the explosion of Farmer's Markets and box programs, the desire to meet face-to-face each week with the person who grew your food goes deeper than that food. It may just be part of a desperate longing to have some connection to the real world. I've watched chefs receive mythical rock-and-roll status. It may be time for farmers to receive that same attention. The chefs don't mind me saying that I'm sure, if you're here.

I've been on the road speaking quite a bit since the beginning of October, and I've been telling folks to make friends with a farmer, you know the old saying, "Make friends with the cook," because you're really going to need them. For I am certain that as this current global, industrial experiment continues to unravel, and I have to tell you I get up each day and I look around and it's still going on and I can't believe it. It's as if the tree has been cut, but it still hasn't fallen. But as this experiment unravels, agriculture may once again return to its rightful place at the heart and at the centre of our society. Think about that. That's where we came from.

*JS:* And you're tuned in to Deconstructing Dinner. On today's broadcast we are listening to segments of a talk conducted by farmer Michael Ableman as he spoke to an audience

in Vancouver in November 2005. Michael farms on Salt Spring Island, located in the Gulf Islands of British Columbia. He is also author of the book *Fields of Plenty*.

In this next segment of Michael's talk he's directed away from the topic of agriculture, but his story is one that emphasizes the way in which community interests are sacrificed for the benefit of economic progress, an all-too familiar story within the industrial food system serving most Canadians. As Michael begins to suggest in this segment, asking questions is the first step to understanding the role both the individual and communities can play to combat such a model, and children, as he indicates, provide perhaps the greatest example of what questions we should be asking.

*MA:* I have two sons now, my 24-year-old son Aaron, who I already mentioned, and my youngest, Benjamin, who's almost four. It's kind of my version of long-term crop rotation. This past spring, I took my 3-year-old son Benjamin out to a friend's cabin located on the west coast of Vancouver Island. The two of us left the farm in good spirits, hopped on the ferry – the guys out for a little three-day adventure. But what I didn't realize was that to get to my friend's cabin required driving through a huge relatively fresh clear-cut. Now I've seen a lot of ecological devastation, but I don't think there's anything quite exemplary of human's most destructive ways as seeing a rich, diverse oxygen producing forest reduced to vast fields of brush and stumps and eroding soil. The emotional impact of being in the midst of such a thing for an extended period of time is absolutely overwhelming. Little Benjamin was glued to the scene, looking out the windows of the truck with the most heart-breaking look of horror and dismay. And you know what I felt like? I felt like I had just taken my young son, unknowingly, to see a really violent film. When it came time to drive back after our little retreat, Benjamin cried; he pleaded with me not to drive back the same way that we had come. "Why" is a word you hear a lot with a three year old. But there was a new persistence to Benjamin's "why" after our experience that day and my responses just couldn't satisfy him.

I find myself asking why a lot these days as well. But I cannot find answers when my questions stray too far beyond my own land and beyond the community within which I live. Why is a word we should all be asking ourselves and of those that claim to be our leaders. I just think about what if we had asked why after 9/11 instead of who? Think about how things would have shifted. As we bear witness to the disappearance of nature and the disconnection of our society from it, we also see an increase in confusion and extreme lack of compassion and understanding of how to care for each other and for our world. A loss of understanding in regards to cause and effect. It takes a real conscious effort to rise above the propaganda and the lies, the litany of misdirected questions. Step out of the confusion and be like little Benjamin. Come back into our beginner's mind, to our sense of childlike wonder, and start asking why as honestly and as freshly and as persistently as a three year old.

I believe that to deal with the great unraveling that is taking place around us, we've got to come back home. I should be telling myself that. (laughs) Immerse ourselves in that which goes on in our neighbourhoods and our communities, in our own backyards or on the land that we farm. We can feel paralyzed by the broader world scene, but we have

enormous power in and around the places where we live. It really doesn't matter what the issue is - energy, water, food, waste, transportation, or even that pervasive sense of loneliness or disconnection that so many folks are feeling. When you focus your attention on the local world in which you live, when you come back home, real change is possible.

I've been used to getting lots of accolade for my work. After all, it's difficult to get too many people upset when you're just offering them a ripe tomato or a peach, only asking that they make choices that will actually increase the pleasure of their experience. But a couple of years ago I found myself involved with initiating a campaign to challenge Norske Canada, now known as Catalyst Paper. By the way, they were very wise to change their name when they did. Too much heat. It's the company that owns the Crofton Pulp and Paper Mill on neighbouring Vancouver Island, across from us from Salt Spring. At the time they were proposing to begin burning tires, railroad ties, and coal in one of their power boilers at that mill to save a few dollars. You've probably heard about this. It made national news, or at least our efforts did. We eventually stopped them from that particular whacko plan, but in the process we discovered that current emissions from that mill are not so good. Twenty-four million cubic metres of exhaust gases coming from that facility each and every day, containing the likes of dioxins and furans, chlorine, formaldehyde, PCBs, hexavalent chromium. We had the audacity to ask questions, to wonder aloud whether our families and our communities should be exposed without choice to such chemicals. We expressed concerns about the headaches and the burning eyes and the ash and the goo that covers cars and houses near the mill. We worried about the high levels of cancers and lung and heart disease and the asthma amongst local kids. By the way, the asthma statistics at the Crofton school are off the charts, and yet the principal of that school did not want me talking about that. I thought principals are supposed to be the ally of the students.

We eventually got Neil Young, the Barenaked Ladies, Randy Bachman to perform at the Duncan hockey arena for the first Clean Air concert, and we raised a bunch of money to do a study on that facility. That was quite an event. I just about had to have protection for that event. I was so surprised. I came to Canada because I love Canadians; they're so nice and polite. But boy, you start talking about this issue and watch out. We asked the questions that every father and mother should be asking. Should this huge, aging, decrepit, industrial facility belching 24 million cubic meters of exhaust gases each and every day, 24 hours a day, into the air that we all breath, be allowed to do so without any functioning pollution devices or government oversight? Should the community be forced to breath whatever comes out of that facility? Should the company that owns them be allowed to make decisions that affect the broader community, solely to satisfy the return to their shareholders? At first we were patted on the heads by the company officials and told not to worry. But when some of us began to organize, when we engaged experts to help us understand the pollution, when we initiated the concert, when we got louder, we were called names and criticized, even threatened.

In the play "An Enemy of the People" written by Henrik Ibsen over 100 years ago (I don't know if any of you have read this) a young doctor in that town begins to discover that the chronic health problem that he's seeing across the board have a direct connection

to the industrial facility in that town. Now he figures that when he announces his findings he's going to be considered a hero, but instead he becomes the enemy of the people. He's hated, he's vilified for bringing up things that might impact tourism, jobs, and the economy. Sounds familiar. That was 100 years ago. I came to the conclusion that the biggest problem is not so much with Catalyst Paper or Norske, what their other alias was, one more corporation that every day places the wellbeing of its shareholders over the wellbeing of its workers and the community. The biggest problem may not be a government which ignores its responsibility to protect the health of its citizens and the environment. The biggest problem may not even be the toxic pollution itself. The problem, I believe, may be our own self-deception in a form of denial so deep, so complete, that many people in the region are willing to accept and to even rationalize polluted air that is making them sick just because the company "contributes to the local tax base" or because "it's always been there" or because "it's too expensive to clean it up." Folks are willing to accept such a pathetically narrow view of economic health over the personal health of their children and of all those who work and live in and around the mill. Those of us who held up the mirror, the messengers who bear information that folks are afraid to hear, were called names. "Nimbys, aging rockers, environmentalists, radicals." Radicals. But when did it become so radical to want clean air? What is so radical about wanting a safe place to work? What is so radical about wanting to see the clear blue sky, or to eat safely from the waters, or to go to bed at night and not to have to close the windows? We simply wanted an independent study of the mill's emissions. Independent. We wanted to know what is coming out of those stacks, where the pollutants are traveling, and in what concentrations and what the health impacts are.

Now I know I'm going off on a tangent here, but it's important. The government in essence refused to get involved, and the company, instead of supporting a study commissioned its own—managed, paid for, and controlled by the polluters themselves—all behind closed doors. And of course when they announced their findings they told us that everything was fine. You may not know it, but there are virtually no laws in this province protecting any of us from dangerous air emissions. Nothing. A permit is required for that mill, but there are no legally binding enforcement policies for that permit. B.C.'s regulations for air emissions are so lax we might as well be living in a third-world country. Why else would a company that originates in Norway, where this mill could never operate due to strict environmental laws, set up shop here?

In a province founded on resource extraction, we have a government that still believes that its role is to protect the rights of industry, not the rights of citizens and the environment. Now I'm probably not telling any of you anything new. Definitely not. But I had to get this off my chest here. There are a lot of bad ideas in the world that each of us unknowingly supports just because we've decided they are a necessary casualty of doing business. Trade-offs like blood for oil, or cancer for bleached-white toilet paper. It's certainly easy to blame government and industry, and I think we should, but we have some responsibility in this as well. By the way, that company has its offices right here in Vancouver. Ultimately, and I am rapping up here, our arrogance, our wholesale disconnection from the natural world, our belief that somehow we are in control, keeps us from recognizing the most fundamental law of nature. The one that every good farmer is

absolutely bound by: What we sow is what we reap; for every action there is a reaction; cause and effect. It's the law, and no one is immune from it. At every turn in each moment, with each change in our lives and on the broader world stage, we must bring forth the hopeful and positive alternatives and models. No matter how outrageous, no matter how ridiculous we may appear, we must gently and creatively and persistently repeat and remind and demonstrate that a new world is in fact possible. Thank you very much. (audience applause)

*JS:* And you're listening to Deconstructing Dinner, a weekly one-hour program produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio in Nelson, British Columbia. This program is heard on radio stations across the country and is also available on our website at [www.cjly.net/deconstructingdinner](http://www.cjly.net/deconstructingdinner).

Today's broadcast is featuring a talk conducted by farmer Michael Ableman, who among being the author of the book *Fields of Plenty*, also farms on Salt Spring Island in British Columbia. The recording is courtesy of the Necessary Voices Society. That last segment concluded the structured component of Michael's talk, and when we return after this musical intermission, we will hear clips from the question and answer period that followed.

#### **musical intermission by Don Ross**

*JS:* And you're tuned in to Deconstructing Dinner.

That musical intermission was Toronto guitarist Don Ross, referred to by many as one of the best guitarists in the world, and that was his tune titled *Thin Air*, one that appeared on his 2001 release *Huron Street*. And the interesting story behind that tune is that it was inspired by the harrowing pass through the mountains that he took here into Nelson, British Columbia while on a Canadian tour.

During the first half of today's broadcast, we heard a talk given by Salt Spring Island farmer Michael Ableman, recorded in November 2005 in Vancouver. And for the remainder of the broadcast we will explore clips from the question and answer period that followed the talk.

One of the audience questions presented to Michael allowed him to further expand on this idea that our current food system of industrial agriculture and food production is simply an experiment. And in this clip, he describes what he means by an experiment.

*MA:* When I call it an experiment, it's been very short lived. I mean we're looking at a system of food production that really came out of the technology of two world wars. If you're not familiar with that I can briefly tell you. Certainly the fertilizers, traction, even the pesticides came out of wartime development. So we're looking at this really tiny – if you consider we have an agricultural history in this world of anywhere from 5,000 to 7,000 years, this is just a tiny blip in that broader history.

It's taken us quite a while to figure out, first of all, that the first Green Revolution was not totally a great idea. The problems are surfacing; it's very clear that we are all living and dying with the results of how food has been produced in those last 50 years. And I think the experiment is not working. It's not working for people in many different ways. People are responding and desiring a change because corn doesn't taste like corn and tomatoes don't taste like tomatoes and they want food that tastes real. People are responding because of food safety concerns, because of personal health concerns, because of environmental health concern. A very few people are concerned about soil loss, some of us are, which I think is the enormous concern that no one – it's not part of our language.

I spoke, and excuse me for my tangents here, but I was involved with a benefit in New York City for the Soil Association, which is based in England. It was founded in the '30s by British royalty really, Lady Balfour and Sir Albert Howard on the fundamental principle that all life on earth is inextricably connected to the life and the health of the soil—that we are tied. I'm there staying in Trudy's House in New York giving a talk to a hundred high rollers on soil, which was a lot of fun. But basically it's critical. It's a very thin layer of material that's covering the earth. It's been referred to as the earth's placenta. It is disappearing at a staggering rate and we really all have got to be concerned about it. It's more than just the farmer's problem.

Water, another issue related to this big experiment. The incredible inefficient use of fresh water, 80% of which is used in agriculture, only a fraction of which ever reaches the intended plants and animals due to really inefficient transport and application methods. These are critical issues.

Energy. I mean I think that what we are going to see is I think the energy issue will probably push things over to the other side. There's a wonderful piece written in Harper's called "The Oil that we Eat." If you haven't seen that article, it's quite fantastic. But basically, and I don't know the numbers, but it simply takes more calories of energy, of fuel, of fossil fuel, multiple calories to produce single calories of actual food. That probably can't go on for very much longer. So I think that fortunately there are people who are beginning to recognize that this isn't working. And one of the important aspects of having done that book, and the reason I think the book is critically important is not only that it gives us some sense of hope, but that it presents some very important models that we are going to have to look to when this thing really starts to come apart. I think that everyone, non-farmers especially, can begin to support this shift. Not by supporting organic necessarily—I'm not that interested in that issue anymore—but by supporting your regional and local food system. That's the fundamental and most important thing to be doing. If I had said that even five or ten years ago as I was, people would get up and walk out or not understand me. Did I even answer? I don't even remember what the question was. (audience laughter)

*JS:* Continuing on with the question and answer period following Michael Ableman's talk, in this next clip Michael fields a question in regards to the "back to the land" movement that took place in the 1970s. As Michael comments on the role of such a

movement today, he suggests that the back to the land movement was about self-sufficiency, and his current work is about community sufficiency.

*MA:* I mean I think the “back to the land” movement, at least what I remember of it, it was almost, if you will, a survivalist movement in a sense. There were people going back and it was all about self-sufficiency. I’m looking towards community sufficiency as the alternative. And so I don’t know that any of us are going to be able to run off somewhere, because there’s nowhere to go, and as such, we had better find ways to do what we do to support the broader communities in which we live, which is very different than what was happening back then, I believe. And believe me, I have moments where I’d like to run off, certainly, and to some degree maybe I did. So I think certainly there are elements of that whole movement that triggered an interest in alternative energy applications which were very good, and some of those people that began experimenting have now developed some wonderful systems. People learned a little bit about what it meant to support yourself off of the land and the realities of that, which is why for many people it didn’t last long. And there are those that are still doing it, no doubt. I know that. But again, I think that we have to expand this. If we have a little bit of knowledge and access to land, I think we have a great responsibility to share that knowledge and to share the products of the land that we’re growing on. I think it’s important.

And by the way, this is not just a rural thing that I’m talking about. I spent a lot of time talking about the importance of developing agricultural systems that are urban based because as of the year 2000 the majority of the world’s population is no longer living in rural areas. They’re living in cities. In fact, a significant percentage of the world’s poor is not surviving from the products of distant farms, they are surviving from their own tiny little postage stamps urban gardens. That’s a very critical thing in many parts of the world. We have a great deal of knowledge as to how to do this well, whether it’s on rooftops or in small plots in urban neighbourhoods. We’ve got to grow food closer to where it’s being consumed. It’s very very important. We’ve got to reconnect the nutrient cycle, also very important. That has to happen by bringing the food and the people together again.

*JS:* And you’re tuned in to Deconstructing Dinner as we listen to segments from the question and answer period following a talk given by Salt Spring Island farmer Michael Ableman. As Michael indicated that the majority of the population now lives in urban centres, this next question asks whether such large cities can survive on *just* local food. In his response, he suggests that we have not yet pushed the edges of possibility.

*MA:* Okay, there’s two issues here that I’ll mention. One is, I just need to bring it up because it comes up all the time. People say all the time, “How are you going to feed the increasing populations of the world with the system that you’re proposing? Is it possible?” And I’ll say no. The population issue has to be dealt with as a social issue, as a population issue. It’s not an agricultural issue. With that said, I will tell you that right now, and this is a fairly accurate statistic, 40% of the food consumed in Cuba is being produced *in* the cities. 40% percent! They are employing, and my friend Catherine Murphy who spent probably ten years of her life down there giving tours for Global

Exchange and Food First. I think in Havana alone, I think it's a staggering number. It's over 200,000 people – I think it's maybe way over that that are employed in urban agriculture. So it's not only the food, it's the employment. You can run the numbers and do a comparative look, but I told you what we do on that twelve acres. Now mind you that's a year-round cycle, okay. I think that we have not, because we haven't had to, pushed the edges of what's possible. How much is it possible to produce on a small piece of land within an urban or peri-urban area? How many people can you employ? I think we have not even touched on the possibility there. Fairview is one example, but I think that we have a fairly limited imagination on that. We are still working off an old idea, and I think we might have to change that idea and begin to demonstrate that yes, you can have a very successful economic industry on a very small piece of land; quarter acre, half an acre. You can employ people, you feed a lot of people, and when you *have* to do that you'll figure out a way to do that.

*JS:* Prior to Michael Ableman's arrival on Salt Spring Island, he helped establish the Center for Urban Agriculture at Fairview Gardens, in Santa Barbara, California. The farm is a living example of the abundant nature in which a farm is able to operate, and it further illustrates the importance of preserving agricultural land from urban sprawl.

*MA:* Fortunately there's two wonderful images taken from the air, one that was taken in 1954 which shows this little farm in the entire region all agriculture. And then you turn the page – there's one copy of the book there that tells the story of that farm – and it's 1998 and it's the same perspective from the air. It looks like that little farm is sitting on a computer chip. Every square inch is developed. That is in a valley that once boasted some of the deepest and richest topsoil anywhere on the west coast, some thirty feet of topsoil, yet most of it now is paved over. Of course by doing so we've preserved it for future generations. (audience laughter) But this farm (I've been involved with it for 25 years, I'm still involved if you can believe it) it's 12.5 acres; it employs over thirty people now; it feeds approximately 500 families; it produces 100 different fruits and vegetables. Now, if you know anything about current agricultural statistics, none of that makes any sense. You have to see it to believe it. It's true, I'm not making this up. It also is a place that now runs programs for some roughly 5,000 people a year that come through. A number of years ago it had been privately owned for a good part of the time that I was farming there and it was zoned for 52 condominiums. And one day the owner gave me, she was getting old and her kids were anxious to cash in, and she gave me a little slip of paper after I had pushed her for years to consider allowing me the opportunity to try to save it. This little corner of a legal pad said, "A million dollars, no bickering." Now in those days a million dollars was a lot of money. Now it seems like it was quite a deal. We formed a non-profit organization called The Centre for Urban Agriculture, which I am still directing, and in eight months we raised that million dollars and placed that land under an active agricultural conservation easement, or covenant as we call them here, which not only protects the land as an organic farm, it specifies very particularly what time of farming and that education must take place there. It's a very unusual real estate document. That document is attached to that title; it gives that land a voice forever, which I think is a very important mechanism. I know we have this situation here with the ALR (at least what's left of it) and the fact that we need to do much more than the ALR.

I just have to say to me the best land preservation strategy is not what people think. It's not setting up all these policy initiatives and raising money. It's demonstrating to young people that they can make a decent living doing this. This, to me, is the most important thing that we have to do. That always surprises people. I think that's one of the most important things that we have to do in agriculture, is show that you can make a good living doing this. That this is an honorable profession. For whatever reason, a lot of people (I find more so here) have decided that's not possible. But it is possible. There are those who are doing a wonderful job of it here in British Columbia.

*JS:* And this is *Deconstructing Dinner*, produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio in Nelson, British Columbia. A quick reminder that if you miss any of today's broadcast, it will be archived onto our website, and that website is [cjly.net/deconstructingdinner](http://cjly.net/deconstructingdinner).

We're currently listening to clips from the question and answer period following a talk given by farmer Michael Ableman. Michael is the author of the book *Fields of Plenty*, a book that chronicles a three-month journey across the United States where he meets with fellow farmers and looks to reassure himself that abundance is *enhanced*, and not sacrificed, by using humane and sustainable farming practices. Such practices are a far cry from the many that are often exposed here on this program, *Deconstructing Dinner*.

Following Michael's time at Fairview Gardens in Santa Barbara, California, Michael moved to British Columbia and settled on Salt Spring Island. It was a few years later that an article was written in a magazine that encouraged a reader response that then compelled Michael to address the possibility that even cold Canadian communities could produce a diverse diet of foods. And here's that clip.

*MA:* The Sun magazine did an interview with me a couple of years ago. The following issue somebody wrote a letter and said, "We have great respect for Michael Ableman's work, but why is it that every time we hear someone waxing poetically about the wonders of regional food, they always come from southern California?" (audience laughter) I don't know how they missed it, but I was already years living up here. But it gave me a great opportunity to address an issue, a misperception if you will, that people have and that is that the only people that can eat a diverse diet somehow live in southern climes. Not true.

I'll give you two wonderful examples. There are many many more. They're both in this new book. One is Eliot Coleman who farms in Maine whose main season (no pun intended) is, how do I say that? whose primary season actually begins in the fall and goes through the wintertime. The climate of Maine, by the way, makes British Columbia look like Jamaica or something, trust me. Unless you're well in the interior, in the higher reaches of the interior, but certainly along the coast. But his products are grown in cold frames, or green houses often unheated with multiple layers of diaphanous floating row cover on top of them. So outside of the greenhouse it's ice and snow and inside you've come maybe a zone or so down. Below the first layer you're in Pennsylvania and below that, anyway it's a wonderful system and he's quite successful with it.

Another person is Odessa Piper, L'Etoile restaurant in Madison, Wisconsin. In case you haven't been to Wisconsin in January-February, it's pretty hard to present a diverse menu in January and February that is based on local ingredients, but that is what she does. Only local ingredients throughout the year, and it's an incredible wonderful menu throughout the year. As a result she has stimulated people to find ways to grow throughout the year. So bananas, I don't know, that's another story. Avocados, I miss them. Truthfully. But citrus? Possible here on the coast, yes, certainly. Figs? Yeah.

*JS:* Michael Ableman currently farms on Madrona Valley Farm, a 6-acre plot of land located on Salt Spring Island, and in this next clip Michael describes the farm and his recent acquisition of Foxglove Farm, a 120-acre parcel of land that will become a working model and learning centre that addresses the possibility of creating, as he would so aptly call it, "Fields of Plenty."

*MA:* We started on a little place over six years ago on Salt Spring. We planted a lot of asparagus. We do white and green asparagus. The white actually comes to restaurants here in Vancouver in the spring. We do a lot of berries: strawberries, raspberries, blueberries. We do about twelve different types of French melons. European shelling beans, which we shell in the fresh stage, which is very unusual. We have a fig orchard that we planted. Lots of plums. It's fairly diverse; it's about 50 or 60 items.

I must tell you about a year and a half ago we got grabbed by another piece of land on Salt Spring Island and there's a wonderful, historic 120-acre farm/ecosystem called the Foxglove farm. With a partner who sits on the Board of the non-profit that I'm still directing in the States, we did something completely crazy and jumped off the cliff and bought it. So we are now, our little place is in the process of finding a new owner, and we are shifting, starting over again (how many times is this that I've done this?) to develop a rather remarkable 120-acre place. It's got two creeks and it borders the lake. It's right up by Lake Maxwell if you're familiar with the Island. Wonderful forests and fields and lots of funky buildings. So that's going to be the next fifty years of my life. Probably take ten just to get it developed.

*JS:* And in wrapping up today's broadcast of Deconstructing Dinner and the segments of the question and answer period following Michael Ableman's talk, he comments on the strain of operating a farm in the way he does, and how part of the major problem of creating more sustainable approaches to farming, is that more natural methods of agriculture are always in competition with the dominant systems and the market economy.

*MA:* It's both ways. There are a lot of moments where, "Why am I doing this?" Every day is not a joyous experience in other words. But part of this is the strange collision that we face doing this work, of trying to practice natural agriculture within the context of a market economy. It makes you crazy sometimes. The bottom line of the traditional market economy does not take into account the fertility of the soil, or the wellbeing of the community, or the person doing the work on the farm. That's a challenge. I think that's

probably for most of us the area that – at this point in my life if I just had to produce enough for my family and the immediate community, it would be amazing, it would be so simple. But the fact that 1.5 or even less percent of our entire population is trying to feed the rest, it creates this kind of dynamic tension, which I think is challenging.

*JS:* And that was Michael Ableman, who is both author of the book *Fields of Plenty*, and a farmer on Salt Spring Island. You can learn more about Michael, his books, and his work by visiting his website at [www.fieldsofplenty.com](http://www.fieldsofplenty.com).

Today's recordings were courtesy of the Vancouver-based Necessary Voices Society, and you can learn more about the society on their website [www.necessaryvoices.org](http://www.necessaryvoices.org)

### **ending theme**

That was this week's edition of Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson, British Columbia's Kootenay Co-op Radio. I've been your host Jon Steinman.

The theme music for Deconstructing Dinner is courtesy of Nelson-area resident Adham Shaikh.

This radio program is provided free of charge to campus/community radio stations across the country. Should you wish to financially contribute to this program, we invite you to offer your support through our website at [cjly.net/deconstructingdinner](http://cjly.net/deconstructingdinner) or by dialing 250-352-9600.

Till next week.