

Mark Winne

The food-system reformer

By Amy Halloran
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For 25 years, Mark Winne was the executive director of the Hartford Food System, an emergency-food program in Hartford, Connecticut. His books — *Closing the Food Gap* and 2010's *Food Rebels, Guerrilla Gardeners, and Smart-Cookin' Mamas* — share his local food-advocacy work with the broader public. He is currently touring in support of his new book.

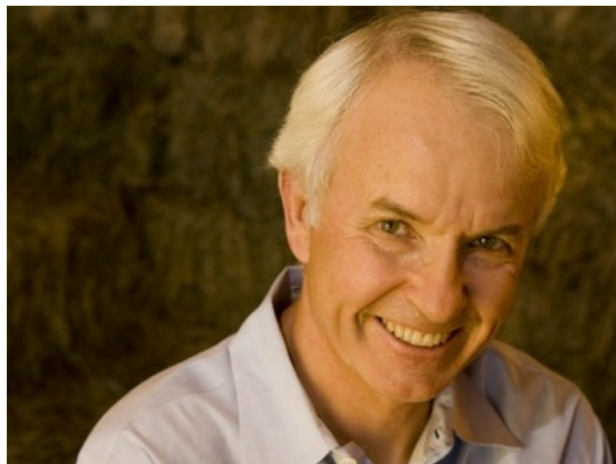
How does your new book differ from *Closing the Food Gap*?

Closing the Food Gap is distinctly a social-justice book. It's about two food systems. It's about the divide in this country around food. *Food Rebels* has more of a philosophical framework. While social justice is in the background, and sometimes in the foreground, the primary theme is the clash between the industrial-food system and the alternative-food system and what the consequences are for our health, for our environment, and most importantly for our democracy. What is it doing to undermine our freedoms? What is it doing to undermine our intimacy? Various aspects of our own humanity are being subverted in various ways by the dominant food system.

As the keynote speaker at the **Hunger Summit** in Massachusetts last fall, you politely suggested a radical career change for the professionals in the emergency-food system, saying that the paradigm needs to shift to economic equity rather than feeding people. Do you see the food-justice movement as being able to change the way we connect to each other and to ways of earning a living?

I think that there is a lot of opportunity to address local economies and regional economies through food. There is a lot more value that can be captured in a regional food chain, expressed through new businesses and new jobs.

I have this whole mantra: We need to get our hands in the soil, our vegetables on the chopping block, and our voices down at city hall. Those three elements are all inherently economic in the sense that they do produce real value, in terms of lower-cost food, but they also produce value in terms of us getting control of our lives as well as over the political process, which I do think will ultimately determine the direction that our food system takes. Being a good consumer needs to be balanced by being a good food citizen.



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How can people get involved?

I think there are many forms that food citizenship can take. Becoming involved in a food-policy council is one way. I think it can be as simple as checking in on the food that's being served at the local school. When people are running for the city council or running for the state legislature, let's ask them questions about food. Let's also become a little bit more knowledgeable about what's going on — are we losing farmland in our area?

It's becoming informed about some of the larger economic connections and forces that are acting on the local economy, so you can weigh in on a very individual level, and you can weigh in on a very organized level. Either way, we have to start talking about it, and we have to show up and we have to participate.

What are some of the more exciting policy changes you've seen lately?

I think you have to look at the public-health aspects of food. At what's happened in New York City with respect to trans fats, for example. Or to calorie counts in chain restaurants, which is now part of health-care reform; it's now a national policy. Or what's happened

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recently in Los Angeles, where they're trying to control the location of fast-food restaurants, especially in lower-income and food-desert communities.

Taking public consciousness to where we can look at particular policies, and use existing local authorities and regulation to try to create, or recreate, the food environment that we really want — I think that that's a very powerful direction.

I think that New York City, and some of the proposals that have been hatched there lately, where they look beyond the borders of the city and begin to look at their natural resources, at their foodshed — that, to me, is exciting. Planners are now engaged in doing food-system work. As they look at what their community should be like 10 or 20 years from now, food is definitely on the table. Whereas in the past, it wasn't there at all.

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Tell me more about your vision of what a high-school student should learn about food before graduation.

I call it food competency. I think there ought to be a food-competency test for all high-school students. You should be able to prepare maybe 10 dishes from whole, unprocessed food. It would be a great idea if you also had a little bit of gardening knowledge. And thirdly, you should be able to dissect mass-media food advertising.

I'm exaggerating a little bit, just to make a point. We have no standards of food knowledge. Look at the growth in obesity and diabetes in the adult population. We know that the actual **cost of obesity** can be up to \$300 billion a year. It suggests that obesity is our number-one public-health crisis, and we need to take dramatic action. An investment in food education in our public schools seems the most cost-effective approach.

Amy Halloran lives on six city lots in upstate New York with her husband and sons. She writes for regional and national outlets about the changing food landscape, and records dispatches from her family's gardening, cooking, and chicken-raising enterprises on her [blog](#). Along with photojournalist Ellie Markovitch, she has launched [Storycooking.com](#), a home for food-based digital storytelling.

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