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# Cultivating Change: Women Transforming Holland's Food System

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# Cultivating Change

Women Transforming Holland's Food System

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Meg VanDeusen

Cultivating Change: Women Transforming Holland's Food System

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## Abstract

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Women are influential in the production and reproduction of food systems. Historically, domesticity positioned women as gatekeepers to their family's food consumption; these food practices have in turn informed cultural codes that construct personal identity. Feminist scholars have investigated how cooking and feeding practices affect a woman's perception of self and interaction with society. Both practices are viewed as a simultaneous burden and pleasure, as an act of victimization and empowerment. These binaries must be deconstructed in order to create change within the food system. The impact of women taking control of the full cycle – gaining knowledge of where their food comes from, how it was grown, and how it came to their table – is lacking in current research. The role as gatekeeper provides women with the power to cultivate lasting change in today's local food system. This research gives voice to five influential women who are initiating transformative projects throughout Holland. These women empower themselves and others through creating a life of gardening, cooking, feeding, and eating. They encourage everyone to learn about their food and to overcome individualistic tendencies; the result will foster sustainable community around healthy food systems. Their organizations could increase social impact by collaborating with one another through the physical medium of a shared meal. These women will overturn the perceived burden-pleasure binary within women's relationship to food by sustaining positive change within their local food systems.

## Acknowledgements

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I want to say a special thank you to all the people who made this project and experience possible.

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My semester in The Netherlands has been something I will never forget. This project has introduced the beauty behind forming interpersonal relationships through ethnographic research, a skill that I hope to continue to foster in to the future. Finally, the city of Amsterdam continues to surprise me and I look forward to the day when I can return.

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## Introduction

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*Food touches everything and is the foundation of every economy. Eating is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family, and community relationships.*

- Penny van Esterik

Women are the transmitters of cultural codes about food: food systems are culturally constructed and most food work is women's work. Power relations are embedded within food practices. Women's and men's varying relationship to food practices tell us about how society addresses, reproduces, and resists gendered constructions. The conversation around food began to gain popularity in 2008 when the Dutch government established a grant for improving local communities. Many of the projects proposed were to start community gardens and urban farms across many of the major cities; this research focuses on ones developed in Amsterdam, Haarlem, and Den Haag. The Netherlands has a unique opportunity to use volkstuinen and urban farms to build community and establish creativity.

Due to the economics of the import and export system, The Netherlands is not pressed to maximize food resources for the sake of feeding its population. The country's agriculture sector employs only 2% of the labor force but provides a large surplus of food products for both the processing and export industries. For the most part, food is accessible and affordable. Therefore, local food systems are not expected to feed the city; sustainable food production, processing, distribution and consumption are recognized as a way to enhance the economic, environmental and social health of a particular place. Urban Farming has developed as a way to use existing city assets - green spaces and neglected places - to make the city more edible, healthier, wealthier and happier.

Urban farming has been recognized by the Dutch government as an asset to value communities, dissipate urban neglect and stimulate local economies. One of my interviewees, Ann Doherty, explains that "they see that a piece of empty land can be bad for the

neighborhoods: there's more crime, and people don't feel safe. If you get people involved in growing food on this land, you can completely turn that around and build the social fabric in a neighborhood and build a community and make it safe. The government knows they can't maintain all the gardens so they give people the tools and the training to maintain them themselves." It has the opportunity to bring together representatives from an expanding range of participants: community activists, local politicians, planners, policy-makers, farmers, gardeners, shopkeepers, social workers, developers, landlords, engineers, health professionals and academics. I want to investigate how these communities use their assets for social change: bringing communities together, providing for the underserved, and educating youth.

Furthermore, food practices witness a very strong class divide. Whereas farming stereotypically resides in the lower class, the push to return to the land has become an upper middle class phenomenon. Although food practices instill a sexual and socio-economic division of labor, recent initiatives within Holland strive for equity. Despite these efforts, however, most projects and initiatives continue to appeal to a Dutch and expat crowd and the vast majority of participants are women. Holland's initiatives to understand local food systems include neighborhood gardens, urban agriculture, and shared meals. Public involvement is central: do it yourself, learn together. Each project combines increasing food awareness – knowledge of the quality of food and the cultivation processes – with efforts to improve the local community's quality of life.

Who are the people creating alternative communities based around food? Food representations and practices can tell us about the culture that constructs our personal identity. After just a few weeks of participating in various food related projects around Holland, it became evident that the people investing in local, grassroots, bottom up change were all women. Women are the ones caring about where their food comes because they are the ones responsible for understanding how it affects their family. More importantly, the women that I



spoke with leading these initiatives recognize the importance of food not only in their own lives but within the fabric of their communities.

Discourse around food is necessary to understand who we are within communities we identify as home. I believe that anything can be accomplished over a meal or around a table, long standing gender discrimination notwithstanding. Therefore, my question remains, how can women empower themselves and others through creating a life of gardening, cooking, feeding, and eating?

This research gives voice to the women cultivating change within Holland's food system; it validates their efforts and brings light to the position of food consciousness in Dutch society. The stories of the five women I interviewed serve as a building block towards reconciling the stereotypical role of women and food with their modern day leadership position in food systems. This paper will provide Dutch participants in these local initiatives with a deeper appreciation for the leaders. Further, my observations and gathered knowledge can provide an outlook on how existing organizations and current leaders can expand their social impact and reach.

## Methodology

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*Oral History changes the writing of history much as the modern novel transformed the writing of literary fiction: the most important change is that the narrator is now pulled into the narrative and becomes a part of the story.*

- Alessandro Portelli

My research is rooted in an anthropological approach to documenting the lived experiences of female leaders within Holland's food system. I advocate for sustainable food systems and community based meals which lends to my distinct perspective within this research. My own opinions on the importance of local food systems – urban farming and community gardening – induced the assumptions used to frame this project. Personal experiences with gardening as a community asset led me to look for the social benefit within each project. Furthermore, I recognize my own reflexivity having been interested in the way food affects individuals and community interactions for the past several years. One year ago I began an oral history project based around gendered food systems which quickly developed in to examining how an individual's personal history with food affects their view on the relevance of food in their lives, more importantly, the impact of food systems on their community. Therefore, I approached this research with the knowledge that food and identity are inexplicably connected and the curiosity for how a woman's self-presentation can often be traced to her relationship with food.

I began this research seeking answers from those invested in a food movement. Through casual conversations with various female leaders at their gardens and in their homes over dinner, I came to realize that the "movement" I envisioned does not exist. Change is being made, but there is no cohesive group mentality. This report is therefore the result of a one month qualitative and anthropological study of the women leading various projects dedicated to creating a grassroots based local food system within Holland. According to recent theories and

literature, women are at the center of building new, local, ecological food systems. I was interested in seeing how. My investigations and resulting analysis is based on individual interviews as well as participant observation from spectrum of approaches to changing the current food system: community gardens, urban farms, slow food, and education.

Coming from the standpoint that meaningful human connection can only be formed through the reciprocity of interactions, I committed to spending more time with each participant than just during their interviews. This consisted of everything from digging in the dirt for hours at project sites and getting to know other volunteers to attending slow food events and sharing meals with the community. While at these sites I learned that many students have entered these projects before, looking for answers, but none have been interested in truly learning from the community. Learn is all I did. I discovered how simple worm composting can be, watched an expert engage children in the concept of growing food, got proven wrong on a planting method, dug up bricks from a parking-lot, and learned the Dutch words necessary for agricultural pursuits. I breathed fresh air and got my hands dirty in order to connect with the hands and faces actually making a difference in this movement.

The intended approach for conducting these interviews was from a strictly oral history lens. I wanted to understand how each woman got involved in her current project through engaging with her lived experiences around food and feeding and eating. What I soon discovered, however, is that my interviewees fit too perfectly into the assumed role as female leader. Many of them were mothers, with full time jobs, responsible for getting food on the table for their families in addition to the projects I was curious about. A conversation reflecting on the entirety of their life was a luxury they simply could not afford. In addition to the time constraints, the cultural difference of "Dutch directness" and the need to cut to the point, resulted in focused my interview questions directly to each woman's opinion of the food movement and their project. And yet, each interviewee continued to reflect upon the important aspects of their childhood and recent past that brought them to where they are today.

I approached each interview with the curiosity of an oral historian and the knowledge of an ethnographer. Ultimately, my approach to simultaneously engage with these women's projects and lived experiences will explore how a woman's sense of self, and her representation of herself, is established through her food practices.

## Theoretical Framework

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*Like women's studies, the emerging field of food studies is interdisciplinary and includes attention to the daily lives of ordinary people.*

- Arlene Avakian

Women's relationship to food is often represented as a natural division of labor; however, the gendered roles within our food systems are culturally constructed. A woman's identity of self is often integrally connected to the ability to feed her family. The scientific disciplines of nutrition, economics, and agronomy have studied how food shapes and reflects human values. In order to shift from the scientific standpoint towards recognizing ethical social rules, studies have begun to analyze cooking and feeding from a gendered perspective. This research has placed women at the center of the family meal since most food - production, acquisition, processing, preparation, and serving – indicates women's work transmits cultural codes about food. Conversely, most food work outside of the home is not within the woman's sphere. This research seeks to address how the physical cultivation, the commercial preparation, and the formation of community through food affects the positioning of women.

Extrapolating from feminist food theories that have been applied to women's position in the kitchen and role as family nurturer will establish the basis for analyzing women's relationship to food in the public sphere. Penny Van Esterik encourages academics to shift towards a discussion of active agency. She argues that by providing women with the right to feed their families, not just assigning role of nurturer, we can acknowledge women's social and political positioning within the food system. The power of nurturer is undervalued, but the power as cultivator is unexamined. I question whether Esterik's theory on "the right to feed" can be applied to today's food movement and the shift towards seeking healthy, fairly produced food. All existing bodies of literature focus on this role of feeding, therefore I am curious about how food arrives the table. I will examine how women's classical positioning as gate keepers to the food

system can create a paradigm shift when applied to their current positioning within the public sphere. By integrating gendered food ideologies with the theorized feminist food praxis model, I will establish a framework to examine women's experiences in today's food movement.

In order to analyze women's experiences, we must first understand the theories and variables that have contributed to the feminist food praxis model. Theorists have used feminist, social exchange, and standpoint theory to contextualize gender within the social formation of food practices. Although the academic discussion of food and foodways began in the 1940s with M.F.K Fisher connecting the sensual to an otherwise ordinary eating experience, the academic discipline of food studies did not develop until the 1980s. Laura Shapiro illuminated how the history of food could connect with the history of women. Carole M. Counihan first connected food studies with women's studies in a theoretical framework when expressing her belief that food practices are both "constructive and reflective of gender construction." (Avakian and Haber, 8) Counihan focused on viewing food as a means to create interdependent relationships between men and women, challenging the presence of power in the home. She argued that women's identity derives from an influential private life as nurturers in the domestic realm.

McIntosh and Zey's depiction of social exchange theory – where all human relationships are formed through cost benefit negotiation – relates directly to Counihan's perception that women "feed others in return for love, favors, good behavior and the power that comes from being needed." (Counihan, 48) McIntosh and Zey would further extrapolate that this form of power stems from the socialization that men and women are influential in separate spheres. These power differences provide each gender with the ability to exercise coercion and manipulation while producing different outcomes. McIntosh and Zey use social exchange theory to argue that power revolves around money rather than household acts, stating that women with a higher income have greater control over family food choices. We will return to this theory when looking forward at my proposed research where urban farms have the opportunity to overcome these power relations.

Marjorie DeVault views activities in the home in a similar manner as Counihan. She recognizes that “food preparation is work that defines the family” and indicates that work cannot be separated from leisure. (Avakian and Haber, 9) Feminists recognize that the home is often the site of women’s work, coining the term “the second shift” when discussing the invisible work of women maintaining the house and the family. Devault’s studies in the 1990s can be complemented by Esterik’s current food praxis model blurring the work-leisure divide by considering the way an act is performed. The expectation for women to feed their families is a simultaneous burden and source of pleasure. Whereas DeVault argued that women often deny their domestic tasks as work, Esterik acknowledges that it is the way a task is performed, not the task itself, which defines her work. Therefore, feminist food theory considers the way in which the act of feeding - producing, processing, preparing, and serving - is performed.

Performance theory applied to food systems exemplifies the relevance of identity through agency. Esterik contributes that a social actor can make individual actions on the food system while the collective system simultaneously acts on the individual. This perspective recognizes the relationship between agency and structure as integral to a women’s understanding of her own identity. Due to the social construction of women’s expectation to feed her family, she has power as nurturer, which contributes to her sense of self. Food insecurities that result in a woman’s inability to feed her family can be detrimental to her concept as an independent provider. Standpoint theory – all perspectives are shaped by individual experiences – is relevant to the positioning of identity within food studies. Esterik analyzes women’s identity from their point as provider whereas Probyn examines women’s perspective as consumer. Both theorists explore the influence that eating has on a woman’s perception of self, but Probyn approaches eating as a way to refigure the woman’s identity. She connects “knowing the self and caring of the other” in order to articulate who the individual is through what they eat. (Probyn, 70) Each standpoint has a unique contribution to the food studies praxis. Woman as feeder creates identity through power; woman as consumer creates identity through pleasure.

The perspective of woman as cultivator merges the two standpoints. Growing her own food for the sake of health and pleasure allows a woman to be both feeder and consumer.

Only with these theories and variables can we question why men often dominate food decisions when women are held responsible for enacting the food practices. Finally, we are able to examine the notion that women control the flow of food. Most important to this study is the theory of women as gatekeepers to the food system. The culturally constructed concept of women as mediators between production and consumption critically shapes the flow of food in to the home. McIntosh and Zey contextualize the gatekeeper concept within feminist food studies; their study simultaneously acknowledges women as chief decision makers regarding food while casting doubt on previously theorized domestic power.

Even though women tend to purchase, store, prepare, and serve the meals, men ultimately control family food decisions due to their economic position. This is where social exchange theory, implying that if women earned more money they would be better situated, could come in to play. McIntosh and Zey examine the nature of family power – authority, coercion, and influence – within food choices. Since issues of domestic power are largely resource based, however, I propose a new theoretical framework. Why does purchasing dictate the production of food in the home? In 1943 Lewin introduced the concept of woman as gatekeeper and subscribed to the belief that we can “discover why people eat what they eat if we learn how food comes to the table.” Patriarchal control of economic resources implied that women maintained all channels of the food system except for monetary income and for gardening. Production of food was in no way at their disposal. Now decades later the physical production - cultivation of the land through gardening - is an option.

By applying feminist theory to the notion of women as gate keepers, we can develop a new feminist food praxis model that applies to women's role in the public sphere as cultivators of food and influential producers within the food system. Not much research has been done in the field of feminist food studies for fear of reducing women's work to the domestic sphere.



Focusing on the women's influence on the physical production of food, it is essential that we make use of the non-dualistic principle. Food simultaneously victimizes and empowers women. Women are both vulnerable and powerful within food practices since they are constantly fluctuating between productive and reproductive work, public and private spaces, and formal and informal economies. The task of feeding cannot be reduced to a private act of social reproduction. However, it is more than this task of feeding which binds women within a dualistic model. Theories from ecofeminism notes that women's daily actions have a connection to the environment - shared history of oppression by a patriarchal Western society - which is often ignored. Others consider women's position as homemaker and mother to be what connects them so closely to nature, leading to the understanding that human relationships with each other and with nature should be nurtured separate from exploitative power dynamics.

Examining all of these dichotomies indicates that the new feminist food praxis must not be limited to such a binary. Instead, we can use Esterik's non-reductionist model of cooking, feeding, and eating as a metaphor for interdependence. Esterik proposes a paradigm shift towards reflexivity – recognizing how individual food choices affect other food systems – in order to understand terms like nurturance, reciprocity, and intimacy. These terms do not need to be viewed within the classically defined “natural” division of labor, but can instead be associated with the empowered gatekeeper model.

Examining food systems on the whole will overturn monetary influence within social exchange theory by including the role of cultivation. Women who produce their own food have the power to depart from the dichotomy of feeder or consumer. The role of nurturer remains prevalent regardless of a woman's position within the food system but establishes a sense of interdependence by valuing health and pleasure. Such spaces as urban farms and community gardens should be examined through the feminist food praxis lens. Women clearly have power that extends past the domestic sphere, including the power to eliminate hunger, reproduce bodies, and ensure sustainability. (Esterik, 160) How can these abilities be put to use?

Feminist food praxis will inform my research by combining gatekeeper and identity theories. I will extrapolate from Lupton's post structural approach to the construction of identity through food. Her perception of the food discourse provides a theoretical approach to the age-old saying "we are what we eat." Post structuralism focuses on an individual's subjectivity, therefore Lupton views "food and eating [as] intensely emotional experiences that are intertwined with embodied sensations and strong feelings." (1996: 36) We must create a new frame for power over identity for women to utilize their power within the greater food system. I propose we establish that we are *how* we eat by applying standpoint theory to the interdependence existent within a gatekeeper model. This model deconstructs the dichotomies between producer and consumer, domestic nurturer and receiver of pleasure to ultimately erode the stereotypical perception of women's place within the food system. The feminist theoretical framework acknowledges that the food system remains gendered but that knowledge can be used to improve individual's relationship to food and in turn their quality of life.

## Literature Review

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The development of local food systems has recently become a global trend. Food shortages are becoming more frequent and poor health results from a growing capitalistic, globalized economy. Backyard gardens are not expected to be the solution that feeds the world; they are however, allowing citizens to take matters in to their own hands. Many studies have been done on the influence of large scale industrialized farms versus family owned or small industrial farms. Debates over genetically modified crops persist and work has been done to explain the importance of organic treatments. Little research has been done on the relevance of urban farms and community gardens in these food systems. Researchers and anthropologists alike recognize that small scale initiatives are not going to feed the world and end the current agricultural crisis. Local food systems can, however, be supplemented by these community efforts and should be recognized as an asset to the community. Limited research exists on efforts towards a local food system within the Netherlands, none-the-less their impact. Relevant literature indicates that small scale female farmers, at both urban and rural sites, have the ability to positively impact local food systems through their efforts for environmental sustainability and community building.

Large scale agricultural food production has more to do with the structure of power than it does growing food. In reality, farming should be about feeding people and building community. As in many European countries after World War II the Netherlands' government and factory owners worked together to provide allotments of individual plots of land to the country's citizens. During that time of economic rebuilding these 'volkstuinten' served as a means to establish food security and to improve the quality of life of those living in the industrialized cities. (Zimmler, 18) Today these same volkstuinten serve a somewhat different purpose: recreation, access to nature, and sometimes supplementing store bought produce. The owners of these plots have

shifted from being a majority of older men to increasingly younger women. In addition to these *volkstuinten*, urban farms and community gardens are springing up around the country and around the world. Such actions indicate that women are at the center of building new, local, ecological food systems. (McMahon, 203)

Maria Turesky explored how women are a central component of this shift in food systems by recording the personal life stories of six Dutch female farmers. Each of these women's farms were by no means small, but still an alternative to the mass produced food available at chain grocery stores. Most small scale farmers, whether male or female, are culturally and politically feminized; they are economically viewed as powerless, unproductive, and dependent. Turesky demonstrated "how a few current female farmers shift or uphold the historical stereotypes of women farmers." Telling their individual truths exemplified each woman's commitment and passion to their farms while simultaneously depicting each woman's perseverance through gender discrimination. Her work indicated that female farmers are not primarily taking care of the family and also working on their husband's or father's farm, but that they are running the business. However, Turesky failed to address why these food systems are gendered in the first place. Just like the rest of women's work within capitalistic societies, women's contribution to agriculture is "rendered invisible or devalued." (McMahon, 204) Therefore, local farming and women farmers, represent cultural and economic resistance.

The economic resistance, and capital based asset of local farming, resides in its environmental sustainability. Globally, people are hungry because they lack access: limited money to buy food or no access to land on which to grow it. Hunger is not a pressing issue in The Netherlands; however, local food systems can still enhance a capitalistic society. Increasing greenspace within urbanized communities "could improve both the environmental and aesthetic quality of the urban areas." (Zimmler, 20) Such an improvement would also reap economic benefits by having a healthier and more active population. Urban farms can even establish a local economy through market gardens and neighborhood jobs. In addition to the asset of urban

farms, small scale rural farming increases “participation among more social niches such that more women would be economically independent and self-sustaining.” (Turesky, 38) Female farmers are able to develop independence from their male counterparts and establish their own contribution to the food system, ultimately increasing the amount of inputs and outputs. More environmentally important, “community gardens help remedy the environmental problems, such as water, soil, and air pollution, that result from the intensive use of center city land in the Netherlands.” (Zimble, 26) Having a better cared for urban terrain will decrease governmental spending and improve the Dutch quality of life. Each of these authors recognize the presence of economic influences, but none elaborate on how arguing the capitalist advantage of a local food system could increase participation or appreciation. Most individuals interested in local food do not find the economic influences appealing to study, but it is important to remember how all aspects of a system are interconnected.

Arguably more important than economic benefits, community building remains one of the greatest assets to local food systems. Zimble frames her thesis around a US historical perspective where urban farming addresses underserved populations, offers outdoor education opportunities, and provides a focal point for community gathering. She notes that The Netherlands is just beginning to develop this perspective since historically the *volkstuinten* were a place for individuals or families to cultivate their own land. Interaction and group work is not a focus of these gardens. Research on the developing Urban Farms and Community Gardens within Holland will begin to evaluate the creating of community. In capitalistic societies, food can become a vehicle of power; this can be witnessed even within the *volkstuinten* analysis. It is necessary to recognize, however, that “when we partake in food, we consume relationships.” (McMahon, 204) Current research lacks any explanation for why people have become so disconnected from their food and how a relationship like that which McMahon imagines can be valued.

Each of these bodies of work a different component to the topic of local food systems which can be extrapolated to the present day situation within Holland. The studies are thoughtfully conducted and address their topic at hand, which makes it apparent that research on women's positioning within the food system as a way to establish community must be conducted.

## Self-Representation

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Each woman that I interviewed shared with me a part of herself. They engaged me in their projects, illustrated their inherent beliefs and worked with me to discover the origin of their ideals. I chose each of these women for their distinct contributions to Holland's local food system. After a conversation with Annett van Hoorn – director of Eetbaar Amsterdam, the online medium working to help projects collaborate – I began to get a glimpse into the lives of the women I wanted to learn from. Annett graciously invited me in to her home to share in a family dinner because she had no other moment to spare for an interview. While I could not include our conversation in my official research, her enthusiasm, contacts, and knowledge framed the rest of my project.

Each woman I spoke with had incredibly limited time because of how invested she is not only in her project, but in the way she leads an environmentally and food conscious life. No one viewed themselves as an activist, in fact that was the very last thing they wanted to be. I had to overcome my assumptions of researching a food movement: making changes in the food system is simply a part of these women's lives because they want everyone to recognize the importance of healthy food. They have big goals and visions for what this change means. Knowing who they want to ultimately reach within their communities, many of these women are dissatisfied by who is currently involved. And yet, they are not women to compromise for something less than what they know is possible.

Through just a few hours of planting in *Eetbaar Park* I observed Rachelle Eerhart attempt to balance getting her work done and talking to her visitors; we then unearthed the reason for that struggle in our interview. Over the course of two months I got to know Natascha Hagenbeek while working in her garden *I Can Change The World With My Two Hands*. It is

there that I have watched community being built: volunteers return week after week to talk with new friends and see if their seeds sprouted and children taste herbs for the first time and enthusiastically take them home to their families. But, even with these successes Natascha is limited by what she can accomplish herself. "I don't have much time to dream." She stated, as if it were a simple matter of fact. "No time to think about what would be the next goal. I'm not that character, I don't think before doing. This project requires that you just do do do." Although none of my other interviewees expressed the sentiment in such a direct manner, I could tell it was in the back of their minds.

When I asked each of them what is the next step there was always a pregnant pause filled with tension. It is not their individual projects that are going to alter the food system in the ways they dream is the best solution. They know they need each other's projects, but for that the need more time and resources and support. For these reasons, it is only just that I present the full stories of each woman who took time they did not have to tell me about their life.

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Natascha Hagenbeek, director of *I Can Change the World With My Two Hands*, grapples with joining her two worlds of needing an urban life style and having a love for fashion. Her new approach is to incorporate gardening in to both her artistic and everyday life. "It's not so strange" she notes, "because nature has the strongest beauty within, and fashion, if you leave the superficial things out, is also beautiful. It has to do with identity and it can be really about beauty." *ICCTWWMTH* is becoming a space for volunteers, gardeners, and curious community members to find beauty in their identity.

Natascha, a 42 year old artist and trend researcher, spent her childhood in a flat in Amersfort. Although the neighborhood was fairly poor and full of concrete, Natascha was able to grow up surrounded by many different cultures. Access to nature was limited, but her Indonesian Father was a skilled forager so she and her sister both got in touch with the outdoors through him. He taught them to climb apple trees and shake down the ripe ones which they then would store in refurbished freezers in their attic. And when the summer months were right they would share in hours of berry picking. Her Mother would use some of what they found to cook, and would occasionally cook Indonesian food for her father, but for the most part dinners were not diverse. The family didn't have the ability to make everything from scratch or



with the freshest of ingredients, but Natascha remembers her mother focusing on healthy food as much as possible.

Her Mother moved from that neighborhood when Natascha was 15. The new neighborhood was less lively and engaging than where she had grown up, and after a year Natascha decided to move out. Living in Utrecht with her boyfriend at the time Natascha started in a fashion school. Having been determined to join the fashion world from the age of 12, Natascha was disappointed by the unnecessary stress that school forced upon her. Confusion built; she found her long held dreams of fashion suddenly superficial. Unsure of what to do next Natascha began exploring her options: she attended an art academy for teaching, went to India for 4 months, tried evening school, and sought out education in art research.

At the age of 23 Natascha met her current boyfriend Stephen at the squat he had started. Initially lured by the artist's studio he let her rent out, they soon started dating and together developed the squat's all vegetarian restaurant. Although she only had a few months of cooking experience, the two of them made it work. The squat was appealing for her artistic needs: allowing her to experiment with space and get in to nature. Since childhood and foraging with her father, Natascha "always had the attraction to nature but needed the city as well. The loneliness of really being outside in nature was too scary" but the squat was close enough for her to access both. After 3 years of living there, and 15 years of being associated with the community, working with irresponsible individuals became too difficult.

In 2003 Natascha took a trip to New York City where she was first exposed to Urban Farming. The concept of gardening in the city aligned perfectly with her desires: a city life with access to nature and an artistic lens of creativity with space. It was an idea she was excited to bring back to The Netherlands. After trying to get a "food from the hood" project started in the Bijlmer, Natascha moved to the Landlust neighborhood with her two children and realized that something in her new community needed to change. In 2008 the local government welcomed proposal to improve the neighborhood, and the garden project "I Can Change the World with My Two Hands" was her solution.

Neighbors work side by side, either in their own beds which they can rent or in the central garden managed by Natascha, and together they share knowledge, make mistakes, and get to know nature. The people involved with their own beds seem to unconsciously like feeling connected with the neighborhood - they have a very independent life and a good life - but the garden puts them more at ease in this back street neighborhood. Those who work in the shared beds are more idealistic and have more connection to the goal and the purpose. And it's working. People are starting to see each other on the street more, to talk and feel safe with each other.

I have seen Natascha's artistic side emerge from under all the compost; her vision guides all the weekly volunteers who are planting without any greater sense of purpose. She likes having the ability to direct the project but welcomes input from all participants, emphasizing that she knows just as much as the rest of us. This sense of learning from doing opens up the paths of communication in the garden, letting everyone's voice be included. But at the end of the day Natascha is still the woman behind it all, and there is a lot that goes on behind the scenes.

Rachelle Eerhart, chair-woman of *Eetbaar Park*, shares in the struggle for an urban life with the remedies of nature. More difficult than finding this balance, however, is the personal disconnect between her individualistic personality and her quest to establish community through gardening.

Rachelle talks of the inherent value to learning where food comes from and appreciating the

work that goes in to it, she speaks of the ability home cooked food has to connect people, but she is not one to naturally seek out the help of others that comes with establishing human connection. Rachelle notes that she must “adjust her patterns” in order to cultivate the change she envisions.

Rachelle grew up in the country side of Holland with two younger sisters, a merchant for a father, and a mother who was queen of volunteer work. As a young girl, chasing after boys, she was blissfully unaware of nature. Rachelle reflects “I was never touched by nature in my younger years,” and there was never any conscious talk of sustainability. Even more surprising, when looking at her current life style, is that she never had any interest in food growing up: “We just ate.”

But, that all began to change when she went to the University of Leiden and started feeding herself. She wasn't very good at it and learned most of what she knows from her housemates. Those two men must have been budding chefs because they had the right tools, Rachelle laughed, “You never realize how important good knives are until you start to use them.” They shared with Rachelle one of her most prominent cooking lessons: never cook from a packet. And so to this day she never does. Learning to cook led Rachelle to connect with her food, but it was really the process of learning to grow that food which changed everything.

Immediately out of University Rachelle began a job, which had nothing to do with her studies, in a big company with endless opportunities. Joined by other young graduates eager not to leave University life, the company was full of various clubs and activities. Curious, Rachelle joined one for sustainability. The more involved she got the more she realized “I don't know anything about growing food,” and thought “let's learn about that.”

She enrolled in a permaculture course through FoodPrint, an organization that helped start Eetbar Park where she works now. The program invited artists and designers to develop appealing proposals on how food can shape culture by connecting entrepreneurs, farmers, food experts and the public. Although Rachelle continues to insist that she is not a permaculture expert, it is this concept that permeates through all her actions. “I never used to think in systems,” she explains “I never saw the world as being interconnected, but now that I do I think I like that world view. And once you start looking at the world like that you can start to apply it to everything you do.”

More important than the physical cultivating skills, Rachelle learned the importance of interacting with people: “I have always done my own thing, but I have now become embedded” in the system. To practice both the tangible and philosophical permaculture skills, Rachelle began her own garden. There was an old, typically Dutch, house occupied by artists just a few blocks from her home in Den Haag. Despite the funny looks she was given after asking to cultivate their land, she got hold of the patch of earth in front of the property. It was a really special place because of the social aspect, because people would stop to chat. Yes, one boy asked if she was digging the neighborhood's new graveyard, but the point was that they were talking.

When renovators took over the land she moved to Eetbar Park, an edible garden where participants get to engage with examples of humans as a part of nature. Rachelle had first witnessed this garden in action while taking her permaculture course, and saw the value in the project. As the community started to feel disconnected and turn away from it, she got involved and focused on including the community in the park. She wants to create the demand to know where food comes from, and to do that she hopes community members will start by just coming by the park to see what's happening and have a conversation.

Over the course of our interview Rachelle vocalized her inherent preference for solitude: independently making choices and observing everything around her. Asking for advice, reaching out for the soul purpose of connection, does not appear to be her style. But, the more that Rachelle works in Eetbaar Park and gets to know her neighbors that stop by, the more she recognizes the importance and relevance of her own mission. In essence, gardening means “becoming healthy by doing something that connects you to a bigger picture.” As Rachelle becomes a part of that bigger picture she is prepared with the tools to engage others in what it means for them to become healthier through connection with nature and with each other.

Janneke van der Heyden believes that the best way to make a difference in today's food system is by creating awareness of it through slow food, shared stories, and connect people around collective values. She wishes that Rachelle would recognize the work she does in Eetbaar Park as part of the slow food movement, but knows that naming the movement is less important than following its ideals. After all, she's been practicing the value of slow food her whole life, before the naming of it ever existed.

Janneke was born in 1945 in Utrecht. As a child of the post war generation, she remembers a life of simplicity. Although there was never any extra food in the house her mother always assured that Janneke and her younger siblings got all the vitamins they needed, if even through the dreaded liver cod oil. In this way she recollects that even at that time food was not always healthy when it came in to the house, they always had to supplement something. But once the family moved to Silvolde it was a different story. There a sense of the old Dutch culture with street markets and food specialists. “We were connected with the farmers around,” Janneke mused. “They brought us potatoes, one bag for the whole winter you could hardly lift it. We had good cheese too coming from the western part of the Netherlands.”

As a teenager in the “flower power” era during the 1960's, Janneke was exposed to contrasting environmental messages. The pesticide DDT became popular and her family, along with the rest of the world, consumed the poison as easily as they did milk and water. It was used on everything, from toilet cleaning to tooth brushing, but was unknown to be a poison that remains stored in fat cells. At the same time she attended summer camp in southern France: the essence of returning to nature. Reminiscing on her time in the Ardèche, she explains her sensual interaction with what she can now name slow food: “if you remember the taste of a good peach, and we called this a wild peach, when it hangs there and its 35 degrees it already starts dripping and you sit under that tree... you will never forget it.”

Janneke already had developed her own passion for good food by the time she met her husband Jan, but he fueled their life style of pursuing *really* good food. Jan had spent much of his adult life teaching himself to cook. Together Jan and Janneke discovered new cuisines and styles of cooking. They created a cooking group with sixteen friends and once every few months would create an elaborate sixteen course dinner. They would go to great means for good, authentic, fulfilling food. Everyone in the group came from different backgrounds - some were farmers or hunters, others just appreciated great tastes - but all were idealistic that food is both survival and pleasure.

In the 1980's in the Netherlands hormones were quickly becoming a larger problem: the moment Janneke saw a cow whose udders were scraping the ground she knew there was something she had to do. As the rest of the country started to learn what was going on the

government required all fields to be cleared. "It was a very tearful period" Janneke recounted mournfully as she described how her friends who were farmers, or even just had pet chickens, urgently traveled to Belgium or Germany to keep their animals from being killed. She was among the many people who stopped trusting the industrially produced food.

Around this time Slow Food was beginning to develop in Italy, and Jan learned about the movement in 1995. Jan brought home the idea of fundamental rights to the pleasure of good food and responsibilities to protect the tradition and culture that makes pleasure possible. They started the Netherland's convivium and Janneke initiated "Slow on Sunday." Every few months Janneke would gather strangers in her home for a leisurely Sunday meal: some would cook, some would set up, and others would just come to eat. At first people were not so fond of knowing the story behind their food, those conversations come organically. But, the more they participated the more the movement grew.

By 2004 Janneke felt confident enough in her Slow Food convivium that she could ask "Where does the world need me?" There were many environmental issues that she saw needing her help. Although she detests the global fish industry, her heart fell to working with bees. "Bees represent what slow food is trying to do: autonomic and self-supporting. They depend on each other, they can change their interactions, they can guide each other and take really care of each other; it's quite a human way of society." So now Janneke focuses her energy on spreading awareness – about food, bees, health, and human connection – when and wherever she can.

Caroline van den Bemt also works to create awareness of daily food culture in The Netherlands and does so by contributing to the fun within food. She recognizes that the issues within our food system are big, but that the solutions can be simple. Caroline's approach to making change is by building awareness and getting the young people involved. Children are never allowed to play with their food, but with Caroline's organization *HappieFood* everyone is able to engage all their senses in order to understand where our food comes from, where it goes, and why it's important in our lives.

Caroline grew up during the Netherland's last movement to "get back to nature." As a child of the 1960's, she was always surrounded by access to nature and fresh food. Caroline reflects upon how her mom "makes good food out of simple ingredients;" an approach Carolina has put to practice in her own life's work.

In 1990 Caroline graduated from the Design Academy in Eindhoven where she studied environmental design for public spaces. After working as a designer for several years she missed interacting with the public. So, in 1993 Caroline had a new idea to bring many of her passions together: she started a cookery club for children ages 6-12 in her local community center. Inspired by the American chef and author Alice Waters' simple style of making each dish a party, Caroline instituted a 10 lesson series. Children got to learn in a chef's own restaurant everything from the flavors of different ingredients to the creation of their own menu.

For many years Caroline worked additional jobs in nearby restaurants in order to give these children better courses but by the time she was 29 discovered that she needed more education. It was time to take a cooking course of her own. The course she enrolled in, Restaurantkok, was primarily filled with young Turkish men, instilling in Caroline a love for the

way different cultures approach their meals. "Their way of sharing simple food," she reflected. "I was touched by how hospitable they are."

Her budding curiosity in various cuisines took Caroline to Paris to improve her own cooking style. Simple food took on a new meaning when starting at the market and choosing the best product. Later on she worked at cooking magazine "Delicious" and wrote the children's recipes and tasting sections followed by another cooking school: de Laurier. It was there that Caroline developed her own course for children to come and learn both tasting and cooking. When she sees children are scared she explains to them that "Tasting is a kind of sport. It's not your tongue only, it's your nose. It's not about liking or not liking, it's about being curious."

Caroline's ability to make tasting a game culminated in a study she conducted between two primary school classes in different neighborhoods around Haarlem. A famous chef was tasked with creating 5 ways to make white asparagus, and to get the kids to eat it. The two groups of children were from opposing socio-economic backgrounds, but all the children preferred the taste of the asparagus more when it was presented to them in a friendly manner. Caroline came to recognize she could reach any child through the common ground of food.

Most importantly she wanted these kids to know that food does not have to be complicated and that there is "someone in their neighborhood who is caring about their food." She wants the kids to ask "where does their food come from and what work is in it."

In 2007 in response to all this growing knowledge Caroline began her current project: HappieFood. The program develops educational food settings within her own community. She has put her belief that sharing in honest and delicious food - around a table, or a picnic cloth, or anything that brings people together - will result in happiness of body and mind. This is something that both producers and consumers can share in by approaching a food product from a new perspective or developing mutual understanding for the stories that accompany all sides of the food system.

Therefore, by 2006 when her own son started primary school, Caroline was well versed in teaching children about their connection to the food they eat. She asked the principal what their school was doing, and he told her to tell them what they should be doing. In 2008 when the government welcomed proposals for improving communities, she was encouraged by the number of other people thinking about similar issues. Her project Plezier in Eten was too small for the government funding, but she came to realize effective community projects must derive from their own community efforts. So now Caroline artistically explores on how the people around her can engage in food collectively.

Ann Doherty, coordinator for *City Plot*, similarly values simplicity in creating a healthier, more connected food system. At City Plot newcomers to experienced gardeners learn together in basic workshops which ultimately benefit the growth of their local communities. Her own experience and focus on education – gardening is something everyone can do – and communication – working together – contributes to the growth of City Plot and changes in Holland's food system. Ann has the vision for stimulating the ideals of connection that Rachelle speaks of, and dreams that City Plot can be part of that platform.

Ann, originally from Boston, has been living in The Netherlands for the past 20 years. For her, sustainable food systems have always been in her blood. "I always wanted to be a

farmer," she reflects "that was always my dream, and when I was little I didn't know how to reach that. It wasn't a natural progression from where I grew up in the suburbs to becoming a farmer." Her father maintained a small backyard kitchen garden where she and her siblings would help harvest for fun as kids, and in the summer they would visit the ranch where her mother grew up. Nature was something that just simply had to be a part of her life.

Ann started realizing there was a problem with the food system a long time ago from her parents, but it was at Carelton College where she started to develop her own understanding of the issues. After earning her Masters in Political Science at New York University Ann traveled to The Netherlands for an environmental conference youth summit. It was there that Ann remembers recognizing that our food system was the issue that makes her the angriest. A farmer from Portugal spoke to the youth about the EU's control on his farming and the detrimental effects it was having on his crops, his fields, and his family tradition. It was then that Ann realized the "knowledge that these people possess, within a couple generations, will be completely wiped out."

After the conference Ann decided to stay in Holland writing funding proposals which quickly turned itself into a communications job with Friends of the Earth International. Ann contributed to the dynamic program for 16 years, but at times the lack of policy change began to feel disempowering. She was able to connect people doing great work for the Earth, but she wasn't seeing any of those results in her own neighborhood. Especially once Ann started having kids, and realized that cement playgrounds was not where she wanted them to grow. It was time to rediscover her childhood dream of being a farmer. Ann and a friend invested in a volkstuin plot in Amsterdam West, where her current project also resides. The more she started gardening the more she realized she didn't know what she was doing, and attended an online Urban Farming course to "understand it and make it more systematic. Anyone can throw seeds in the ground and some of their food is going to grow up, but [Ann] wanted to really be able to produce food."

Evidently, the environment and food have always been important to Ann, but it took a big leap of faith to switch from a policy level to the more hands on, bottom-up solution. There is still a disconnect between the two but Ann is bridging that gap: "I grow food in the city and I teach people how to grow food in the city. This is not just a hobby, this is my work." Through her Urban Farming classes and contacts from her job, Ann found the organization City Plot. The City Plot founders were interested in making the city greener and a nicer place to be by simplifying gardening. Ann's timing to transition jobs could not have been more perfect, City Plot asked her to take over their communications role, which Ann took on enthusiastically. Through connecting with other gardens and advertising what City Plot had to offer, it became clear that learning to farm in the city was a dream held by many. The excitement and curiosity is there, but the hardest part is maintaining the momentum.

From working with Ann at City Plot's garden I can vividly see the potential for connection. She rapidly switched from role of interviewee to mother to director to farmer, and did so with complete poise and control in each role. However, not everyone can be able to do that so easily, so City Plot's mission to make a local food system simple and accessible is necessary to increase involvement.

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Each of these women illustrate their desire for a healthy, cyclical food system in all aspects of their work. The urban life style is one that these Dutch women cannot renounce, which inspires them to merge nature with city even more. While the outdoors and farming might be something that they are passionate about having access to, it is the city which provides them

with ease, connection, and independence. It is that independence which most notably drives everything else. Making change in the food system derived from their personal pleasure of good food and their desire to take control of what that means. These women are pioneers in their field and are active doers. As awareness for their work grows, they desire bringing in more influential actors and connecting with each other's work. But, can their mentality of independence, often conflated with individualism, provide enough motivation for community building? In order to discover how these women's lived experience of their ideals for Holland's food system can be put in to expanding practice we must examine how their participation in domesticity and environmental sustainability impacts their community interaction.

## Theoretical Analysis

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*It's a beautiful world and we live in paradise because The Netherlands has everything, but we have the most spoilt water in all of Western Europe, we have the most spoilt grounds from all Western Europe, and at the same time we are in the middle of a food crisis.*

- Janneke van der Heyden

Examining Lewin's proposal that we can discover why people eat what they eat if we learn how food comes to the table, I propose that if those people themselves know how food comes to the table we can sustain a healthier, sustainable food system. Since food shapes and reflects human values, we must maximize on personal well-being to focus foodways practices towards healthy consumption, community connection and ultimately environmental sustainability.

Commercial food production exploits and dominates the environment, paralleling the oppression of women within their role as consumer and feeder. Urban Farming practices similarly reflects this patriarchal system. Men are invested in large scale projects – super market roofs, green houses, aquaponics – aiming to feed the whole city. Women's role as nurturer and connection to nature, however, places them in a position of influence within their community's local food system. Women are held accountable for feeding the family; that is an undeniable

reality still present within modern day Dutch society. Ann Doherty explains that this responsibility is often the inspiration for women to grow their own food: “The food system is such a mess that they want to take control back and feed their family in a healthy way.”

The smaller scale, community based gardening endeavors therefore appeal to women. Identifying the importance of organization and working together, they are interested in foodways work which will help them and their families in any small way. The women leaders I interviewed recognize their role within the system: their role as nurturer has the power to improve foodways among families and communities which in turn will change the greater approach to food systems on the whole.

## A twist on domesticity

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*[The leaders] are mostly women with kids who are just power houses and amazing women who know this needs to happen, it's right in their community so they know, but they also need to make money and are balancing a job that's actually putting the food on the table.*

- Ann Doherty

Cooking and eating recollect deep personal connections to childhood, travel, important moments in an individual's life etc. But to women, it also implies a realm of domesticity. Traditionally, cooking was passed down from mother to daughter. Women held the secrets to cooking seasonally and eating well balanced meals. These truths are why feminists have skirted the food conversation for so long. “We all wanted to enter the workforce,” Rachelle Eerhart explains, “but what was the cost?”

It is important that women desired independence, left the house and sought professions outside the realm of domesticity. No theorist implies that the solution to today's food problems is sending women back in to the kitchen; the environmental issues are too big and the patriarchal system is too corrupt for that to make an ounce of difference. Women have limited resources and decision-making power within the food industry and food policy sectors. However, we must



recognize the important role that women have had and will continue to play in foodways. Food has been the source of both victimization and empowerment of women for centuries.

Counihan perceives that women feed others because of the power that comes from being needed and the pleasure that comes from receiving love. This is a far more pessimistic approach to food systems than illustrated within Dutch society. Each of the women that I interviewed held positions of power both in and outside their home and appeared confident in both self-love and interpersonal relationships. But undoubtedly, women are the gatekeepers to food; they carry the mental and manual labor of food provision on a daily basis. DeVault acknowledges that food work involves physical, mental, and caring labor through the process of shopping, cooking meals, serving food, planning meals, worrying about nutrition, and arranging suitable time for the family. Basic interactions with my interviewees depicted the relevance of these overlapping and time-consuming roles. "We all have to eat" I told one woman as we scheduled an interview over a meal. I cannot separate my interviewees out of this underlying domestic role of mother and nurturer, regardless of how conscious they are of the situation.

The conversations I had with my interviewees, however, reside within DeVault's furthered theory about a work-leisure divide and Esterik's efforts to blur that line through the concept of performativity. These women are foodies: they love good healthy food, they enjoy growing it and cooking it and feeding it to people, and they recognize its burden but also see it as a pleasure. Each woman remembers their mother focusing on food in some way throughout their childhood. Janneke remembers the distinct connection her mother had to various farmers and the effort she put in to getting all the right nutrients in their food. Ann laughed about eating carb chips and other alternative food that comes with overly-exuberant food-conscious parents. Caroline, Natascha, and Rachelle all recollect simple meals, but healthy and filling meals nonetheless. Each of these women's history with food contributed to their current values. Each also had their own personal moment of realization: when food tastes good and feels good it is good for the body, mind and soul.

Cooking becomes a joy when seeking that perfect balance of what food can do for you and for those you feed it to. The inherent quality of the food affects the way an individual embodies what that dish has to offer. Much of the food that people eat today are full of empty calories, and even the healthy food we eat is devoid of nutrients. Therefore taking ownership over what we put in to our bodies, and what mothers feed their children, becomes a powerful act. Esterik discusses women's inherent right to feed. Recognizing the distinct importance of each decision diminishes the burden within cooking.

Ann discovered the joy in cooking when her oldest son began to learn about gardening as part of The Netherlands's school curriculum in year 4. Until that year he refused to taste new things and was always very skeptical about food. In that garden he began to see "the connection between the food he was eating and growing. He'd come home with all kinds of bizarre things and ask 'can we cook this?' and he'd eat it. This was the story of all the kids in the garden." These are exactly the type of success stories that Caroline strives for in her work. She connects children to more than just the vegetables themselves, but to the individuals who put in the work to grow those vegetables, produce the cheese, and grind the mill. "Where do your roots come from," Caroline stresses, "Not just the carrots but your roots. That's also what's in your food." Children have never been able to make this connection before because food regularly goes straight from the store in to the cart in to the refrigerator and on to their plate; their mothers rarely having time to let them participate in the process. But, when the system becomes tangible it also becomes accessible and digestible.

Ann went from constantly being challenged by putting good food in her son's mouth to having the opportunity to cook with him and taste new vegetables together. Cooking became an adventure that they could share and that brought them closer. The physical connection between person and food before consuming it also fostered a physical connection between those they consumed it with. As Rachelle explains, "growing food is a really easy way for people to talk to each other." There is something immediate to connect over – a simple question to ask, a menial

suggestion, a basic comment on the weather – that could seem pointless anywhere else but in a garden sparks conversation.

Cultivating food as the means for nurturing provides women with tools to merge the binary between work and pleasure. DeVault emphasizes the power divide present within identity politics around food. However, the concept of cultivator provides an alternative to the classic role of provider. A woman's identity can no longer be conflated with her domestic role as nurturer, but can now be observed through her efforts to take control of the way food comes to her table. Whereas DeVault argued that work cannot be separated from leisure, we saw that line beginning to blur through my interviewee's relationship with cooking. Now with growing the food, these women enact Esterik's model of performativity. There does not have to be a binary between work and leisure, nor does one have to be hidden within the other. Instead, the way these women perform the act of growing their own food is with joy, excitement, and knowledge: key components towards being self-empowered.

Establishing this connection allows eating to become a completely different experience. Food does not have to restrict women to the kitchen, instead they are able to have a bigger role in nurturing. In order for food to nurture it has to become more than just sustenance. Cooking becomes a place of pride and connection, not just a domestic expectation. Women are able to take pride in what they grow, how they produce it, and where it goes. The main thing, Caroline explains, is "the experience people get in food." This experience can begin in the ground or around the table, but the key is sharing in it.

Community around food changes the way it is perceived. Everything tastes better when you cook it yourself, but it feels better when you grow it yourself. "Eating is a completely different experience than before," Rachelle admits. She was speaking directly to how the experience changed when she started producing her own food. But, that personal production could not be separated from the knowledge of effort that goes in to producing everything else that she cannot. Rachelle immediately followed her comment on the experience of growing and

cooking and eating with a lesson she learned while in Japan: “they say ‘itadakimasu’ which means saying a word of thank you to every piece of effort that was put in to bringing this on your plate. It’s just a moment of respect to value all the effort, the whole system behind it.” Growing your own food creates a unique awareness of the rest of the cycle, which is what each interviewee emphasizes as a solution to the problems within the food system.

What Janneke found attractive in the world of slow food was valuing that whole system and knowing where that experience of sharing came from. Her compatriots in the movement all know there is something wrong with the food system and all want to do something to fix it. The beautiful part of it, however, is that sitting together around a table and sharing in a meal can be one of the small steps towards fixing the system. “One of the centerpieces of this world,” Janneke mused “is that hope is always there.” She reiterated that regardless of the current state of things – perhaps extrapolated to domestic pressures or environmental destruction – “if you are in greatest despair, there is always hope.”

Evidently, the domestic experience of these women cannot be separated from the rest of their work and ideals within foodways. This realization allows us to move further away from the dualistic view of women as oppressed domestic provider versus pleased consumer. We can make use of ecofeminism non-dualistic principles by focusing on my interviewee’s influence over the physical cultivation of their food and enjoyment behind cooking and eating together. These positions restructure our notions of power. Women partake in the consensual relationships of food systems by reclaiming their position as nurturer. This movement creates an interconnected community: women to their local food communities, consumers to female gatekeepers, and individual eaters to each other. The essence of ecofeminism is reflected within these relationship between woman and nature and can therefore in turn be applied to shifting the role of nurturer in to the power of cultivator.

The inseparable relationship between cooking and community relate directly to the lifestyle these women commit to. Their lives are inexplicably intertwined: food relates to family

and community, cooking relates to work but also happiness, their individual projects relate to each other. These relationships can be most perfectly summarized by Rachelle's task for all young people: "Learn to cook because food connects people. If you're a good cook everyone will want to come to your party. If you're a good cook then you want to have good stuff in your dishes, maybe grow it yourself, maybe value the farmer who grows it for you more, and you want people to take time to eat it. Organize dinner parties, sit together and talk, and don't be afraid of taking up the challenge to change your routines and see that everything is not as it is. We cannot change everything but we can change the way we look at the world, and there are some ways of looking at the world that are better than others, and not for the world itself but for you as a person."

## Permaculture as a way of life

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*When I took a permaculture course the diversity I encountered was very welcoming. It was very good for me. You can feel embedded in a natural system, but to feel embedded in a social system is what everyone eventually wants. Gardening is what you do together and gardening is the means by which you enter that group, and then the group is welcoming.*

- Rachele Eerhart

Today's population is not taking care of the environment; every selfish act against nature quickens the rate with which the health of the Earth is declining. There are endless issues in our environment, and twice as many reasons for what caused each of those problems. According to Janneke, "Food communities in the Netherlands are almost destroyed by our very outgoing economies thinking." She is right in noting that communities around food are practically non-existent, and that many of the reasons behind this destruction is the Dutch focus on economic gain. But in reality, food is a part of every issue. The loss of biodiversity in food production, the use of DDT and pesticides on plants, the injection of hormones in animals all contribute to climate change, deforestation, water pollution, land erosion, and even the loss of culture.

As Ann felt in her position at Friends of the Earth International, these issues can quickly become overwhelming. The global food system is in disarray because it is dominated by corporate power. Capitalistic thinking in a globalized economy presents serious detriments for agrifood systems. In addition, there is a rising lack of access to healthy food because the pesticides and single crop systems causes a loss of nutrient value in the produce. Such a public health crisis is a huge cost for the government. Changing policy on the large scale is one approach to addressing the issues in today's unsustainable food system, but it is not the only approach. The unsustainable food system derives from not knowing how it grows and not knowing who grew it. Therefore, a separate approach should be learning about where the food comes from.

Sustainability means that something can endure over time, and in order to do so that thing must exist within a system that remains diverse and productive. Each of my interviewees reconcile environmental sustainability with all other aspects of their life: family, art, food. They recognize that the goal of creating a healthy planet also has to do with community and connection. Rachelle explains that sustainability is about three things: “It’s about connecting to yourself, and it’s connecting with other people and it’s connecting with the system. And connection is of course the central word in that because we’re all atoms functioning in the system that’s interconnected.”

This concept of connection surfaced in every interview, and was often also reflected in conversation around cycles. The cyclical nature with which we approach our daily lives, with which we approach our food, and with which we treat the earth points directly at the practice of permaculture. Today, when people hear the word permaculture they assume a specific style of farming. In terms of growing vegetables permaculture implies that we can have higher yields simply by mimicking the cycles of nature. Most importantly when applied to urban farming, it acknowledges that we can grow food just about anywhere. But permaculture means more than nature’s food production cycles; it is a whole design system. A reaction to food insecurity in the 1970s created the desire for self-reliance. This desire can manifest itself both in attitude and practical application; it encompasses anything from cultivating to recycling to simply observing.

Of the three basic principles of permaculture, two stick out as the most interconnected and most alluded to in my interviews: take care of the earth because without a healthy earth people cannot flourish, and take care of people because they are the access to those resources that allow us to flourish. To each of my interviewees permaculture means more than mimicking nature while attempting to grow food on their balconies. Instead, it means living in tune with the cycles of nature: applying the interconnection they have observed to their own life systems. Most importantly, part of creating these interconnected systems is the education of a permaculture based life. Ann explains that all of City Plot’s workshops are based in a

permaculture approach as they are “trying to make it so anybody can do this at home and are helping people do things with very few resources.” Each small step like this makes a sustainable local food system accessible.

We are therefore able to apply the previously discussed non-reductionist, non-dualistic model present within cooking, feeding, and eating to Esterik's metaphor for interdependence. The principle within ecofeminism – striving to deconstruct binaries – can be applied to permaculture efforts. If everything is cyclical and connected, there can be no dualistic divide. Esterik proposes a paradigm shift towards recognizing how individual food choices affect other food systems. In other words, building that awareness that all my interviewees have encourage: knowing where your food comes from in terms of both how it is grown and who grew it.

None of these women are expecting their projects to grow enough food to feed all of Amsterdam; that is far from their purpose. Their individual projects, their life's work, and the way that they interact with people on a daily basis boils down to creating awareness. Janneke describes her connection to nature and other people as simply feeling a lot and therefore she wants “to create any awareness, to try to educate everybody.” Yes, that is a lofty goal; but, with so many influential actors participating in this paradigm shift it's possible. Ann and Caroline focus specifically on education, but the other projects naturally incorporate awareness building in to their daily motions of maintaining a garden or sharing a meal. When Natascha found a long lost potato in the ground and replanted it with children in their own plot, those kids learned what a potato looks like before it can be eaten and discovered part of nature's surprising process of growing it. When Rachelle took a minute out of her day to talk with a local young man about his personal life, he learned that gardening is about more than the food produced but is also about the community that is cultivated through that production. Understanding where food comes from maintains many layers of interconnection. “The point is to get people thinking about it.” Ann says simply, “if you know how it's done you know that it's a miraculous procedure.”



Each woman focuses outwardly to broaden the general public's understanding of what it means to respect the cycles of nature. However, participating fully in nature's cycles and interpersonal relationships require a level of self-awareness. Esterik's model of reflexivity can therefore be applied to each of my interviewee's desire for independence. Dutch society is highly individualistic. These women come from that same standpoint within Dutch society. But, food as a source of connection could be a stepping stone for what brings them together. Rachelle explicitly stated "From a very young age I've always been this very independent girl, I've always done my own thing and connecting with people has always been the harder part." Yet, she also reflected that shifting her world view towards human interaction has been the most rewarding part of her gardening experiences. Standpoint theory recognizes, however, that each individual lived experience affects that person's interaction with the world around them. Being physical cultivators and creators of awareness provides them with a unique perspective. These women can participate in Dutch individualism, they can also play a role in woman's identity as feeder and consumer, but most importantly they provide their own respective standpoints developed through their personal relationships with Holland's food system.

Permaculture requires awareness of this personal shift. This is a sentiment I have watched play out in many of the gardens where I worked. Natascha also works from a very vision driven place. At the garden many volunteers are working next to each other, but not together. Individual tasks keep them reporting back to Natascha and only occasionally brainstorming together. But, when she begins to work with the children on their beds, everything shifts. She has more energy, is less distracted, and invests her whole attention in their education. Children make that step of connecting easier because they are less biased and have fewer assumptions about what is being done. But, the shared experience of growing food can also serve that role.

Everyone has their independent place within the food system, but that position only exists because of all the other individuals playing their own role within the same system. The

cyclical approach to sharing in food experiences implies that awareness of both yourself and the system allows for the development of interpersonal connection. Caroline encourages this process of getting to know yourself as a means to understanding foodways. She asks, “How do you react on your environment? How do you feel yourself in your body? How are you connected to the other person?” Answering each of these questions is a part of understanding the production and reproduction of food practices. Without knowing Caroline, without being asked these specific questions, Rachele went through the process of discovering the answers. Attempting to grow her first garden on the land of that abandoned manor “was really a formative experience. It’s sort of spiritual,” she mused. “In our culture we see ourselves as individual actors and the thing you belong to is your nuclear family. But we’re all searching for something and by going through that process of connecting with nature in a really direct sense, it gave me a stronger sense of home in the system.”

Branching away from acting on a strictly personal level opens up an individual to recognizing how they play a role within the system. Food has the ability to be that stepping stone towards awareness. Janneke determines that achieving a sense of equilibrium within the food system – discovering “ecological, harmonical, natural, respect of each other and of nature – are the components of a good life.” Planting the seed that sprouts in to a plant you nurture which grows in to food that provides sustenance in your life which you learn to cook in order to feed friends with whom you share in good conversation sitting around a dinner table is the essence of a permaculture based life. This process completely revitalizes the role of nurturing and feeding. When women have complete power over the whole process of getting food to the table they are not restrained within the role of domesticity. The ability to take control over that they feed their families, how they live their life, allows cooking and eating to become a source of empowerment and pleasure.

## Conclusion

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*This is the most critical struggle of our generation. We need control of our food, everybody needs that in all parts of the world. That's the beauty of growing your own food: it's so incredibly inspiring but it's also a right.*

- Ann Doherty

Women are initiating transformative projects throughout Holland, cultivating a shift in the way people interact with their food and their community. Having grown up with mothers who dedicated time and attention to the way that they ate relates these women's relationship with food to the lived experience of many women who feel responsible for feeding a family. My interviewees, however, each embarked on their own personal journeys with food production and consumption which sparked the desire to create change on a community scale. "My whole journey started with me wanting to have a better life," Rachelle reflects, "not me wanting to save the planet in a sort of eco activist or eco aesthetic way. The better life is around the corner. That's the beauty of this world, it's filled with opportunities and people doing fun stuff and you just have to have the inclination, the time, and the mindset to just go."

Each of these women embrace the "just go" mind set. They are pioneers in their field, even if they don't view themselves in that light. Although they are each very individual people with their own agendas, they are able to shift their style of interaction when gardening with others. Because of their focus on establishing community, the relevance of this happening within Holland is less important than these improvements in awareness around food happening in their own neighborhoods. As proposed through the theoretical framework, it appears that growing her own food for the sake of health and pleasure does indeed allow a woman to become empowered as both feeder and consumer. Further, it enables her to reframe the power dynamic within her domestic role of nurturer as a leadership role in community building.

All of these projects must work together for true community to form. The online platform Eetbar Amsterdam is beginning to grow as a space for similar community gardening, urban

farming, and other food related projects to collaborate. This is necessary so new projects do not need to re-create the wheel as they are trying to get started. Clearly, effective models exist and can be replicated or learned from. Eetbar Amsterdam's ability to support new projects, answer questions, indicate new courses or events is beneficial, but it is not enough. Can the best results be found through an online forum?

Food, gardening, eating, are all very physical and sensual experiences. Replicating this type of a community online will be difficult. There is an essence of physical embodiment when each woman speaks about her project that I cannot imagine a website being able to get such a passionate message across. I met Rachelle and Janneke at a Youth Food Movement dinner: surrounded by other young people who desire knowing about their food and sharing meals with other like-minded people was the most invigorating way to start my project. As previously indicated, each of these women are incredibly busy, but everyone has to eat. I envision growing awareness of change in Holland's food system by establishing interpersonal community connections between these projects. The solution is not online, but over shared meals. If these projects are able to collaborate in the same physical space – to eat a meal together produced from each other's garden, to answer each other's permaculture questions – the results will be staggering.

Rachelle reminds us that the whole point of focusing on our food system is to become "healthy by doing something that connects you to the bigger picture." The bigger picture includes each of these projects and dozens more that I was not able to participate in. Women have the power to teach their children about where food comes from, to feed their families with what is right and to fuel their communities. We will see sustainable change once all these initiative can share in their lived experiences and developed knowledge about what their food is, how it is grown, and all the work that goes in this interconnected system. These women have proven that a positive relationship with food can be empowering, and will continue to overturn the burden-pleasure binary by cultivating lasting, positive change within their local food systems.



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## Appendix

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### Interview Guide:

- Please introduce yourself
- What do you remember of your first home?
  - Who lived with you growing up?
  - Did both of your parents work outside the home? What did they like to do best when they were not working?
  - Who took responsibility for various household chores: cleaning, washing, cooking, gardening, sewing, child care etc?
  - Describe a typical evening in your parents' home when you were a child.
- Who made most of the decisions in your family when you were a child? How did this affect how you run your own family today?
- Describe for me your first kitchen.
  - Where did your parents do their shopping? Did you go shopping with your parents? What do you remember about these trips?
- Describe the meals the family took together.
  - Describe your family's diet. What foods were commonly served?
  - Where did your family eat? What were meal time seating arrangements?
  - While you were growing up, who was in charge of feeding your family?
  - Did you have any family traditions that revolved around food?
  - What kind of discussions occurred at meal time?
- Did your parents want you or your siblings to follow a certain occupation? What did you want to be when you grew up?
- What was your process for deciding what to do after high school?
  - Who influenced your decision?
  - How did you decide what to study?
- What has been the most influential component of determining your current career path?
  - When did you first develop an interest in farming / food systems?
  - Why do you do what you do? Why is your work important?
- Why do you participate in community gardens and urban farms?
  - Who uses and benefits from these spaces?
  - What more do you think could be accomplished?
- Who do you want your work to reach?
  - Who is left out of this new urban farming and local food trend?
  - Do you feel your work is valued?
- What is most important to people in your community?
  - How has the community changed within your time here?
  - How would you like to see the community change?
- What has been your greatest struggle in this movement?
  - Have you had to sacrifice anything for the success of your project?
- How has your work affected the way you eat or feed your family? The activities you you're your family participate in?
- What do you think is the next step for the local food movement?
- Is there anything that we've left out that you'd like to talk about?