

Evan Schneider:

Hi Tessa, thanks so much for joining us today.

Tessa Desmond:

Hi Evan, thanks for having me.

Evan Schneider:

I'd like to start by giving you an opportunity to tell us just a little bit about what drew you to your current work in farming and food systems.

Tessa Desmond:

For 15 years, my professional life focused almost exclusively on working on issues of racial inequality and injustice. Over much of that time I was living in Madison, Wisconsin where I inherited a flock of backyard chickens from some friends and I had a small garden plot at a community garden and I regularly shopped at the farmer's market. Madison's market is the largest in the country. It was totally the event in town on Saturday mornings. But these two parts of myself though, they were pretty separate. So I worked on racial justice professionally and I cared about food when I was off duty. And while it wasn't exactly that easy of a split but more or less that was the division of labor in my head. But in my work I've always paid particular attention to self to systems connections. So I do a lot of self work and I facilitate self work and deep reflection for myself and for students and others in my community.

Tessa Desmond:

So it was really only a matter of time before those things sort of blended together, even though they did sort of start out more or less separate. After I was living in Madison, I moved to Cambridge and was teaching at Harvard and the program on ethnicity, migration and rights. And I had the opportunity to bring them together. I needed to create classes that brought together the pillars of the program, which were studies of ethnicity, migration and human rights. And I had a lot of leeway in terms of the interdisciplinarity of my offerings. So I only ever teach classes that I want to take and I thought, what do I want to learn more about? I was well aware of the problems in the food system by this time, but I hadn't examined them through an aperture much wider than my own personal consumption patterns.

Tessa Desmond:

So I decided to use one of my experimental seminars to turn my academic training and concerns towards food in the food system. So I developed a course which was aptly named the EMR of food, how ethnicity, migration and rights are parts of the food we eat. And the title was basically the question of the course and I was asking it for myself as much as for the students. How are ethnicity, migration and rights intertwined with the food system? Sixteen weeks was of course woefully inadequate to answer all those questions that grew out of the seminar. And so I started to shift my whole set of intellectual concerns to think more about food inequality, justice and social change. And here I am.

Evan Schneider:

That sounds like a really great way to go about teaching courses. Like what do I want to learn about? That's what I'm going to do a course on.

Tessa Desmond:

That's right. I mean it's such a privilege and joy, but I think that also learning is much more fun when we're doing it together, I think students really enjoy seeing me discover things alongside them. And so I think beyond just being a joy and a privilege, I think it's also a pretty effective pedagogy.

Evan Schneider:

So from the outset the COVID-19 pandemic has deeply affected how we think about and interact with food. And I think it's safe to say that everyone takes food less for granted now than they did just a month ago maybe. So given your expertise on your perspective as a scholar in this area, what is the most important thing that Americans need to understand about the current crisis?

Tessa Desmond:

Wow. I don't claim to have any kind of authority to speak on this really new crisis that we're facing. I think from my own perspective, the most important thing that I can tell Service Focus students and folks in our community from my professional vantage point is that COVID-19 is not a food-borne illness. And this is very important, it means that we're not likely to contract the virus through food. Care and caution needs to be exercised because of course, often food is distributed through networks of people. And so we come into contact with far more people than we're aware of beyond just the point of exchange. But there's evidence to suggest that our standard cooking procedures such as cooking meat in a sanitary way hold for COVID as well. So at our house for instance, we're cooking our own food and being careful to disinfect food packaging and we're limiting our trips to food stores and being aware of minimizing contact with others. But the food itself is unlikely to cause infection. And so that's good news in all of this.

Evan Schneider:

That is very good news. I'm a huge fan of food I like to cook, I'm the cook in my house and it is nice to know like just kind of follow your normal routine and you should be okay in terms of what you consume.

Tessa Desmond:

Yeah. I will say that I've never before washed my apples with microbial soap, antimicrobial soap, but new things.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah, I have a little bit of practice with that because I lived in China for two years and it was very unclear what chemicals were getting sprayed, especially on the fresh vegetables and fruits and things like that. So we did do a pretty good job of washing our food there. So it's just sort of a little step back into time for us.

Tessa Desmond:

So you're practiced.

Evan Schneider:

So one major concern currently is that food supply chains may be disrupted by this crisis, and your research has deeply analyzed how food systems are organized and how improvements in terms of both

access and sustainability can be made. So what are some of the structural weaknesses that COVID-19 has illuminated and what are the most critical areas for improvement?

Tessa Desmond:

All right. And now I have a lot of thoughts on this topic and I was glad that you sent over the sketches of the questions in advance because it helped me. But bear with me because I think this is, I mean this is the crux of the issue for me is to thinking about how COVID-19 has highlighted problems within the food system that many of us studying food have known about for a long time, but there hasn't been the will or kind of the political force to fix. And so the problems themselves are not all together new. And I think that this is true across the board with some issues that COVID-19 is highlighting. But I think to begin to think about this question, it's really important for us at the outset to recognize that we actually have two food systems in this country.

Tessa Desmond:

We have one food system for people with access to resources, including money and transportation and time. And this is the one that most of us are familiar with. It involves trips to the grocery store or the farmer's market, some cooking at home, but also frequent trips for takeout and restaurant meals. But there's a second food system too and a lot of us know about it, right? It's one for people living in poverty or who live in impoverished areas, both urban and rural. And for these folks, they may have limited resources including money and transportation. The second food system is often marked by insecurity and by government or charitable assistance. Grocery stores are hard to get to and generally less stocked. People buy most of their food instead at corner markets and fast food shops, food pantries and soup kitchens are important sources of food too, as is the national school lunch program, SNAP and WIC.

Tessa Desmond:

Now, to be clear both of these food systems are undergoing significant shocks right now. They're both vulnerable to certain stressors, but what that looks like and what the solutions might be are different because each system operates differently. Both are concerning during the COVID crisis. I imagine that the folks listening to this podcast have questions about both of these issues. But to think about this critically, I do think it's important to differentiate them. So let me start by talking about some of the biggest concerns for that second food system. The one that's already marked by insecurity.

Tessa Desmond:

First I'm worried about the kids who rely on the National School Lunch Program for Food. The National School Lunch Program is one of the largest and most successful welfare programs in the country, established in 1946 and now feeds over 30 million children per day. The program has traditionally received broad bipartisan support as it aids both children and farmers with surplus commodities. So the National School Lunch Program is a huge factor in the food security puzzle for the kids enrolled in it, providing breakfast, lunch, weekend food backpacks, and summer meals as well.

Tessa Desmond:

The loss of school is a huge blow to families who are living in this second food system. It's harder to access food during COVID, many folks have lost their jobs and now they're responsible for many, many more meals for their family. It's absolutely unsustainable, it is a disaster unfolding and it's one that we could see the consequences in terms of health and well-being for a very long time. So I'm spending a lot

of time thinking about the kids who are affected by the National School Lunch Program and it's bands while school is out.

Tessa Desmond:

The second thing that I'm worried about with this food system that's already marked by insecurity is the tremendous increase in the number of food insecure persons that we've seen just even over the last couple of weeks. And this is combined with charitable resources that are already stretched really thin. So there was a New York Times article last week about this huge increase in demand experienced by food pantries across the country, while at the same time, nearly 40 percent of them have temporarily closed. In Pittsburgh there was a line of cars, eight miles long, waiting for food distribution. We know from The New York Times headline today, this is being recorded on April 16th, that over four weeks, 22 million people have been added to the unemployment rolls.

Tessa Desmond:

So at a time of totally unprecedented increased demand, the supplies and human resources that make our charitable food network run are dwindling. Food pantries receive their supply from food banks. Food banks receive their supply from surplus of canned and dry goods from grocery stores or restaurants and surplus commodities from farms and manufacturers. Of course, grocery stores are hardly able to keep non-perishables on their shelves right now, and those stores that do have supply have no capacity to comb through expiration dates and prepare shipments for food banks. Grocery stores are stretched to a breaking point and restaurants are shuttered. Additionally, most food pantries rely on elderly volunteers who are at increased risk of death from COVID-19. So they're under-resourced in terms of food, funding, and people.

Tessa Desmond:

Our leaders, our political leaders are going to have to address the issue of food and quickly, and I don't hear enough people in these leadership roles talking about how we're going to feed all the hungry people. This is the foremost concern of the second food system that I'm talking about. Now, as for the first food system, the food system that has traditionally had much more stable access to food in the United States. It's important to recognize that we produce enough calories to feed our population. In fact, our food system produces two times the number of calories that we need to feed our population. It's one of the reasons that obesity has been on the rise.

Tessa Desmond:

We make more food than we need and food companies need to sell that food to increase profits and provide investors with growing returns. So we have enough food to feed the folks who can afford to access it and we have enough food to feed the folks who can't. The issue is how that food is produced, packed, distributed, and delivered. Now, there's a lot to talk about here too, but I think one of the most important things to talk about is the massive shift that the food system is having to make to accommodate this crisis, in short, it's all mixed up. Much of our food pre-COVID-19 has been consumed in restaurants or other institutional settings like college campuses. Fewer and fewer people cook at home regularly, and that means much of our food supply is packaged in bulk for institutional settings.

Tessa Desmond:

We're talking about 50 pounds of ground beef, a 10 pound can of tomatoes, two and a half pound bags of spinach, and remember, spinach is very light. So with restaurant demand now virtually nonexistent,

food distributors are going to have to repackage food for home consumption. And there are challenges to this. No one knows how long we'll be in a lock-down situation or when the lights to restaurants will be turned back on. And so there's a question about will and retooling right now to provide for the needs of people who are home bound. And even without a question of, well, within our complex and vast food system, companies have specialized in preparing for home consumption or institutional settings.

Tessa Desmond:

So those focused on institutions, they don't have the right size containers. They don't have the right size assembly lines or the right size boxes to package food in a new way, and they don't have the human resources to retool quickly enough for our immediate needs. Grocery stores too have operated for a long time within margins. Demand for food in light of restaurant closings has put them in a bind and as that demand has increased, the products that are demanded have also drastically changed. Non-perishable, it's yeast, flour, these are the products that are sought after right now. Our national yeast supply for instance, has been drastically depleted. The owner of Bob's Red Mill reassured folks a few weeks ago that they were growing more yeast, but that takes about 60 days. And so because our system is Bohemian, it will take time to respond to this crisis, but it's also innovative and it's well-supplied.

Tessa Desmond:

So I do have confidence that there will be enough food to feed our population. What we need to do right now is make sure that the right food gets to the right places and people and that's no small feat. The other challenge that is a foot for this food system has to do with availability. There will inevitably be shortages of certain products, either because of delayed production or disrupted distribution and delivery. Now we've grown used to having food, whatever food we want, whenever we want it, and that will not be the norm during this crisis, partly because of blips in the supply chain, partly because of temporary closures due to outbreaks and partly due to unpredictable consumer demand and hoarding practices. For instance, my drink of choice is a gin and tonic, I've heard that there was a run on tonic water because of a false rumor that quinine can be used to treat the virus.

Tessa Desmond:

This is completely unproven. But I might not be able to have gin and tonics through the summer right now, and I just have to learn to be okay with that. We all will have to get used to being a bit more flexible. It's hard to say what will happen with imports from other countries too who are less able to deal with the crisis. We get our year-round seasonal produce from many central and South American countries. There may not be bananas or avocados at certain points. There may not be strawberries this December. The Smithfield pork plant in South Dakota, which is responsible for 5 percent of the nation's pork supply, had to close this week due to an outbreak. That single plant is responsible for something along the lines of 40 to 50 percent of all the COVID-19 cases in South Dakota right now.

Tessa Desmond:

That closing will absolutely impact the availability of pork for the short term, but of course there's plenty replacement sources for protein, so we just have to get used to being a little bit more elastic. And thinking about the Smithfield case in particular brings me to a related concern which is around food and farm workers. So already food and farm workers are among the most exploited and least protected workers in our economy. The unemployment rolls are filling with out of work cooks and dishwashers and waitstaff because we have devalued restaurant work to such a degree that many folks who work in

the industry don't have sick leave or job security. For folks working in the meat processing facilities, they work shoulder-to-shoulder on an assembly line that runs at breakneck pace.

Tessa Desmond:

The poultry industry has used COVID to push the USDA to allow them to increase the processing speed in their plants to three chickens per second. The Smithfield outbreak will not be the last in the meat packing industry, and too often the workers themselves are considered expendable. At a Tyson plant in Georgia, a worker suffering from an undiagnosed COVID fever for two days reported to her boss that she was sick and she was told that she needed to return to work the next day. The pretense he said, was that they needed to feed America. Now, she died a week later and was the third death among workers at that plant. Farm workers who harvest our produce and berries are in tremendous risk as well, often traveling and living in close quarters together, migrant farm workers travel a farm circuit spanning the length of our country south to north.

Tessa Desmond:

They work with minimal protections already. This will only get worse during the crisis as the demand is overwhelming and their movement across the states will increase the spread of the virus endangering all of us as well. So concern for thinking about how food and farm workers are treated is concern for them and also concern for us. I think all of this, food is a right and food work is essential and we really need a framework that recognizes this. Without stable food, without full nutrition, you cannot enjoy the other freedoms that we think of as basic, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, all require a full stomach. We should instill the right to food and our most essential governing documents. We should have done this before the COVID crisis. We should absolutely do it afterwards and we should treat food as absolutely essential.

Tessa Desmond:

As you said, like we're all thinking about it a lot more now. If we hold the value that food is of the highest regard, we may also then hold the people who work to make our food plentiful and available in such a manner. So those are some of the things that I'm thinking about as we think about what is this crisis illuminating, and what are we going to do about it.

Evan Schneider:

Well, I really appreciate the time you took to lay that all out. I know that it's obviously really complicated, but having that model of thinking about two different food systems kind of happening at the same time, sort of dipping into some of the same sources, but also then having very different end products and experiences for the folks who are accessing food through those systems, it's just a really helpful way to think about how food is delivered. So thank you for that, and a lot of what you had to say was really sobering to hear and shocking to some level, but I think it's really important that we just speak truth and reality and not beat around the bush. So thank you so much for illuminating those concerns.

Tessa Desmond:

Absolutely.

Evan Schneider:

So another major concern is that COVID-19 will exacerbate existing disparities in well-being and nutrition around the world. How can we be more attentive to issues of equity for vulnerable populations? And what are the critical questions we should be asking ourselves?

Tessa Desmond:

We've known this to be true for a long time, there is more than enough food on the planet to feed everyone. So hunger and starvation are not caused by food shortage globally, hunger and starvation are caused by lack of access to resources by which to procure that food. Hunger and starvation are about lack of money and about lack of investment in infrastructure. They are not due to lack of food. And this is the point made by Amartya Sen, the Nobel prize-winning economist in his essay *Poverty and Famines* and it's made time and time again by scholars in the field. This will hold true during COVID-19 too, and I think it's really important for us to remember that there will be enough food in the United States. There will be enough food across the globe to feed everyone, but there will absolutely be a mismatch because those food sources and their distribution networks are not going to always align with where the need is.

Tessa Desmond:

And so it's reasonable to expect that the cause of those mismatches will be poverty, both personal and national. Poverty on a personal level means that the people can't afford to buy food when they need it. And national poverty also often results in lack of infrastructure to provide people with access to food. It's also important to remember that food aid for its part has become politicized over the past four decades, such that we distribute food aid as part of a larger global strategy of leverage and favors. I don't know the solution to these two issues, but it's important that we watch for these things. These will be patterns of this crisis. Often though when we ask questions about global inequalities I think that we look at these kinds of crises in relation to each other and we see that hunger and poverty are greater elsewhere. And so we think that the problems are greater elsewhere and then maybe aren't so bad at home.

Tessa Desmond:

With this problem it's going to be very real around the world. It will also be very real here at home. And so I'd encourage each of us to think about thinking globally, but acting locally to help ameliorate the effects of hunger and food insecurity among those we're closest to. Now we can't capital to the hardest hit places right now, but there'll be people in each of our communities who feel this crisis and disproportionately bad ways. I just want the listeners to know that if they themselves or their families are experiencing food insecurity, I urge them to ask for help. Ask friends and neighbors for help. And if you're not, if listeners are not experiencing food insecurity, I urge them to ask around for people who might need help.

Tessa Desmond:

In my town, for instance, neighbors have been building these little food pantries. They're very much along the model of the little lending libraries. If you Google search little lending libraries, you'll see just what I'm talking about. There are these little cabinets that are placed on posts along sidewalks where folks can leave excess food and other folks can come along and take it. It's a discreet way to help. It's small, but it matters and it will matter for the people who opened the cabinet to take that can of chef Boyardee or tomato soup. And so while the problems will be global there also going to be local and I would just encourage our listeners not to wait but to just figure out a way to help exactly where they are.

Evan Schneider:

You've shared in the past that decisions that we make about food or opportunities to take a stance and think deeply about our values. And you've talked a little bit about that already, but I want to give you an opportunity to talk about how we can better "vote" with our forks at this time and what are some concrete steps that we can take to ensure that our decisions are helping and not hurting other people?

Tessa Desmond:

Yeah, so I think that the most compelling sort of thing that I could encourage people to do right now is to try to grow some of your own food. If you have a favorite fruit or vegetables that you'll be sad to miss during this crisis, try to grow it. Victory Gardens weren't only useful as a wartime effort to stabilize the national food supply. They were tremendously empowering. Growing your own food is food security at its best. And so folks can look to their state extension service for resources or there's a movement which I'm a part of called the cooperative gardens commission. And they could go to the website, [co-opgardens.org](http://co-opgardens.org) to get advice and ideas about growing things. The goal of the Co-ops Garden Movement is to increase community food security during this time with a special focus on vulnerable urban populations. But there's lots of great resources on that website and that website will be growing exponentially in the coming months. And so I would that I think is both a great source of joy and empowerment and also useful.

Evan Schneider:

I know for me sometimes when it comes to choices like this that are ethical decisions, I just go around and around in circles about different things. It's like, well that could good or it also could be bad and it's really hard and you kind of can get stuck in that cycle a little bit. Or at least I can. And one of the things that our family was considering was joining some kind of a food co-op or garden club or something like that where you're able to go pick up food every week from a local farmer. Is that a positive net impact or a negative net impact? For my family to make?

Tessa Desmond:

It's absolutely a positive net impact. I can't think of a negative on it, that's one of the things that's been really encouraging right now is that community supported agriculture. So the community supported agriculture model is to buy into a farm at the beginning of the season and then to share in that farms products throughout the season. So often this is produce, but there's ed co-ops and meat CSA is and all this right? So the CSA model has been essential to growing the local food movement. It's been essential to propping up small farmers for the past several decades. But with food there are fads and trends and just like there are with clothing and CSA is in the last few years have fallen precipitously out of fashion. And this is literally just pulled the rug out from under these small farmers. And small farmers don't have the human resources to retool their whole marketing strategy to find a new customer base.

Tessa Desmond:

And so for instance, here in Pennington, we have one of the longest-running CSA farms in the country. And they had lost in the last several years, they've lost gosh now I want to get the number right, but it's a very large number of CSA shareholders. Right now I don't know a single farmer who can fill the demand. There are so many people who are trying to sign up and it is the most encouraging, it is the most hopeful part of all of this is that I think the people in that first food system, the already secure food system with resources to access food right now those people are accessing local farms and food in their

communities. And I think that the local food system is going to emerge from this crisis on stronger footing than we had any recent memory of. And that's very exciting to me.

Tessa Desmond:

So I think, yes, that's a net positive. You should still grow some of your own just because it will be really fun. And with these things, they're not mutually exclusive actually like growing your own, build your appreciation for the farmers who are growing up for you. And I actually think that there's a great synergy between the two. I don't think that it's a zero sum.

Evan Schneider:

Great. Thank you. You kind of skipped to our last question a little bit there at the end, which is great. It's fine. We want to end on a lighter, brighter, more positive note. And so you said that that was one thing that was bringing you hope was that the way that people are signing up for CSAs. And I just wonder if there's anything else right now that, that you see as a bright spot that you'd like to highlight?

Tessa Desmond:

Yeah, I think that I've been a proponent of a long time for having smaller, more localized food systems and I think that that's happening right now in an accelerated way. And so I'm excited and I'm hopeful for that, not only for the farmers that are working hard to grow food for their communities, but also because people are going to be blown away by the quality of food they get when they buy within their own communities from conscientious, focused small farmers. So I'm thrilled about that. I'm also really encouraged that more people are cooking at home. This has been Mark Bittman's shtick for a long time, Michael Pollan's answer to some of the problems that he's helped to unearth in the food system. Everyone is like, you just need to cook it yourself, and there's these heirloom skills like bread baking and how to make cheese and they've been casualties of a fast, convenient food system.

Tessa Desmond:

But there are also cultural practices and they have to be maintained and passed on, they're like languages, and a loss of two generations, and the skills may be lost forever. Now, the industrial food system would like nothing more than to have us all be relying on them for everything, from bread baking and tortilla making to cheese grading, but our culinary independence is a blow to the food system. And so I make a lot of things from scratch already, but even I discovered places where I'm unnecessarily reliant on industrialized food. For instance, now I know that I can make my own cream cheese, and tomorrow I'm making my first batch of mozzarella. And-

Evan Schneider:

Oh, can I come join you? That sounds amazing.

Tessa Desmond:

Yeah. Mozzarella cheese is really hard to get-

Evan Schneider:

It is.

Tessa Desmond:

For me right now, and we have a Friday night pizza night for our family. And I've settled on the best sandwich bread recipe that I enjoying making. And so I think that's so encouraging and food and sharing food around the table can be the place where the magic of family, the magic of relationships, the magic of community happens. And so I don't think it's a bad thing at all right now that more people are cooking at home, although I do think that the dishes are a little overwhelming.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah. Well, my wife and I have a really great agreement, I spend the time to cook and then she's on cleanup duty and we're both very happy with that arrangement.

Tessa Desmond:

That's very nice, yes.

Evan Schneider:

I really like to do things from scratch as well. I was actually just saying the other day that I needed to order some dry soybeans because I want to make a batch of tofu. Yeah, I really have been so surprised. We actually had a conversation the other day, when was the last time we ate, not at our house? And it was like over a month ago. And I don't miss no offense to restaurants out there, I just don't miss it, like I really love cooking. I love being able to cook at lunch especially, and not have to rush. Today I cooked like a Chinese style rice porridge with Vietnamese flour flavors in it. So it was really good and it was just from things we had laying around the house, you know.

Tessa Desmond:

That sounds amazing. And I think like that kind of creativity, like these were just laying around the house, I would have never cooked this before and like, these are the things that we need to just celebrate and savor because it's what we have.

Evan Schneider:

Well, and even for people who aren't that confident in the kitchen, it doesn't take very much experimentation to really recognize like, Oh, that's not that hard to make a tomato sauce from scratch, like you just open a can of tomatoes and then add a few things and reduce them a little bit. And so, once you kind of get that first taste of doing that, I feel like people will be more apt in the future to experiment a little bit more, even when they do have the option of going out to eat.

Tessa Desmond:

And I shared with you that I've had this concussion and so that I've been on leave from work and things and my project was to cook new recipes in part because I couldn't be on screens and I wasn't reading, I had a lot of time on my hands. But the fact is that it can be a little hard to cook a new recipe for the first time, but the second time and the third time, like they just get easier and easier. And so like this bread recipe that I found, as more involved than I'm used to making, but I've now made it two or three times and I literally made it this morning without even looking at it, and I was able to multitask and help my youngest with his math while the bread dough was needing in my mixer. So I think that folks like the onboarding can be overwhelming with cooking, but then once you've cooked a recipe for the first time, like the second time is easier, the third time is easier, and by the fourth time you can almost do it without thinking. And so you have time.

Evan Schneider:

Well, Tessa, thank you so much for coming on and joining us today and sharing your expertise. This is a really ... At times, I already said this, but some hard things to hear, but really, really important, and I really appreciate your time

Tessa Desmond:

Yeah, I appreciate the chance to be able to talk about these things, I look forward to continuing the conversation. Thanks for having me Evan.