

MICROFARMING: *New Life for Old Trend*

The farm population may no longer be counted by the Census Bureau, but a sector of leading-edge baby boomers, concerned about food safety, is developing into a new crop of agrarians.

Microfarmers will become a significant part of the total farming market sector within 20 years. These boutique farmers — who share similar psychographic characteristics with those in the voluntary-simplicity (Winter Issue, page 7) and health-fitness-and-nutrition trend sectors — will reach 12 to 18 percent of the agrimarket by 2015, according to Institute trend estimates, even though microfarming today accounts for barely 1 percent.

Microfarms will challenge the food

giants, just as microbreweries are confronting the brewery mammoths, by developing upper-end niches based on taste and character in food production, rather than volume, good looks and slick advertising.

WORTH THE PRICE

Consumers in these niches are already paying a premium for foods of distinction and quality that are guaranteed unaltered and fresh — especially as food scares and genetic engineering heighten their health awareness. (See also “Clean’ Food Trend,” below.)

While supermarkets will still carry mass-produced, agribusiness products, the specialty market for wholesome and natural food products will penetrate an estimated 19 to 25 per-

cent of the population in different degrees by the early 2000’s.

The majority of microfarmers will offer such staple items as organic poultry, fish, meats, produce and dairy products. Others will cultivate “heirloom vegetables,” which are grown from seeds that have been passed down through generations.

In cities and suburbs these foods will be sold at greengrocers, which are sprouting up across the nation, and seasonally at farmers markets, which will grow in popularity.

In exurbs they’ll be sold seasonally at roadstands, locally owned fruit and vegetable markets, and at restaurants built on or adjacent to farmgrounds — similar to brew pubs attached to microbreweries.

‘Clean’ Food Trend

The biggest growth market in microfarming will be for foods that are certifiably “clean.”

Clean is more than organic. It’s a new standard of health and reliability.

It means foods that are free of artificial preservatives, coloring, irradiation, synthetic pesticides, drug residues and genetic engineering. It also means foods that are processed, packaged, transported and stored to retain maximum nutritional value.

Clean chicken, for instance, is certified as free-range, and as having been fed organic foods, sheltered in sanitary conditions and brought to market under the strictest controls.

Such foods will be the microfarmers’ marketing ace, gaining strength in the growing mainstream concern that many mass-produced foods aren’t safe to eat anymore. Indeed, a concern about the safety of the nation’s food-production and -inspection system is behind the drive for clean foods.

More than 20,000 drugs are used in the production of meats, and many haven’t been conclusively tested for harmful effects. Some 6.5 million people become ill each year, and 9,100 die, from acute food poi-

soning, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

NUCLEAR PROCESSING

To kill harmful bacteria, the Agriculture Department wants to irradiate beef and other red meat — a symptom-relief measure that doesn’t improve the health of the animals or the cleanliness of the packing houses. The Food and Drug Administration approved irradiation of poultry in 1990.

WORKAHOLIC COWS

Even milk is losing its wholesome image. The FDA permits dairy cows to be injected with Monsanto’s genetically engineered bovine-growth hormone somatotropin, or B.S.T., which increases a cow’s milk production by more than 20 percent.

The FDA says milk produced with the drug “shows no significant difference” from milk that is not. But the overproducing, hormone-injected cows will increasingly be treated with higher doses of antibiotics to prevent udder and teat infection from the unnaturally high milk output. The residues from these antibiotics can remain in the food chain, and raise the specter of increasing human resistance to

antibiotics. Antibiotic resistance is a real threat to human health.

Clean foods will become one of the important elements of good health and nutrition among Americans who engage in camping, hiking, outdoor activities, aerobics and generally healthy mind-body life styles. The trend is finding strongest acceptance among “previewing” baby boomers.

Previewing boomers, on the leading edge of the generation, are getting an advance screening of their own mortality in the death and illness of their mothers, fathers, aunts and uncles. They want to stay healthy, and see smart nutrition as vital to good health and to aging more gracefully than their parents.

The trend will gain a broader following as continuing exposés highlight unsanitary meat processing, pesticide-laden food imports and increasingly contaminated fish.

Note: *Organically grown fruits and vegetables have been found in a scientific study to have up to four times more nutritional trace elements and fewer toxic trace elements than foods grown using synthetic pesticides.*