**The Origins of Our Food**

**Class activity for Chapter 1**

***Food, Farms and Community***

**Material Requirements: Large pieces of paper**

**Time Requirement: 30-45 minutes**

Every piece of food we eat starts somewhere. Sometimes that starting point is clear and close-at-hand, as when we pick a blueberry from the bush at the edge of a nearby forest. At other times though, the starting point of food is more obscure. Take the bagel you ate for breakfast, or the candy bar that served as a mid-afternoon snack. These foods contain several ingredients, perhaps even hundreds, and each ingredient has its own unique origin story. Some of these ingredients are whole foods themselves, but others may be the product of complex chemical reactions undertaken in an industrial-scale laboratory. The goal of this exercise is to help students develop an appreciation for the complexity and scale of modern food systems.

For this exercise, break students in your class into small groups of three to five and invite them to explore the origins of a food they’ve eaten recently. Although a piece of notebook paper will be adequate if they choose something fairly simple, like a whole fruit, vegetable or meat, if students choose a processed food like bread, a bagel or something like pizza with multiple ingredients, it may be useful to provide larger sheets of paper. Have students first name their food and its ingredients (if it has any), then invite them to probe their origins. For complex foods, access to the internet can help elucidate a realistic list of ingredients. While exploring the origins of various ingredients, encourage students to acknowledge any product development, transportation, industrial processing and packaging needed to turn the ingredients into their final form. For relatively whole foods, students should be encouraged to explore the many inputs required by agricultural systems to produce the whole foods, including things like fertilizers, pesticides, machinery and labor. You can allot as much time as you like for this activity, although beyond about 45 minutes students typically begin losing interest.

Paper is useful for this exercise because many students benefit from an opportunity to study their food visually, by drawing a tree diagram wherein the tips of branches represent the origins of each ingredient and the base of the trunk represents the final food as it is consumed. It is unlikely that students’ diagrams will be perfect; learning the origins of the many ingredients commonly seen in modern processed foods (if that is what students choose, and it often is) requires knowledge of chemistry and industrial processing. Students should be encouraged to do their best.