

COMMENTARY

# Celebrate food and end hunger

It had been a long day with lines of hungry people, computer problems and spilled food. Last in line was a man who looked to be in his mid-forties. As the food pantry staff and volunteers boxed his food, he looked at the jar of peanut butter and then picked it up, opened the top and began scooping out the peanut butter with his index finger. "I haven't eaten in days," he said apologetically.

Hunger is everywhere in America today. In this congressional district there are approximately 29,000 people who rely on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or food stamps, to feed themselves and their families. There is hunger in every single county in the U.S.; urban, rural and suburban. Over 49 million Americans — one in five children — are food insecure, which means they lack sufficient food to lead productive lives. Hungry children do not learn well, face higher rates of disciplinary issues and have lower graduation rates — leading to lower incomes, greater poverty and higher incarceration rates.

Hunger is a huge problem for seniors, as well: 15.3 percent of those over the age of 60, many of whom have worked their entire lives, are food insecure. It should be unacceptable for the elderly to have

to decide between paying for their prescriptions or for their food. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates the annual cost of hunger to our economy at almost \$190 billion. And that doesn't begin to take into account the personal and human cost for millions of people — many of whom work full time.

Food pantries work hard to maintain the dignity of their clients and are laboring heroically to make a difference at a time of great need. But the truth is we can't "food bank" our way out of this: Food banks and charities are raising more money than at any time in our nation's history, yet hunger is at an all-time high. Why? Because all that generosity is being undermined by imprudent and short-sighted policy. Congress just cut \$8.8 billion from the food stamp program. Even the most prolific fundraisers can't begin to make that up.

As people who love food — its freshness, its quality, its origins — we're used to voting with our wallets to influence the marketplace. It's time we start using our voices and our ballots.

If you make it your business to know

where your food comes from and how it is produced, then it is important to learn how your representatives are voting on issues that directly impact our food supply and hungry Americans. One group working on transparency in the food system is Food Policy Action that scores legislators on food and hunger issues. Get the word out.

If elected officials are held accountable for the way they vote on food and hunger, they will act accordingly. But if the people who care most deeply about food detach themselves from the conversation then we lose a giant opportunity to make real, lasting change.

This week's Aspen Food & Wine Classic represents the apex of the American food experience, and it's one that all of us look forward to all year. It's a chance to reconnect with friends and fellow food-lovers, taste innovative food, drink well and enjoy the spectacular setting. This year it is more exciting than usual because there is something new in the air — a dawning awareness on the part of fellow foodies that we can enjoy food and have a lasting impact on the policies that determine how food is

grown and distributed.

Food culture and food policy are not separate domains. One can both celebrate the perfect cheese and ask pointed questions about what our elected officials are doing to guarantee the health of our food system and make sure everyone has access to real, nourishing food. In fact, they are inextricably linked.

What can you do to be part of this growing movement? While you're here, find time to learn more about the groups that are working to keep our food supply safe, to keep the soil alive and to end hunger. Talk to the folks at Wholesome Wave. Grab Tom and ask about Food Policy Action. Live in Colorado? Contact Hunger Free Colorado. Host a screening of "A Place at the Table" in your community. Get in touch with your elected officials and ask what they are doing — right now — to end hunger. Offer your expertise, whatever it is, on a pro-bono basis to the organizations that are doing this important work. Enjoy the fabulous food and wine at the Classic — and do your part to fix the system.

*Tom Colicchio is a chef and food activist. Amy Wood is a trustee of The Marcus Foundation.*

**Tom Colicchio and Amy Wood**  
Guest Column



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