



## I • CALLED HOME

This story about good food begins in a quick-stop convenience market. It was our family's last day in Arizona, where I'd lived half my life and raised two kids for the whole of theirs. Now we were moving away forever, taking our nostalgic inventory of the things we would never see again: the bush where the roadrunner built a nest and fed lizards to her weird-looking babies; the tree Camille crashed into learning to ride a bike; the exact spot where Lily touched a dead snake. Our driveway was just the first tributary on a memory river sweeping us out.

One person's picture postcard is someone else's normal. This was the landscape whose every face we knew: giant saguaro cacti, coyotes, mountains, the wicked sun reflecting off bare gravel. We were leaving it now in one of its uglier moments, which made good-bye easier, but also seemed like a cheap shot—like ending a romance right when your partner has really bad bed hair. The desert that day looked like a nasty case of prickly heat caught in a long, naked wince.

This was the end of May. Our rainfall since Thanksgiving had measured less than *one inch*. The cacti, denizens of deprivation, looked ready to pull up roots and hitch a ride out if they could. The prickly pears waved good-bye with puckered, grayish pads. The tall, dehydrated saguaros stood around all teetery and sucked-in like very prickly supermodels. Even in the best of times desert creatures live on the edge of survival, getting by mostly on vapor and their own life savings. Now, as the southern

tier of U.S. states came into a third consecutive year of drought, people elsewhere debated how seriously they should take global warming. We were staring it in the face.

Away went our little family, like rats leaping off the burning ship. It hurt to think about everything at once: our friends, our desert, old home, new home. We felt giddy and tragic as we pulled up at a little gas-and-go market on the outside edge of Tucson. Before we set off to seek our fortunes we had to gas up, of course, and buy snacks for the road. We did have a cooler in the back seat packed with respectable lunch fare. But we had more than two thousand miles to go. Before we crossed a few state lines we'd need to give our car a salt treatment and indulge in some things that go crunch.

This was the trip of our lives. We were ending our existence outside the city limits of Tucson, Arizona, to begin a rural one in southern Appalachia. We'd sold our house and stuffed the car with the most crucial things: birth certificates, books-on-tape, and a dog on drugs. (Just for the trip, I swear.) All other stuff would come in the moving van. For better or worse, we would soon be living on a farm.

For twenty years Steven had owned a piece of land in the southern Appalachians with a farmhouse, barn, orchards and fields, and a tax zoning known as "farm use." He was living there when I met him, teaching college and fixing up his old house one salvaged window at a time. I'd come as a visiting writer, recently divorced, with something of a fixer-upper life. We proceeded to wreck our agendas in the predictable fashion by falling in love. My young daughter and I were attached to our community in Tucson; Steven was just as attached to his own green pastures and the bird-song chorus of deciduous eastern woodlands. My father-in-law to be, upon hearing the exciting news about us, asked Steven, "Couldn't you find one closer?"

Apparently not. We held on to the farm by renting the farmhouse to another family, and maintained marital happiness by migrating like birds: for the school year we lived in Tucson, but every summer headed back to our rich foraging grounds, the farm. For three months a year we lived in a tiny, extremely crooked log cabin in the woods behind the farmhouse, listening to wood thrushes, growing our own food. The girls (for another

child came along shortly) loved playing in the creek, catching turtles, experiencing real mud. I liked working the land, and increasingly came to think of this place as my home too. When all of us were ready, we decided, we'd go there for keeps.

We had many conventional reasons for relocation, including extended family. My Kingsolver ancestors came from that county in Virginia. I'd grown up only a few hours away, over the Kentucky line. Returning now would allow my kids more than just a hit-and-run, holiday acquaintance with grandparents and cousins. In my adult life I'd hardly shared a phone book with anyone else using my last name. Now I could spend Memorial Day decorating my ancestors' graves with peonies from my backyard. Tucson had opened my eyes to the world and given me a writing career. I'd had a taste for the sensory extravagance of red hot chiles and five-alarm sunsets. But after twenty-five years in the desert, I'd been called home.

There is another reason the move felt right to us, and it's the purview of this book. We wanted to live in a place that could feed us: where rain falls, crops grow, and drinking water bubbles right up out of the ground. This might seem an abstract reason for leaving beloved friends and one of the most idyllic destination cities in the United States. But it was real to us. As it closes in on the million-souls mark, Tucson's charms have made it one of this country's fastest-growing cities. It keeps its people serviced across the wide, wide spectrum of daily human wants, with its banks, shops, symphonies, colleges, art galleries, city parks, and more golf courses than you can shake a stick at. By all accounts it's a bountiful source of everything on the human-need checklist, save for just the one thing—the stuff we put in our mouths every few hours to keep us alive. Like many other modern U.S. cities, it might as well be a space station where human sustenance is concerned. Virtually every unit of food consumed there moves into town in a refrigerated module from somewhere far away. Every ounce of the city's drinking, washing, and goldfish-bowl-filling water is pumped from a nonrenewable source—a fossil aquifer that is dropping so fast, sometimes the ground crumbles. In a more recent development, some city water now arrives via a three-hundred-mile-long open canal across the desert from the Colorado River, which—owing to our thirsts—

is a river that no longer reaches the ocean, but peters out in a sand flat near the Mexican border.

If it crosses your mind that water running through hundreds of miles of open ditch in a desert will evaporate and end up full of concentrated salts and muck, then let me just tell you, that kind of negative thinking will never get you elected to public office in the state of Arizona. When this giant new tap turned on, developers drew up plans to roll pink succo subdivisions across the desert in all directions. The rest of us were supposed to rejoice as the new flow rushed into our pipes, even as the city warned us this water was kind of special. They said it was okay to drink, but don't put it in an aquarium because it would *kill the fish*.

Drink it we did, then, filled our coffee makers too, and mixed our children's juice concentrate with fluid that would gag a guppy. Oh, America the Beautiful, where are our standards? How did Europeans, ancestral cultures to most of us, whose average crowded country would fit inside one of our national parks, somehow hoard the market share of Beautiful? They'll run over a McDonald's with a bulldozer because it threatens the way of life of their fine cheeses. They have international trade hissy fits when we try to slip modified genes into their bread. They get their favorite ham from Parma, Italy, along with a favorite cheese, knowing these foods are linked in an ancient connection the farmers have crafted between the milk and the hogs. Oh. We were thinking *Parmesan* meant, not "coming from Parma," but "coming from a green shaker can." Did they kick us out for bad taste?

No, it was mostly for vagrancy, poverty, or being too religious. We came here for the freedom to make a *Leaves of Grass* kind of culture and hear America singing to a good beat, pierce our navels as needed, and eat whatever we want without some drudge scolding: "You don't know where that's been!" And boy howdy, we do not.

The average food item on a U.S. grocery shelf has traveled farther than most families go on their annual vacations. True fact. Fossil fuels were consumed for the food's transport, refrigeration, and processing, with the obvious environmental consequences. The option of getting our household's food from closer to home, in Tucson, seemed no better to us. The Sonoran desert historically offered to humans baked dirt as a construc-

tion material, and for eats, a corn-and-beans diet organized around late summer monsoons, garnished in spring with cactus fruits and wild tubers. The Hohokam and Pima were the last people to live on that land without creating an environmental overdraft. When the Spaniards arrived, they didn't rush to take up the Hohokam diet craze. Instead they set about working up a monumental debt: planting orange trees and alfalfa, digging wells for irrigation, withdrawing millions more gallons from the water table each year than a dozen inches of annual rainfall could ever restore. Arizona is still an agricultural state. Even after the popula-

Only Food

Americans put almost as much fossil fuel into our refrigerators as our cars. We're consuming about 400 gallons of oil a year per citizen—about 17 percent of our nation's energy use—for agriculture, a close second to our vehicular use. Tractors, combines, harvesters, irrigation, sprayers, tillers, balers, and other equipment all use petroleum. Even bigger gas guzzlers on the farm are not the machines, but so-called inputs: Synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides use oil and natural gas as their starting materials, and in their manufacturing. More than a quarter of all farming energy goes into synthetic fertilizers.

But getting the crop from seed to harvest takes only one-fifth of the total oil used for our food. The lion's share is consumed during the trip from the farm to your plate. Each food item in a typical U.S. meal has traveled an average of 1,500 miles. In addition to direct transport, other fuel-thirsty steps include processing (drying, milling, cutting, sorting, baking), packaging, warehousing, and refrigeration. Energy calories consumed by production, packaging, and shipping far outweigh the energy calories we receive from the food.

A quick way to improve food-related fuel economy would be to buy a quart of motor oil and drink it. More palatable options are available. If every U.S. citizen ate just one meal a week (any meal) composed of locally and organically raised meats and produce, we would reduce our country's oil consumption by over 1.1 million barrels of oil every week. That's not gallons, but barrels. Small changes in buying habits can make big differences. Becoming a less energy-dependent nation may just need to start with a good breakfast.

tion boom of the mid-nineties, 85 percent of the state's water still went to thirsty crops like cotton, alfalfa, citrus, and pecan trees. Mild winters offer the opportunity to create an artificial endless summer, as long as we can conjure up water and sustain a chemically induced illusion of top-soil.

Living in Arizona on borrowed water made me nervous. We belonged to a far-flung little community of erstwhile Tucson homesteaders, raising chickens in our yards and patches of vegetables for our own use, frequenting farmers' markets to buy from Arizona farmers, trying to reduce the miles-per-gallon quotient of our diets in a gasoholic world. But these gardens of ours had a drinking problem. So did Arizona farms. That's a devil of a choice: Rob Mexico's water or guzzle Saudi Arabia's gas?

Traditionally, employment and family dictate choices about where to live. It's also legitimate to consider weather, schools, and other quality-of-life indices. We added one more wish to our list: more than one out of three of the basic elements necessary for human life. (*Oxygen* Arizona has got.) If we'd had family ties, maybe we'd have felt more entitled to claim a seat at Tucson's lean dining table. But I moved there as a young adult, then added through birth and marriage three more mouths to feed. As a guest, I'd probably overstayed my welcome. So, as the U.S. population made an unprecedented dash for the Sun Belt, one carload of us dog-paddled against the tide, heading for the Promised Land where water falls from the sky and green stuff grows all around. We were about to begin the adventure of realigning our lives with our food chain.

Naturally, our first stop was to buy junk food and fossil fuel.

In the cinder-block convenience mart we foraged the aisles for blue corn chips and Craisins. Our family's natural-foods teenager scooped up a pile of energy bars big enough to pass as a retirement plan for a hamster. Our family's congenitally frugal Mom shelled out two bucks for a fancy green bottle of about a nickel's worth of iced tea. As long as we were all going crazy here, we threw in some 99-cent bottles of what comes free out of drinking fountains in places like Perrier, France. In our present location, 99 cents for good water seemed like a bargain. The goldfish should be so lucky.

As we gathered our loot onto the counter the sky darkened suddenly. After two hundred consecutive cloudless days, you forget what it looks like when a cloud crosses the sun. We all blinked. The cashier frowned toward the plate-glass window.

"*Dang*," she said, "it's going to rain."

"I hope so," Steven said. She turned her scowl from the window to Steven. This bleached-blond guardian of gas pumps and snack food was not amused. "It better not, is all I can say."

"But we need it," I pointed out. I am not one to argue with cashiers, but the desert was dying, and this was my very last minute as a Tucsonan. I hated to jinx it with bad precipitation-karma.

"I know that's what they're saying, but I don't care. Tomorrow's my first day off in two weeks, and I want to wash my car."

For three hundred miles we drove that day through desperately parched Sonoran badlands, chewing our salty cashews with a peculiar guilt. We had all shared this wish, in some way or another: that it wouldn't rain on our day off. Thunderheads dissolved ahead of us, as if honoring our compatriot's desire to wash her car as the final benediction pronounced on a dying land. In our desert, we would not see rain again.

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It took us five days to reach the farm. On our first full day there we spent ten hours mowing, clearing brush, and working on the farmhouse. Too tired to cook, we headed into town for supper, opting for a diner of the southern type that puts grits on your plate until noon and biscuits after, whether you ask for them or not. Our waitress was young and chatty; a student at the junior college nearby studying to be a nurse or else, if she doesn't pass the chemistry, a television broadcaster. She said she was looking forward to the weekend, but smiled broadly nevertheless at the clouds gathering over the hills outside. The wooded mountainsides and velvet pastures of southwestern Virginia looked remarkably green to our desert-scorched eyes, but the forests and fields were suffering here too. Drought had plagued most of the southern United States that spring.

A good crack of thunder boomed, and the rain let loose just as the waitress came back to clear our plates. "Listen at that," she clucked. "Don't we need it!"

We do, we agreed. The hayfields aren't half what they should be.

"Let's hope it's a good long one," she said, pausing with our plates balanced on her arm, continuing to watch out the window for a good long minute. "And that it's not so hard that it washes everything out."

It is not my intention here to lionize country wisdom over city ambition. I only submit that the children of farmers are likely to know where food comes from, and that the rest of us might do well to pay attention. For our family, something turned over that evening in the diner: a gas-pump cashier's curse of drought was lifted by a waitress's simple, agricultural craving for rain. I thought to myself: There is hope for us.

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Who is *us*, exactly? I live now in a county whose economic base is farming. A disastrous summer will mean some of our neighbors will lose their farms. Others will have to keep farming *and* go looking for a job at the end of a long commute. We'll feel the effects in school enrollments, local businesses, shifts in land use and tax structure. The health of our streams, soils, and forests is also at stake, as lost farms get sold to developers whose business is to rearrange (drastically) the topsoil and everything on it. When I recognize good agricultural sense, though, I'm not just thinking of my town but also my species. It's not a trivial difference: praying for or against rainfall during a drought. You can argue that wishes don't count, but humans are good at making our dreams manifest and we do, historically speaking, get what we wish for. What are the just deserts for a species too selfish or preoccupied to hope for rain when the land outside is drying? Should we be buried under the topsoil in our own clean cars, to make room for wiser creatures?

We'd surely do better, if only we *knew* any better. In two generations we've transformed ourselves from a rural to an urban nation. North American children begin their school year around Labor Day and finish at the beginning of June with no idea that this arrangement was devised to free up children's labor when it was needed on the farm. Most people of my

grandparents' generation had an intuitive sense of agricultural basics: when various fruits and vegetables come into season, which ones keep through the winter, how to preserve the others. On what day autumn's first frost will likely fall on their county, and when to expect the last one in spring. Which crops can be planted before the last frost, and which must wait. Which grains are autumn-planted. What an asparagus patch looks like in August. Most importantly: what animals and vegetables thrive in one's immediate region and how to live well on those, with little else thrown into the mix beyond a bag of flour, a pinch of salt, and a handful of coffee. Few people of my generation, and approximately none of our children, could answer any of those questions, let alone all. This knowledge has vanished from our culture.

We also have largely convinced ourselves it wasn't too important. Consider how Americans might respond to a proposal that agriculture was to become a mandatory subject in all schools, alongside reading and mathematics. A fair number of parents would get hot under the collar to see their kids' attention being pulled away from the essentials of grammar, the all-important trigonometry, to make room for down-on-the-farm stuff. The baby boom psyche embraces a powerful presumption that education is a key to moving *away* from manual labor, and dirt—two undeniable ingredients of farming. It's good enough for us that somebody, somewhere, knows food production well enough to serve the rest of us with all we need to eat, each day of our lives.

If that is true, why isn't it good enough for someone else to know multiplication and the contents of the Bill of Rights? Is the story of bread, from tilled ground to our table, less relevant to our lives than the history of the thirteen colonies? Couldn't one make a case for the relevance of a subject that informs choices we make *daily*—as in, What's for dinner? Isn't ignorance of our food sources causing problems as diverse as overdependence on petroleum, and an epidemic of diet-related diseases?

If this book is not exactly an argument for reinstating food-production classes in schools (and it might be), it does contain a lot of what you might learn there. From our family's gas-station beginnings we have traveled far enough to discover ways of taking charge of one's food, and even knowing where it has been. This is the story of a year in which we made

every attempt to feed ourselves animals and vegetables whose provenance we really knew. We tried to wring most of the petroleum out of our food chain, even if that meant giving up some things. Our highest shopping goal was to get our food from so close to home, we'd know the person who grew it. Often that turned out to be us, as we learned to produce more of what we needed, starting with dirt, seeds, and enough knowledge to muddle through. Or starting with baby animals and enough sense to refrain from naming them.

This is not a how-to book aimed at getting you cranking out your own food. We ourselves live in a region where every other house has a garden out back, but to many urban people the idea of growing your food must seem as plausible as writing and conducting your own symphonies for your personal listening pleasure. If that is your case, think of the agricultural parts of the story as a music appreciation course for food—acquainting yourself with the composers and conductors can improve the quality of your experience. Knowing the secret natural history of potatoes, melons, or asparagus gives you a leg up on detecting whether those in your market are wholesome kids from a nearby farm, or vagrants who idled away their precious youth in a boxcar. Knowing how foods grow is to know how and when to look for them; such expertise is useful for certain kinds of people, namely, the ones who eat, no matter where they live or grocery shop.

Absence of that knowledge has rendered us a nation of wary label-readers, oddly uneasy in our obligate relationship with the things we eat. We call our food animals by different names after they're dead, presumably sparing ourselves any vision of the beefs and the porks running around on actual hooves. Our words for unhealthy contamination—"soiled" or "dirty"—suggest that if we really knew the number-one ingredient of a garden, we'd all head straight into therapy. I used to take my children's friends out to the garden to warm them up to the idea of eating vegetables, but this strategy sometimes backfired: they'd back away slowly saying, "Oh man, those things touched dirt!" Adults do the same by pretending it all comes from the clean, well-lit grocery store. We're like petulant teenagers rejecting our mother. We *know* we came out of her, but *ee-ew*.

We don't know beans about beans. Asparagus, potatoes, turkey drumsticks—you name it, we don't have a clue how the world makes it. I usually think I'm exaggerating the scope of the problem, and then I'll encounter an editor (at a well-known nature magazine) who's mixing the part counter an editor (at a well-known nature magazine) who's mixing the part of my story that refers to pineapples growing from the ground. She insisted they grew on trees. Or, I'll have a conversation like this one:

"What's new on the farm?" asks my friend, a lifelong city dweller who likes for me to keep her posted by phone. She's a gourmet cook, she cares about the world, and has been around a lot longer than I have. This particular conversation was in early spring, so I told her what was up in the garden: peas, potatoes, spinach.

"Wait a minute," she said. "When you say, 'The potatoes are up,' what do you mean?" She paused, formulating her question: "What part of a potato comes up?"

"Um, the plant part," I said. "The stems and leaves."

"Wow," she said. "I never knew a potato *had* a plant part."

Many bright people are really in the dark about vegetable life. Biology teachers face kids in classrooms who may not even believe in the metaphors of bud to flower to fruit and seed, but rather, some continuum of pansies becoming petunias becoming chrysanthemums; that's the only reality they witness as landscapers come to campuses and city parks and surreptitiously yank out one flower before it fades from its prime, replacing it with another. (My biology-professor brother pointed this out to me.) The same disconnection from natural processes may be at the heart of our country's shift away from believing in evolution. In the past, principles of natural selection and change over time made sense to kids who'd watched it all unfold. Whether or not they knew the terms, farm families understood the processes well enough to imitate them: culling, selecting, and improving their herds and crops. For modern kids who intuitively believe in the spontaneous generation of fruits and vegetables in the produce section, trying to get their minds around the slow speciation of the plant kingdom may be a stretch.

Steven, also a biology professor, grew up in the corn belt of Iowa but has encountered his share of agricultural agnostics in the world. As a graduate student he lived in an urban neighborhood where his little back-

yard vegetable garden was a howling curiosity for the boys who ran wild in the alley. He befriended these kids, especially Malcolm, known throughout the neighborhood as "Malcolm-get-your-backside-in-here-now-or-you-won't-be-having-no-dinner!" Malcolm liked hanging around when Steven was working in the garden, but predictably enough, had a love-hate thing with the idea of the vegetables touching the dirt. The first time he watched Steven pull long, orange carrots out of the ground, he demanded: "How'd you get them *in* there?"

Steven held forth with condensed Intro Botany. Starts with a seed, grows into a plant. Water, sunlight, leaves, roots. "A carrot," Steven concluded, "is actually a root."

"Uh-huh . . .," said Malcolm doubtfully.

A crowd had gathered now. Steven engaged his audience by asking, "Can you guys think of other foods that might be root vegetables?"

Malcolm checked with his pals, using a lifeline before confidently submitting his final answer: "Spaghetti?"

We can't know what we haven't been taught. Steven couldn't recognize tobacco *in vivo* before moving in his twenties to southwestern Virginia, where the tobacco leaf might as well be the state flag. One Saturday morning soon after he'd moved, he was standing on a farmer's porch at a country yard sale when a field of giant, pale leaves and tall pink flower spikes caught his eye. He asked the farmer the name of this gorgeous plant. The man grinned hugely and asked, "You're not *from* here, are you, son?"

That farmer is probably still telling this story; Steven is his Malcolm. Every one of us is somebody's Malcolm. Country folks can be as food-chain-challenged as the city mice, in our own ways. Rural southern cooking is famous for processed-ingredient recipes like Coca-Cola cake, and plenty of rural kids harbor a potent dread of compost and earthworms. What we all don't know about farming could keep the farmers laughing until the cows come home. Except that they are barely making a living, while the rest of us play make-believe about the important part being the grocery store.

When we walked as a nation away from the land, our knowledge of food production fell away from us like dirt in a laundry-soap commercial.

Now, it's fair to say, the majority of us don't want to be farmers, see farmers, pay farmers, or hear their complaints. Except as straw-chewing figures in children's books, we don't quite believe in them anymore. When we give it a thought, we mostly consider the food industry to be a *thing* rather than a person. We obligingly give 85 cents of our every food dollar to that thing, too—the processors, marketers, and transporters. And we complain about the high price of organic meats and vegetables that might send back more than three nickels per buck to the farmers: those actual humans putting seeds in the ground, harvesting, attending livestock births, standing in the fields at dawn casting their shadows upon our sustenance. There seems to be some reason we don't want to compensate or think about these hardworking people. In the grocery store checkout corral, we're more likely to learn which TV stars are secretly fornicating than to inquire as to the whereabouts of the people who grew the cucumbers and melons in our carts.

This drift away from our agricultural roots is a natural consequence of migration from the land to the factory, which is as old as the Industrial Revolution. But we got ourselves uprooted entirely by a drastic reconfiguration of U.S. farming, beginning just after World War II. Our munitions ration of U.S. farming, beginning just after World War II. Our munitions plants, challenged to beat their swords into plowshares, retooled to make ammonium nitrate surpluses into chemical fertilizers instead of explosives. The next explosions were yields on midwestern corn and soybean fields. It seemed like a good thing, but some officials saw these new surpluses as reason to dismantle New Deal policies that had helped farmers weather the economic uncertainties notorious to their vocation. Over the next decades, nudged by industry, the government rewrote the rules on commodity subsidies so these funds did not safeguard farmers, but instead guaranteed a supply of cheap corn and soybeans.

These two crops, formerly food for people and animals, became something entirely new: a standardized raw material for a new extractive industry, not so different from logging or mining. Mills and factories were designed for a multibranch production line as complex as the one that turns iron and aluminum ores into the likes of automobiles, paper clips, and antiperspirants. But instead, this new industry made piles of corn and soybeans into high-fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated oils, and thou-

sands of other starch- or oil-based chemicals. Cattle and chickens were brought in off the pasture into intensely crowded and mechanized CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations) where corn—which is no part of a cow's natural diet, by the way—could be turned cheaply and quickly into animal flesh. All these different products, in turn, rolled on down the new industrial food pipeline to be processed into the soft drinks, burgers, and other cheap foods on which our nation now largely runs—or sits on its bottom, as the case may be.

This is how 70 percent of all our midwestern agricultural land shifted gradually into single-crop corn or soybean farms, each one of them now, on average, the size of Manhattan. Owing to synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, genetic modification, and a conversion of farming from a naturally based to a highly mechanized production system, U.S. farmers now produce 3,900 calories per U.S. citizen, per day. That is twice what we need, and 700 calories a day more than they grew in 1980. Commodity farmers can only survive by producing their maximum yields, so they do. And here is the shocking plot twist: as the farmers produced those extra calories, the food industry figured out how to get them into the bodies of people who didn't really *want* to eat 700 more calories a day. That is the well-oiled machine we call Late Capitalism.

Most of those calories enter our mouths in forms hardly recognizable as corn and soybeans, or even vegetable in origin: high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) owns up to its parentage, but lecithin, citric acid, maltodextrin, sorbitol, and xanthan gum, for example, are also manufactured from corn. So are beef, eggs, and poultry, in a different but no less artificial process. Soybeans also become animal flesh, or else a category of ingredient known as "added fats." If every product containing corn or soybeans were removed from your grocery store, it would look more like a hardware store. Alarming, the lightbulbs might be naked, since many packaging materials also now contain cornstarch.

With so many extra calories to deliver, the packages have gotten bigger. The shapely eight-ounce Coke bottle of yesteryear became twenty ounces of carbonated high-fructose corn syrup and water; the accompanying meal morphed similarly. So did the American waistline. U.S. consumption of "added fats" has increased by one-third since 1975, and our

HFCS is up by 1000 percent. About a third of all our calories now come from what is known, by community consent, as junk food.

No cashier held a gun to our heads and made us supersize it, true enough. But humans have a built-in weakness for fats and sugar. We evolved in lean environments where it was a big plus for survival to gorge on calorie-dense foods whenever we found them. Whether or not they understand the biology, food marketers know the weakness and have exploited it without mercy. Obesity is generally viewed as a failure of personal resolve, with no acknowledgment of the genuine conspiracy in this historical scheme. People actually did sit in strategy meetings discussing ways to get all those surplus calories into people who neither needed nor wished to consume them. Children have been targeted especially; food companies spend over \$10 billion a year selling food brands to kids, and it isn't broccoli they're pushing. Overweight children are a demographic in many ways similar to minors addicted to cigarettes, with one notable exception: their parents are usually their suppliers. We all subsidize the cheap calories with our tax dollars, the strategists make fortunes, and the overweight consumers get blamed for the violation. The perfect crime.

All industrialized countries have experienced some commodification of agriculture and increased consumption of processed foods. But nowhere else on earth has it become normal to layer on the love handles as we do. (Nude beaches are still popular in Europe.) Other well-fed populations have had better luck controlling caloric excess through culture and custom: Italians eat Italian food, the Japanese eat Japanese, and so on, honoring ancient synergies between what their land can give and what their bodies need. Strong food cultures are both aesthetic and functional, keeping the quality and quantity of foods consumed relatively consistent from one generation to the next. And so, while the economies of many Western countries expanded massively in the late twentieth century, their citizens did not.

Here in the U.S. we seem puzzled by these people who refrain from gluttony in the presence of a glut. We've even named a thing we call the French Paradox: How can people have such a grand time eating cheese and fattened goose livers and still stay slim? Having logged some years in France, I have some hunches: they don't suck down giant sodas, they



consume many courses in a meal but the portions of the fatty ones tend to be tiny; they smoke like chimneys (though that's changing); and they draw out meals sociably, so it's not just about shoveling it in. The all-you-can-eat buffet is an alien concern to the French, to put it mildly. Owing to certain rules about taste and civility in their heads, their bodies seem to know when enough is enough. When asked, my French friends have confided with varying degrees of fact that the real paradox is how people manage to consume, so very much, the scary food of America.

Why do we? Where are *our* ingrained rules of taste and civility, our ancient treaties between our human cravings and the particular fat of our land? Did they perhaps fly out the window while we were eating in a speeding car?

Food culture in the United States has long been cast as the property of a privileged class. It is nothing of the kind. Culture is the property of a species. Humans don't do everything we crave to do—that is arguably what makes us human. We're genetically predisposed toward certain behaviors that we've collectively decided are unhelpful: adultery and racism are possible examples. With reasonable success, we mitigate those impulses through civil codes, religious rituals, maternal warnings—the whole bag of tricks we call culture. Food cultures concentrate a population's collective wisdom about the plants and animals that grow in a place, and the complex ways of rendering them tasty. These are mores of survival, good health, and control of excess. Living without such a culture would seem dangerous.

And here we are, sure enough in trouble. North America's native cuisine met the same unfortunate fate as its native people, save for a few relics like the Thanksgiving turkey. Certainly, we still have regional specialties, but the Carolina barbecue will almost certainly have California tomatoes in its sauce (maybe also Nebraska-fattened feedlot hogs), and the Louisiana gumbo is just as likely to contain Indonesian farmed shrimp. If either of these shows up on a fast-food menu with lots of added fats or HFCS, we seem unable either to discern or resist the corruption. We have yet to come up with a strong set of generalized norms, passed down through families, for savoring and sensibly consuming what our land and climate give us. We have, instead, a string of fad diets consulting our

bookstores and bellies, one after another, at the scale of the national best-seller. Nine out of ten nutritionists (unofficial survey) view this as evidence that we have entirely lost our marbles. A more optimistic view might be this: these sets of mandates capivate us because we're looking hard for a food culture of our own. A profit-driven food industry has exploded and nutritionally bankrupted our caloric supply, and we long for a Food Leviticus to save us from the sinful roil of cheap fats and carbs.

What the fad diets don't offer, though, is any sense of national and biological integrity. A food culture is not something that gets *sold* to people. It arises out of a place, a soil, a climate, a history, a temperament, a collective sense of belonging. Every set of fad-diet rules is essentially framed in the negative, dictating what you must give up. Together they've helped us form powerfully negative associations with the very act of eating. Our most celebrated models of beauty are starved people. But we're still an animal that must eat to live. To paraphrase a famous campaign slogan: it's the biology, stupid. A food culture of anti-eating is worse than useless.

People hold to their food customs because of the *positives*: comfort, nourishment, heavenly aromas. A sturdy food tradition even calls to outsiders: plenty of red-blooded Americans will happily eat Italian, French, Thai, Chinese, you name it. But try the reverse: hand the Atkins menu to a French person, and run for your life.

Will North Americans ever have a food culture to call our own? Can we find or make up a set of rituals, recipes, ethics, and buying habits that will let us love our food and eat it too? Some signs point to "yes." Better food—more local, more healthy, more sensible—is a powerful new topic of the American conversation. It reaches from the epicurean quarters of Slow Food convivia to the matter-of-fact Surgeon General's Office; from Farm Aid concerts to school lunch programs. From the rural routes to the inner cities, we are staring at our plates and wondering where that's *been*. For the first time since our nation's food was ubiquitously local, the point of origin now matters again to some consumers. We're increasingly wary of an industry that puts stuff in our dinner we can't identify as animal, vegetable, mineral, or what. The halcyon postwar promise of "better living through chemistry" has fallen from grace. "No additives" is now often considered a plus rather than the minus that, technically, it is.

We're a nation with an eating disorder, and we know it. The multiple maladies caused by bad eating are taking a dire toll on our health—most tragically for our kids, who are predicted to be this country's first generation to have a *shorter* life expectancy than their parents. That alone is a stunning enough fact to give us pause. So is a government policy that advises us to eat more fruits and vegetables, while doling out subsidies *not* to fruit and vegetable farmers, but to commodity crops destined to become soda pop and cheap burgers. The Farm Bill, as of this writing, could apply be called the Farm Kill, both for its effects on small farmers and for

### Hungry World

All these heirloom eggplants and artisan cheeses from the farmers' market are great for weekend dinner parties, but don't we still need industrial farming to feed the hungry?

In fact, all the world's farms currently produce enough food to make every person on the globe fat. Even though 800 million people are chronically underfed (6 will die of hunger-related causes while you read this article), it's because they lack money and opportunity, not because food is unavailable in their countries. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports that current food production can sustain world food needs even for the 8 billion people who are projected to inhabit the planet in 2030. This will hold even with anticipated increases in meat consumption, and without adding genetically modified crops.

Is all this the reliable bounty of industrial production? Yes and no—with the "no" being more of a problem in the near future. Industrial farming methods, wherever they are practiced, promote soil erosion, salinization, desertification, and loss of soil fertility. The FAO estimates that over 25 percent of arable land in the world is already compromised by one or more of these problems. The worst-affected areas are those with more arid climates or sloped terrain. Numerous field trials in both the United States and the United Kingdom have shown that organic practices can produce commodity crop yields (corn, soybeans, wheat) comparable to those of industrial farms. By using cover crops or animal manures for fertilizer, these practices improve soil fertility and moisture-holding capacity over seasons, with cumulative benefits. These techniques are particularly advantageous in regions that lack the money and technology for industrial approaches.

what it does to us, the consumers who are financing it. The Green Revolution of the 1970s promised that industrial agriculture would make food cheaper and available to more people. Instead, it has helped more of us become less healthy.

A majority of North Americans do understand, at some level, that our food choices are politically charged, affecting arenas from rural culture to international oil cartels and global climate change. Plenty of consumers are trying to get off the petroleum-driven industrial food wagon: banning fast food from their homes and schools, avoiding the unpronounceable

Conventional methods are definitely producing huge quantities of corn, wheat, and soybeans, but not to feed the poor. Most of it becomes animal feed for meat production, or the ingredients of processed foods for wealthier consumers who are already getting plenty of calories. Food sellers prefer to market more food to people who have money, rather than those who have little. World food trade policies most often favor developed countries at the expense of developing countries; distributors, processors, and shippers reap most of the benefits. Even direct food aid for disasters (a small percentage of all the world's hunger) is most profitable for grain companies and shippers. By law, 75 percent of such aid sent from the United States to other nations must be grown, packaged, and shipped by U.S. companies. This practice, called "tied aid," delays shipments of food by as much as six months, increases the costs of the food by over 50 percent, and directs over two-thirds of the aid money to the distributors.

If efficiency is the issue, resources go furthest when people produce their own food, near to where it is consumed. Many hunger-relief organizations provide assistance not in the form of bags of food, but in programs that teach and provide support technology for locally appropriate, sustainable farming. These programs do more than alleviate hunger for a day and send a paycheck to a multinational. They provide a livelihood to the person in need, addressing the real root of hunger, which is not about food production, but about poverty.

For more information, visit [www.wn.org](http://www.wn.org), [www.journeytoforever.org](http://www.journeytoforever.org), or [www.heifer.org](http://www.heifer.org).

ingredient lists. However, *banning* is negative and therefore fails as a food culture per se.

Something positive is also happening under the surface of our nation's food preference paradigm. It could be called a movement. It includes gardeners who grow some of their own produce—one-quarter of all U.S. households, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Just as importantly, it's the city dwellers who roll their kids out of bed on Saturday mornings and head down to the farmers' markets to pinch the tomatoes and inhale the spicy-sweet melons—New York, alone, has about a quarter million such shoppers. It involves the farmers' markets themselves, along with a new breed of restaurant owner (and customer) dedicated to buying locally produced food. It has been embraced by farmers who manage to keep family farms by thinking outside the box, learning to grow organic peppers or gourmet mushrooms. It engages schoolchildren and teachers who are bringing food-growing curricula into classrooms and lunchrooms from Berkeley, California, to my own county in southern Appalachia. It includes the kids who get dirty in those outdoor classrooms planting tomatoes and peppers at the end of third grade, then harvesting and cooking their own pizza when they start back into fourth. And it owes a debt to parents who can watch those kids getting dirty, and not make a fuss.

At its heart, a genuine food culture is an affinity between people and the land that feeds them. Step one, probably, is to *live* on the land that feeds them, or at least on the same continent, ideally the same region. Step two is to be able to countenance the ideas of "food" and "dirt" in the same sentence, and three is to start poking into one's supply chain to learn where things are coming from. In the spirit of this adventure, our family set out to find ourselves a real American culture of food, or at least the piece of it that worked for us, and to describe it for anyone who might be looking for something similar. This book tells the story of what we learned, or didn't; what we ate, or couldn't; and how our family was changed by one year of deliberately eating food produced in the same place where we worked, loved our neighbors, drank the water, and breathed the air. It's not at all necessary to live on a food-producing farm to participate in this culture. But it is necessary to know such farms exist,

understand something about what they do, and consider oneself basically in their court. This book is about those things.

The story is pegged, as we were, to a one-year cycle of how and when foods become available in a temperate climate. Because food cultures affect everyone living under the same roof, we undertook this project—both the eating and the writing—as a family. Steven's sidebars are, in his words, "fifty-cent buckets of a dollar's worth of goods" on various topics I've mentioned in the narrative. Camille's essays offer a nineteen-year-old's perspective on the local-food project, plus nutritional information, recipes, and meal plans for every season. Lily's contributions were many, including more than fifty dozen eggs and a willingness to swear off Pop-Tarts for the duration, but she was too young to sign a book contract.

Will our single-family decision to step off the nonsustainable food grid give a big black eye to that petroleum-hungry behemoth? Keep reading, but don't hold your breath. We only knew, when we started, that similar choices made by many families at once were already making a difference: organic growers, farmers' markets, and small exurban food producers now comprise the fastest-growing sector of the U.S. food economy. A lot of people at once are waking up to a troublesome truth about cheap fossil fuels: we are going to run out of them. Our jet-age dependence on petroleum to feed our faces is a limited-time-only proposition. Every food calorie we presently eat has used dozens or even hundreds of fossil-fuel calories in its making: grain milling, for example, which turns corn into the ingredients of packaged foods, costs ten calories for every one food calorie produced. That's *before* it gets shipped anywhere. By the time my children are my age, that version of dinner-time will surely be an unthinkable extravagance.

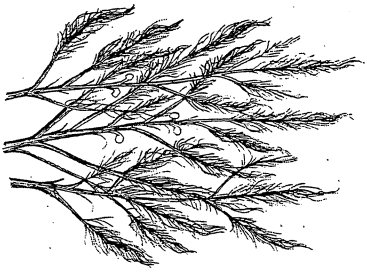
I enjoy denial as much as the next person, but this isn't rocket science: our kids will eventually have to make food differently. They could be assisted by some familiarity with how vegetables grow from seeds, how animals grow on pasture, and how whole ingredients can be made into meals, gee whiz, right in the kitchen. My husband and I decided our children would not grow up without knowing a potato has a plant part. We would take a food sabbatical, getting our hands dirty in some of the actual dying

arts of food production. We hoped to prove—at least to ourselves—that a family living on or near green land need not depend for its life on industrial food. We were writing our Dear John letter to a roomie that smells like exhaust fumes and the feedlot.

But sticking it to the Man (whoever he is) may not be the most inspired principle around which to organize one's life. We were also after tangible, healthy pleasures, in the same way that boycotting tobacco, for example, brings other benefits besides the satisfaction of withholding your money from Philip Morris. We hoped a year away from industrial foods would taste so good, we might actually enjoy it. The positives, rather than the negatives, ultimately nudged us to step away from the agrusiness supply line and explore the local food landscape. Doing the right thing, in this case, is not about abstinence-only, throwing out bread, tightening your belt, wearing a fake leather belt, or dragging around feeling righteous and gloomy. Food is the rare moral arena in which the ethical choice is generally the one more likely to make you groan with pleasure. Why resist that?

In Nikos Kazantzakis's novel *Zorba the Greek*, the pallid narrator frets a lot about his weaknesses of the flesh. He lies awake at night worrying about the infinite varieties of lust that call to him from this world; for example, cherries. He's way too fond of cherries. Zorba tells him, Well then, I'm afraid what you must do is stand under the tree, collect a big bowl full, and stuff yourself. Eat cherries like they're going out of season.

This was approximately the basis of our plan: the Zorba diet.



## 2 • WAITING FOR ASPARAGUS

### Late March

A question was nagging at our family now, and it was no longer, "When do we get there?" It was, "When do we start?" We had come to the farmland to eat deliberately. We'd discussed for several years what that would actually mean. We only knew, somewhat abstractly, we were going to spend a year integrating our food choices with our family values, which include both "love your neighbor" and "try not to wreck every blooming thing on the planet while you're here."

We'd given ourselves nearly a year to settle in at the farm and address some priorities imposed by our hundred-year-old farmhouse, such as hundred-year-old plumbing. After some drastic remodeling, we'd moved into a house that still lacked some finishing touches, like doorknobs. And a back door. We nailed plywood over the opening so forest mammals wouldn't wander into the kitchen.

Between home improvement projects, we did find time that first summer to grow a modest garden and can some tomatoes. In October the so-ber forests around us suddenly revealed their proclivity for cross-dressing. (Trees in Tucson didn't just throw on scarlet and orange like this.) Then came the series of snowfalls that comprised the first inclement winter of the kids' lives. One of our Tucson-bred girls was so dismayed by the cold, she adopted fleece-lined boots as orthodox, even indoors; the other was so thrilled with the concept of third grade canceled on account of snow,