

FORWARD

From Stories to Strawberries

A celebrated author's yearlong experiment in local eating **BY TRACIE MCMILLAN**

WITH HER RARE MIX of storytelling skills and a social conscience, best-selling author Barbara Kingsolver has built a career on the premise that a well-told story can move mountains. This May, her latest effort, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, tells an entirely new tale: her own. Spun around her family's move to Virginia and their subsequent decision to eat only foods grown and raised in their county—including their own farm—*Animal* marries Kingsolver's narrative gifts with reported essays from her husband, biologist Steven Hopp, and recipes from her then-19-year-old daughter, Camille. *Plenty* caught up with Kingsolver to talk about the local food movement, taking your dinner seriously, and why eating well is for everyone—not just the elite.



Author Barbara Kingsolver with her husband, Steven Hopp, and daughters Camille (top) and Lily (bottom).

You started this project a few years ago, long before local food was on the cover of *Time*. Why did you decide to do it, and did your friends think you were crazy?

The truth is we were pretty quiet about it.

We didn't make any big announcement to our family or friends. We've been growing a lot of our food for years, and when we moved to the farm, it just came up: "How about if we try to produce all of it our-

“It’s not about putting on burlap and hiding out in the mountains and going away from the world; it’s a way of going into the world.”

selves, or get it from our neighbors who are farmers?”

Did you have any moments of doubt?

We really didn’t. We didn’t try to be fanatical; this was not a religious conversion by any means. When friends invited us to their houses, we ate whatever they served, and if they had strawberries in January, we ate them and said, “Oh, wow, strawberries!” But we didn’t try to make it difficult—we tried to make it meaningful. If we needed to make an exception, like cranberries at Thanksgiving, we did it. We didn’t stress about it.

Were there any surprises?

Just that summer was the hardest time while winter was pretty easy—that was a *huge* surprise. We did so much of our work ahead of time [growing and preserving food] that eating locally in winter was relatively easy. And we were surprised we liked doing this so much. When the year officially ended, nothing fundamentally changed for us. Now, we’ll sometimes splurge on Alaskan salmon, or something from far away, but it’s a treat, not something normal. And I think that’s good.

How can changing what’s on your plate change anything besides dinner?

I think we’re under an obligation to serve as examples that we can do things differently, that we don’t need this industrial food pipeline. Once you begin to incorporate local products into your diet, it gets easier. And the more people do it, the easier it will get because we’ll be a significant body of consumers that farmers will be able to grow things for.

But isn’t it hard to take your food that seriously?

It feels a bit contrived to do that here, but we live in a culture that’s incredibly lazy about food. In Europe, even working mothers stop at the market, pick out the freshest vegetables, and make meals because

that’s the way it’s done—and those cultures are not facing a crisis of health problems from bad eating. Attending to the sources of your food is not about crossing things off the list; it’s about creating a new culture of food that makes sensible connections between your body, the place you live, and the goods that place can give you.

It’s practical in a very basic, biological sense: Eat what’s available nearby like animals do.

Steven and I had this idea to write an environmental textbook for nonscientists. Americans are not really educated on why we need to think about tomorrow, how we are biologically connected with the place where we live. Dinner is the one time we are fundamentally brought back to the fact that we are animals. So looking closely at where food comes from is a really profound way of engaging people with our biological essence.

That sounds pretty hippie. How is it different from the 1970s back-to-the-land movement?

This is not isolationist, but social. There’s nothing in our lives that wants to hide from the world. We know our farmers by their first names, in the same way you know your hairdresser’s name. It’s not about putting on burlap and hiding out in the mountains and going away from the world; it’s a way of going into the world.

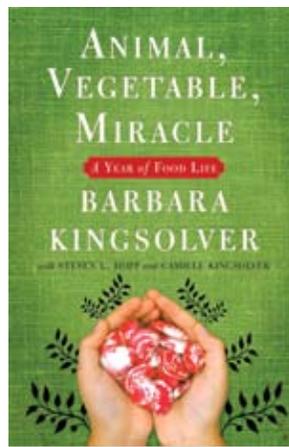
So how can people in cities eat locally and build a sense of place around food when they live in a concrete jungle?

In some ways, this is relatively easy for urban people. The small organic farms surrounding cities are the fastest growing section of our agricultural economy, and farmer’s markets are opening at an incredible rate. I started this book with a promise that I wasn’t going to tell anyone to do anything, but it’s not going to work unless you are willing to cook for yourself. It doesn’t have to be elaborate. Healthy fast foods take 20 minutes in the oven; I can cook a whole meal from scratch in 20 to 30 minutes.

But isn’t it elitist to tell people to eat local or organic when those foods are more expensive, if you can find them at all?

That comes down to politics, and this year’s farm bill. It’s hypocritical for our government to say, “Everyone should eat more fruits and vegetables,” through the surgeon general’s office while paying for subsidies that make junk food cheap. Why is healthy food more expensive? The production of a fast-food hamburger uses enormous amounts of diesel fuel, so why does it only cost 99¢? Because manufacturers can deduct fuel costs from their taxes,

so anyone paying taxes is paying to subsidize junk food. But if you cook using whole ingredients, it costs less than eating out at restaurants or buying prepared foods. Organic ingredients cost more, but the difference disappears if you cook. When we added up the year’s tab, it came out to \$1.75 per meal, per person. Most of us can probably afford to spend a bit more on a better diet. ☺



Barbara Kingsolver (top) enlisted the help of her family to tell the story of their culinary experiment.