

Recipes for a revolution

The *More-with-Less* cookbook called for responsible eating long before it was cool.

by [Lee Hull Moses](#) in the [December 7, 2016](#) issue



The original *More-with-Less* cookbook from 1976 (left) and the 40th anniversary edition from 2016

I don't remember the name of the camp counselor who inspired me to be a vegetarian. I remember only that he skipped the camp-issued hamburger in favor of a peanut butter sandwich, and that he was very, very cool.

Even as a teenager, I knew that wanting to be cool wasn't a very good reason for me to give up meat. So I went in search of others. Animal rights? Sort of, but I've never been much of an animal lover. Health? Many of my meatless meals consisted of French fries and cheese. Then, somewhere along the way, I learned that making a hamburger is a pretty inefficient use of land and other resources. Ah-ha, I thought: environmentalism. That was a cause I could rally behind.

Going meatless was the first of what I've come to think of as my food revolutions: sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic shifts in the way I understand my relationship with food. Another revolution came on a youth group trip to Koinonia Farm in Georgia when I tasted fresh-picked tomatoes; another years later when I read Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* and began to pay attention to where my food comes from.

In the 1970s—long before that camp counselor made me think differently about my dinner—Doris Janzen Longacre began a food revolution of her own. Unlike me, she wasn't trying to impress anyone. Longacre—a home economist who had served a Mennonite relief and development organization in Vietnam and Indonesia—had a clearer, nobler motivation. She was trying to change the world.

It began, the story goes, with a conversation around a picnic table. Longacre and some friends had gathered to share a meal, and they found themselves discussing the Mennonite Central Committee's recent call for families to respond to the global food crisis by cutting food consumption by 10 percent. It was a good and important challenge, Longacre and her friends agreed, but they weren't sure most people would know how to make such cuts even if they wanted to. An idea emerged: What if they compiled some recipes that could help?

Longacre issued an invitation to Mennonites—appealing to their ideals of simplicity and service—to submit their favorite simple recipes. (One wonders now how she did this with no social media to spread the word, no Google Forms to collect the submissions.) She thought of it as a “food crisis cookbook . . . which will work at questions such as how to eat less, particularly less meat, and still maintain good nutrition, and how families can release more of their food dollars to feed the hungry.”

The *More-with-Less Cookbook* was first published in 1976 as a project of the MCC. It's been in print ever since, with nearly a million copies sold. With its recipes for simple, affordable, nutritious meals, and its commitment to addressing world hunger, the cookbook has been a favorite on kitchen shelves for more than a generation. In honor of the book's 40th anniversary, Herald Press recently released a new, revised edition.

A copy of Longacre's original notes and proposal has been preserved in the MCC's archives. They are a delight to read. She outlines her goals for the project, which

range from the grand—to “prepare a book which would have lasting value beyond early awareness of the world food crisis”—to the mundane:

Simple paperback format would obviously be least expensive but personally I do not enjoy at all using paperback cookbooks. They never stay open. Hopefully some kind of binding which makes the book usable and lasting could be found.

She achieved this goal too: the book’s early printings were spiral bound and lay open easily. (The 40th anniversary edition lacks this feature; in any case, it is a tad too beautiful to imagine spilling soup on.)

Longacre’s notes also include a typed list of possible titles, among them *Responsible Eating in a Hungry World* and *Simple Food for Plain People*. Below the typed list, scribbled in handwriting that reminds me of my grandmother’s, is this: *More with Less*. It is the simplest option on the list, and the one that stuck.

The subtitle, however, has changed over the years. The new revision goes with *Timeless Recipes and Inspiration for Simple, Joyful Eating*, but I like the original: *Recipes and Suggestions from Mennonites on How to Eat Better and Consume Less of the World’s Limited Food Resources*. That combination of bold vision (we could have an impact on the world!) and gentle nudging (it’s just a suggestion!) has made *More-with-Less* both revolutionary and effective. The cookbook was a constant, steady call to action for responsible eating, long before it was cool.

Throughout the book runs a deep commitment to Christian ideas of hospitality, stewardship, gratitude, and justice. The call to respond to the food crisis comes from a conviction that we are connected to our global neighbors. Justice requires us to pay attention to how our actions impact others with whom we share this planet. Food—especially good, nutritious food—is a gift to be grateful for and to be used wisely.

But the title of the cookbook isn’t just *Less*. Longacre understood that there is something deeply good and faithful about breaking bread with other people, be it simple dinners on ordinary evenings or grand festivities on special occasions. Rachel Marie Stone, who edited the 40th anniversary edition, says that the book’s primary conviction is that “it is possible to eat simply, healthfully, mindfully, and joyfully all at once.”

Over 40 years, the book's message hasn't changed—and the need for it remains. In the original, Longacre says the project was “born from the compulsion that someone, somehow must prod us overfed North Americans to do something about our overabundance in relation to the world food crisis.” If anything has changed, it is that global hunger crises go far beyond questions of food supply—and that there is a significant hunger crisis in our own country as well.

While the anniversary edition stays faithful to the original's message, the recipes have been updated. “People probably eat fewer casseroles and ‘loaves’ in 2016 than they ate in 1976,” Stone explains, “and I think most Americans are generally more aware of foods that in 1976 would have seemed exotic—tofu, for example, needs much less of an introduction these days.” The revision also includes labels indicating which recipes are gluten-free or vegetarian.

Recipes have also been updated to reflect changes in the science of food. For instance, many of the original recipes called for margarine, which was then thought to be not just cheaper but also healthier than butter. More recently we've come to understand that partially hydrogenated vegetable oil isn't really better, even if it is less expensive.

This example from the book's recipes points to a significant dilemma in the quest to encourage responsible eating: nutritious, simple, sustainable food can be expensive. It takes a measure of privilege to take the time to go across town to the farmer's market and to pay a premium for locally grown, organic produce. Many markets now accept public food assistance benefits as payment—a step in the right direction—but shopping there still requires transportation and a flexible schedule. People who live in food deserts often have little choice but to buy processed food from convenience stores—processed food made cheaper by federal subsidies for corn and soy but not produce. Solving our country's food crisis requires better public policy, not just better recipes.

It is perhaps a bit much to ask a cookbook to promote political advocacy, and the anniversary edition acknowledges that such issues are beyond its scope. Stone maintains, however, that “*More-with-Less* is a handbook, a field guide, for simple and wholesome cooking and a way of thinking about food that opens one up to concerns beyond one's own table.” If a peanut butter sandwich at church camp can get me to consider the environmental impact of a hamburger, then a collection of simple and healthy recipes just might pave the way toward a new approach to the

politics of food.

“We are overcomplicating our lives,” wrote Longacre in 1976. Our lives have certainly not gotten simpler since then. Even our efforts at simple eating are complicated. I recently gave away a cookbook I’d kept on my shelf for awhile. The idea was good—cooking seasonally—but the recipes were so complicated, with such obscure ingredients, that I never attempted any of them.

I hope that Longacre, who died three years after *More-with-Less* was published, would have been pleased by the book’s lasting impact and glad for the move many of us have made toward locally grown, less processed food. But what would she think about services like Blue Apron and Hello Fresh, which deliver meals—whole, healthy ingredients ready to be cooked, shipped in an overabundance of packing material—to your door? What would she think about Whole 30 or paleo or low-carb diets? And what would she think about the obesity epidemic in our country, a problem caused not by too little food but by lack of access to fresh, healthy meals?

“As North Americans, most of us grew up believing we were born into an era of abundance,” writes Longacre. “The ability to buy something has meant the right to have it. Christian discipleship now calls us to turn around.” Turning means repentance—or revolution. It is rarely a onetime event; it is a lifetime of learning and practice.

My own food revolutions have landed me here: I still don’t eat red meat. I remain haunted by those stats about resource use, and I lost my taste for it over years of vegetarianism. I do eat chicken or fish a few times a week. I try to buy sustainably raised poultry and seafood when I can find them, but this holds its own complications—what do all those terms mean? Can I trust the labels?—and the expense often sends me back to my lentils and beans and vegetarian recipes.

To be clear, I also eat far too much sugar, and my family sometimes resorts to fast food for dinner. I get to the farmer’s market most Saturday mornings, but I also buy plenty of imported produce out of season.

Still, I’ve come to see meal planning and cooking as something of a spiritual practice—one that feeds both my family and my soul even as I practice it imperfectly. It’s an act of stewardship of resources, my own and the world’s, and a way of nurturing gratitude for my family’s access to good and healthy food.

At dinner with my family recently—the first time in a week that we managed to sit down together, all four of us—the new *More-with-Less* happened to be sitting on the table, where I'd been looking through it earlier. One of the kids asked about it, and after we said grace I told them about Doris Longacre and her collection of recipes.

We happened to be eating a generally more-with-less meal—lentil soup, cheese slices, fruit—and I pointed this out. We talked about the suggestions Longacre makes in the book: eat lots of vegetables, only a small amount of meat, and not much prepackaged food. This led to a good conversation about processed food, and we named some obvious ones: Doritos, Oreos, soda. But then we had to admit that the pretzels and crackers that are staples in our cupboards are processed, too. We flipped through the recipes and decided that the Egyptian dish kusherie, which we'd never heard of, looked good enough to try.

The conversation turned to the farmer's market, where we get our eggs and veggies most weeks. We are especially big fans of the green leaf lettuce grown by the farmer we affectionately call "the lettuce guy."

"What's his name?" my four-year-old son asked, but none of us knows, despite having eaten his lettuce for years. "Next time we go to the market, let's ask him," he said. "He'll tell us his name, and we'll tell him ours."

We agreed that this was a pretty good idea and turned our attention back to the lentil soup, which was hot and hearty and just enough.

Thanks for the suggestions, Mrs. Longacre.

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