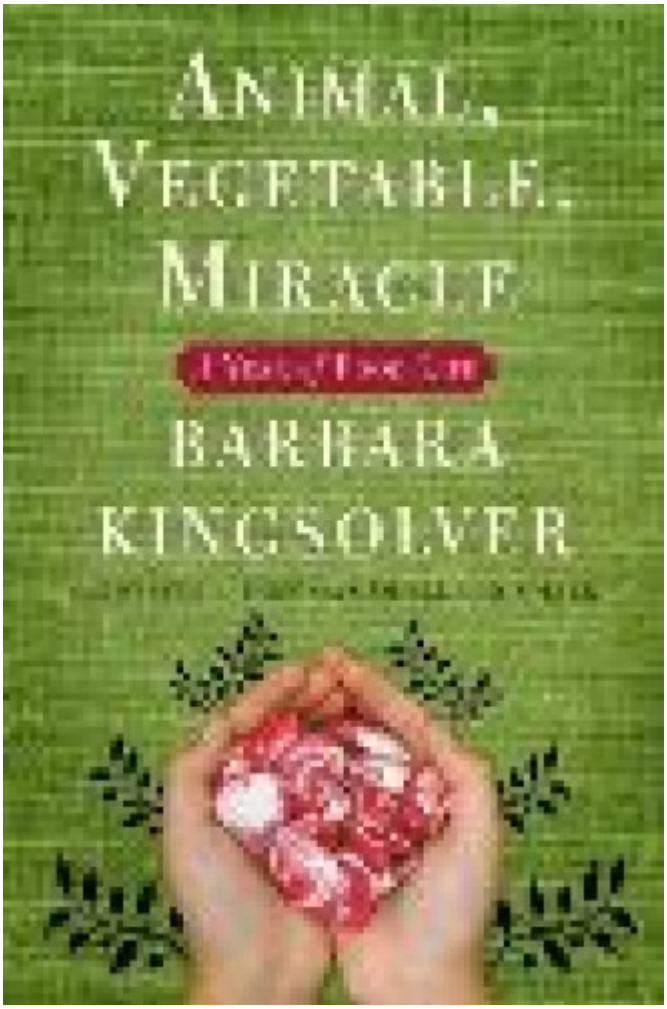
Homegrown

By Valerie Weaver-Zercher in the July 24, 2007 issue

In Review



Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life

Barbara Kingsolver
HarperCollins

Say the words *food* and *culture* in the same sentence, and many people think of foods they've never eaten, with names they can't pronounce: *foie gras, crème*

fraîche, pancetta. Now that vegan is chic, mesclun is modish, and organics have their own grocery chain, even more people are convinced that food culture belongs to the wealthy and well traveled.

Novelist Barbara Kingsolver offers a proposal for recovering an authentic—and nonelitist—food culture: eat food that comes from the place you live. “At its heart,” she writes, “a genuine food culture is an affinity between people and the land that feeds them.” *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* is Kingsolver’s account of her family’s yearlong attempt to eat only vegetables and animals that they grew or raised themselves or that came from their local area.

Born of a desire to lessen their dependence on fossil fuels, extricate themselves from the industrial food web and cultivate the dying arts of gardening and animal husbandry, the family’s local-foods experiment throws into stark relief what Kingsolver calls the “botanically outrageous” expectations of North Americans who want asparagus in September and watermelon in January. “Our highest shopping goal was to get our food from so close to home, we’d know the person who grew it,” she writes. “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.’”

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle is part gardener’s journal, part family memoir, part investigation into the politics of modern food production. Tackling topics as varied as vegetarianism, tobacco farming, the slow-food movement and turkey mating habits, and augmented by sidebar reflections from her oldest daughter and biologist husband, Kingsolver’s writing coherently and passionately delivers an urgent message: our children will not be able to eat in the same fuel-guzzling manner that we do, so it’s best that we—and they—begin figuring out how to live in an ecologically unstable future.

Kingsolver and her family aren’t alone in their attempt to reduce the radius of their food circle. *In Plenty: One Man, One Woman, and a Raucous Year of Eating Locally,* and on their buzz-making Web site (www. 100milediet.org), Alisa Smith and J. B. MacKinnon write about weaning themselves from their “SUV diet” of well-traveled cuisine. They sought food produced within a 100-mile radius of their Vancouver home. In 2001, ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan drew his circle 250 miles wide for a year and recounted the experience in *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods.* And the recently released Herald Press cookbook *Simply in*

Season, by Cathleen Hockman-Wert and Mary Beth Lind, offers recipes and a rationale for eating by the seasons.

Of course, “locavore” diets were so commonplace a century ago that it wouldn’t have occurred to anyone to write a book about them. But the agricultural knowledge that previous generations took for granted is well-nigh dead for most Americans, a casualty of what Kingsolver says is baby boomers’ “presumption that education is a key to moving away from manual labor, and dirt.” Just as farming isn’t making it onto most middle-class American kids’ lists of career possibilities these days, cooking isn’t among their pastimes (their parents’ state-of-the-art kitchens notwithstanding).

An avowed feminist, Kingsolver doesn’t shrink from taking on the processed-foods business that trailed in the feminist movement’s wake, and she laments the loss of homemaking skills among modern women and men and the waning of the ritual of family mealtimes. “When my generation of women walked away from the kitchen we were escorted down that path by a profiteering industry that knew a tired, vulnerable marketing target when they saw it,” she writes. “‘Hey ladies,’ it said to us, ‘go ahead, get liberated. *We’ll* take care of dinner.’ They threw open the door and we walked into a nutritional crisis and genuinely toxic food supply.”

North American agricultural and culinary know-how is disappearing along with the genetic diversity of vegetables and livestock, according to Kingsolver. In one of the most disturbing chapters of the book, she investigates the hegemony of the six agribusiness companies that control 98 percent of the world’s seed sales. One of the companies actually allots $10 million of its budget to investigating and prosecuting customers who save seeds from one year to the next. In addition, three-fourths of all food eaten by humans now comes from just eight plant species, and North Americans now depend on only a few corn and soybean varieties for the majority of their calories.

This homogeneity results in a constriction not only of flavors, but also of disease resistance and the adaptive qualities of heirloom varieties that evolve to thrive in their local microclimates. The narrowing of horticultural diversity may well represent the tightening of our own species’ windpipe, Kingsolver cautions; by relying on fewer and fewer strains of food, we are “dining just a few pathogens away from famine.”

Kingsolver's prose is, as readers familiar with her novels would expect, magnificent. Hilarious, poetic and impassioned, it carries a moral weight that is hard to deny. It is also, in places, a little glib. For one thing, her proposal requires an enormous amount of work, a fact that she only cursorily acknowledges and spends much energy refuting. Eating locally is difficult, she seems to suggest, only if you view manual labor with disdain or are used to wasting your free time watching television. Her few references to the physical exhaustion and decreased time for other commitments that a local-foods lifestyle entails are always made with good humor and a light touch, rather than with the gravity expressed by many locavores. (All of the organic farmers I know are eager to read *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle.* None of them has yet had time to finish it.)

It is understandable that anyone so devoted to convincing others to change their habits will make little room for ambivalence, lest potential converts be deterred. And few causes these days are as urgent and worthy of our efforts as activism against climate change, the taproot reason for local-foods living. Yet at least a few of the targeted souls may long for a little more nuance and a tad more candor about the full scope of the mission for which we are being recruited.

There is also a whiff of agrarian smugness here, at least to those who long for the lifestyle that Kingsolver and her family manage to practice. I confess to feeling more than a pinch of jealousy when I read Kingsolver's gorgeous descriptions of pantry shelves lined with home-canned goods and her young daughter's preference for edamame over Twinkies. So perhaps any perception of sanctimony is just sour grapes from a reader who desires such a lifestyle but is so far unwilling to spend the hours required to turn those grapes into jelly.

The risk for readers of a book like this one is that they will become convinced of the virtue of local-foods living but paralyzed by the hopelessness of attaining ecogastronomical purity. The gospel preached by local-foods advocates can be subverted by the intensity of their passion and the impressiveness of their growing-chopping-preserving praxis. Not unlike virtuous Christians who seem constitutionally incapable of evil, locavores can become elite standard-bearers who make the rest of us want to throw up our hands and sin boldly by stocking up on frozen pizzas and canned soup.

If that's the case, Kingsolver's words toward the end of the book are instructive. She confesses to her own despair over not changing all of her earth- damaging habits—few as they may appear—and also cautions against belittling the baby steps

toward change with which great conversions begin. (It’s good to know she wouldn’t snicker at local-foods novices like me, who have little more than a pathetic handful of homegrown peas to show for our good intentions.) After all, if every American ate one meal of locally grown organic foods a week, we’d reduce our national oil consumption by over a million barrels a week. “It’s the worst of bad manners—and self-protection, I think, in a nervously cynical society—to ridicule the small gesture,” Kingsolver writes. “Small, stepwise changes in personal habits aren’t trivial. Ultimately they will, or won’t, add up to having been the thing that mattered.”