Food fight

By Bill McKibben in the December 27, 2003 issue

The Farmer's Diner in Barre, Vermont, serves the foods you would expect at a diner—ham and eggs, home fries, hamburgers, milkshakes. And it serves them at prices you would expect—the average check is about $7.50. Almost all of the food comes from within a 50-mile radius—which you also might expect, given that Barre is surrounded by good farmland, supporting pigs, chickens, potatoes, steers and dairy cows. But the fact that the food it serves is locally grown actually makes this place decidedly weird, the strangest diner in the country.

To open his restaurant Tod Murphy had to buck every trend in American agriculture, He had to buy his own smokehouse, persuade schoolkids to raise pork and find someplace to get chickens slaughtered. He had to try to relocalize farming.

At the moment American agriculture is anything but local. The average North American supper travels 1,500 miles between farm gate and dinner plate. Depending on your perspective, this might seem a kind of miracle. Our farms are so vast and efficient that they provide us with mountains of cheap food even though less than 2 percent of us work on them—fewer Americans than inhabit our jails. The other 98 percent of us have been freed to do something else: write software, preach sermons, collect tolls.

But you could look at this another way—as more of a curse than a miracle. You could see rural communities emptied, and farms dependent on the unsustainable use of chemicals and fossil fuel. You could see animals concentrated in such massive numbers that abuse is a synonym for existence. You could see cheap, subsidized food wrecking the lives of peasant farmers around the world. You could see tasteless, overprocessed "food products" filling our supermarkets and inflating our bodies. You could see urban and suburban Americans robbed of any connection to the source of their sustenance. This is the perspective of the persuasive group of authors collected in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, which is an unhysterical but thorough indictment not just of American agriculture but of the larger American culture of which it is a diminished part.

Many of the pieces in this book originated as a tribute to Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer and writer who 25 years ago published *The Unsettling of America*. Berry's essays have proven to be seminal, in many ways even more long-lasting and deep-reaching than E. F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful*. With an authority that stretches from the practical to the moral, his words have done more than any other force to launch the wave of farmer's markets, community-supported agriculture and small organic experiments that have enlivened our dinner tables in recent times.

In a larger sense, however, Berry's work must be counted a failure. As in the effort to get Americans to protect the climate, small victories have been overwhelmed by crushing losses. As Berry points out in the opening essay, America now has half the number of farms it had in 1977. Farm communities are poorer, suburban sprawl is uglier. "The large agribusiness corporations that were mainly national in 1977 are now global, and are replacing the world's agricultural diversity, which was useful primarily to farmers and local consumers, with bioengineered and patented monocultures that are merely profitable to corporations." A thousand edible nasturtiums may have bloomed in a thousand farmer's markets, but Monsanto, Cargill and ADM have blighted a million villages with their crushing industrial farming. So far the momentum is going the wrong way.

This volume attempts, mostly successfully, to broaden the discussion, to build the ranks of those who would support a new agrarianism—a localized, careful, beautiful, reined-in agriculture (and forestry and fisheries) that builds dignified lives and strong communities. Brian Donahue is a professor at Brandeis University, not one of America's foremost ag schools. But he writes a remarkably smart and hopeful essay imagining a compromise between the arcadian and the agrarian—a countryside composed mostly of suburban dwellers who nonetheless support and benefit from a healthy working farm community in their midst.

Taking his cues from the many New England communities that have experimented with the widespread use of easements and conservation land to protect working landscapes, he envisions a new commons taking hold. Travel through most American farmland, he notes, and you'll see vast stretches of unpopulated fields waiting for the occasional visit by crop duster or combine. "Then we reach the beltways surrounding our cities, and see tract housing going up at a furious pace, often on prime farmland." Wouldn't it be nice, he writes, "if all of that eerily unsettled rural countryside were instead dense with diversified 100-acre farmsteads, with their grain and hay rotations, livestock, and pastures embedded in a landscape

of protected forest, wetland, and prairie," and in turn supporting an infinity of small villages, connected to the world via all our modern communications pipelines so that people could work at a variety of jobs, but remain connected to the real world by sheer immersion in a particular landscape.

This appealing vision is not entirely impossible. Small versions of it can be seen in parts of the Berkshires of Massachusetts and in parts of Vermont, not to mention wide areas of France and Italy. But since the journey toward such a future is daunting, it is good that this volume includes the thoughts of systemic economists like Herman Daly, formerly a senior analyst at the World Bank. Daly continues the argument that has marked his many books—the economy is no longer behaving economically. That is, our huge level of throughput is now increasing environmental and social costs faster than it magnifies benefits. It makes us poorer, not richer, as most attempts to develop quality-of-life indexes have indicated for the past decade.

Vandana Shiva makes this point in more detail with regard to the social systems of developing countries—the Green Revolution, she writes, has in fact impoverished most of the people it sought to help, and the Gene Revolution now following on its heels will only increase the damage. Her evidence is powerful, right down to the names of particular villagers in one tiny Indian town who sold their kidneys to pay their farm bills. And Wes Jackson, the Kansas agronomist, makes the same point in connection with physical systems—particularly the prairie soils continuing to bleed brown into the Mississippi and every other river system that drains farmland. Globally, he writes, "nearly one-third of land devoted to farming has been lost to erosion in the last 40 years and continues to be lost at a rate of some 25 million acres per year."

Jackson and Shiva are more than critics, however. They know what kind of agriculture they want to see. Shiva envisions a return to the network of small and intensively managed holdings still visible in much of Bengal; Jackson is hard at work developing new grain strains that can be grown in perennial polycultures, ending the need for annual plowing and irrigation. They are joined by others in this volume. The ever-optimistic Ohio farmer Gene Logsdon, for instance, makes a persuasive case for returning to grass-feeding steers, hogs, chicken, dairy cows and sheep instead of the concentrated feedlot farming favored by industrial agribusiness. He marshals a long list of statistics to demonstrate that farmers would make more money and produce healthier, tastier food if they could scale back and grow their animals on grass, not corn. This vision, too, is spreading—I know farmers across the country who have

taken notice of the widespread and profitable return to pasturage in New Zealand, and who have begun their own experiments with it.

If we really wanted such a world, mechanisms to bring it about exist, or could be fashioned by innovative economists. Susan Witt, who runs the invaluable Schumacher Society, offers a variety of possible mechanisms for supporting an emerging community economics, such as local currencies and community loans. And law professor Eric Freyfogle proposes a variety of legal changes to the way we own land which would encourage responsible stewardship. But as he readily acknowledges, change will not come easily. The ethic of individualism that makes any community effort so difficult is, perversely, stronger among farmers than almost any other group save Silicon Valley CEOs.

At the close of his essay Gene Logsdon asks, “Could humankind for once end an old cycle and begin a new one based on a pastoral food system without an intervening decline or collapse of the economy and civilization?” I fear the answer may be no, in part because of the enormous power of the established order—the great grain companies are as powerful, if not as visible, as the great energy companies. And in part because the collapse of at least some parts of our food system may be even nearer than many suspect.

In recent years, the environmental statistician Lester Brown has been almost alone in his attempts to warn us that grain production appears to be nearing a crisis point. His most recent works cannot be read without a tremble. Water tables around the world are dropping dramatically—in China by meters a year—as diesel pumps relentlessly draw water to the surface to irrigate grain. Meanwhile, the heat waves associated with global climate change are suppressing grain production in one region after another—this year, Europe was especially hard hit. As a result, human beings have eaten more grain than they’ve grown for the past four years in a row. The substantial stockpiles with which we began that period are essentially gone. Any shortfall in coming years may cause rapid price rises, and horrific pinches in areas of the world that depend on cheap exported grain.

In the short run, such traumas will probably only lead to more intensification of agriculture, as we attempt to produce our way out of our problems. But the efforts this book chronicles are vitally important because they provide a counterexample—a small demonstration plot. They hold out the possibility of an un-Hobbesian future, one that more and more of us can work toward, gradually but persistently. These

writers and innovators are, in some sense, Noahs, and the arks they are building may help us ride out the storm, or at least reestablish our civilizations on a different basis once the waters recede.

For those who want to get started now, there are many possibilities. For example, one of the worst effects of the nationalization and globalization of agriculture has been the demise of local infrastructures for farmers. Say you have a good crop of tomatoes and the idea that you could make a reasonable amount of money turning them into salsa. In most places the community kitchens where that work—or pickling, canning and the like—could be done no longer exist. On the other hand, most of our rural communities are dramatically oversupplied with Protestant houses of worship, which might be good places to use for work of this kind. The sanitary laws imposed on us by the giant monopolists would make this hard, but not impossible. I love the idea of churches playing a role in building this wider communion, just as I yearn for the day when half our steeples boast windmills to catch the breeze that God sends across the land.

Tod Murphy imagines licensing others to run Farmer’s Diner restaurants on his model around the country, each one buying its food from its own local family farmers. This is work that congregations—and land trusts and environmental groups—could do cooperatively, raising the capital to spread such experiments far and wide. When I saw Wendell Berry not long ago he was talking, albeit a little wearily, about his campaign to convince the Kentucky state government to help fund small slaughterhouses throughout the state.

For a very long time we have had the luxury of not thinking about where our food comes from. Or at least we have considered it a luxury, though we have paid for our ignorance and indifference in diminished lives, lousy dinners and strained landscapes. Now we may again need to think about where our daily bread comes from. It is a question of ultimate, and potentially lovely, moral depth.