

ANIMAL,
VEGETABLE,
MIRACLE

TENTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

A Year of Food Life



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ORIGINAL DRAWINGS BY RICHARD A. HOUSER

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AVM Plus Ten

THE GROUND UNDERNEATH US

by Barbara Kingsolver

This is what a decade looks like, I think as I take up pruning shears against my overgrown flower borders and clear a path to the vegetable garden. Ten years have passed since the storied birthday party when my friends brought little plants to fill the barren yard of our farmhouse, and we eked out a local feast from our frontier ground. Those gifts of peony divisions and rose slips have grown into a wild ramble beyond all common cottage-garden decency. The little purple butterfly bush is now a butterfly filling-station megastore, nectaring up the neighborhood and shading the whole front porch. The sapling pear tree my parents gave me is taller than the barn.

This farm has hosted and fed a procession of birthdays since that one, along with memorable back-to-school and graduation blowouts and, best of all, Camille's wedding in the front yard among the dahlias and hollyhocks. I get to remember forever the way a young man's face was struck with light when my daughter walked through the garden gate in a white dress and sunflower smile. And now, every time they walk up the porch steps to our front door, Reid and Camille get to recover the ground where they spoke their vows. It seems to me our family is not just people but a place. Alongside the pear trees and peonies we've grown to include a beloved son-in-law and, soon, a new baby. When we sit down together in our dining room it's still this place that feeds us. The foodways we ex-

plored in this book have become routine to us now, we don't dwell on the story of this leg of lamb, the broccoli, the garlic, the apples, the tomatoes, and the green beans. Our farm gives these foods up with abandon, fills our summers and our freezers with them. We spent a year consciously learning a habit of eating what we produced ourselves or found at the farmers' market, and it was long enough for a habit to grow into a preference.

We like eating this way, that's all. Now that this book is history for our family—and for some of us, relatively ancient history—none of us thinks of food choice as our defining characteristic. That would strike us as weird and a little boring (except maybe for a spokesperson for a diet program or restaurant chain). When we travel or find ourselves pressed for time we'll happily eat whatever, without apology or remorse. But when we're at leisure, in this particular house, we enjoy cooking with the ingredients that grow from this particular farm.

Now in midlife, I take some of my greatest pleasures from our family's food culture. It's not just the meals that make me happy, but the life. No matter how crummy a day I've had, I know it will get better if I haul myself into the kitchen; even better if Steven is there to listen to my grievances while we make dinner. Better yet if we're there with our daughters and son-in-law, all scooting easily around each other as we manage our pieces of a complex operation we all know by heart. There are never too many cooks in my kitchen. Nor too many hands in the garden; this farm still owns us. Camille and Reid live just down the road. Lily is in college a few hours away, but her face still lights up and says "home" when she walks through the front gate between the hollyhocks. We're what you'd call embedded.

Steven and I constantly talk about scaling back our operation, while steadily doing the opposite. Since we wrote this book our vineyard has matured, we've learned how to make wine and cider, and planted a new apple orchard. We've added a dozen Dexter cattle, a small-framed breed that's beautifully suited to pasture finishing. Also, a flock of Icelandic sheep for meat and wool, which we chose for their admirable hardiness and spectacular natural colors from white and pinkish cream to silver, brown, and black. Our flock ranges from twenty to forty sheep, depend-

ing on the time of year. Our vegetable garden is still immense. And, because we really needed something else to do, Steven launched an unusual restaurant and community-development project (more about that later).

Obviously ours is a working farm that feeds more than just our family, and employs a few extra hands, especially in summer. Among the products that go off the farm are specialty vegetables, lamb, beef, and wool that gets spun into yarn. This place is not just our domicile, but a piece of ground that is well suited to producing food. It would feel wrong to occupy that kind of land and let it lie fallow. The ethical choice is to manage it for food production, ideally in a way that maintains productivity, improves the health of its soils and watershed, and sequesters more carbon than it burns. If we weren't willing to do this, I think we would need to move out and let somebody else do it.

But I'm more than willing. I *like* putting on my muck boots and traipsing up to the garden in springtime to see what's come up overnight. When I discover little curve-necked bean sprouts emerging in perfectly even rows, I am flooded with a warm glow of predictable order imposed on a disorderly planet. It will evaporate as soon as I come back inside and read the newspaper. But that's part of the deal; hope is a renewable option. Farming is renewal by definition. I love watching the curly-haired lambs the first minute after they're born as they find their wobbly legs, stand up, and stagger after mama, doggedly bunting a nose against her front legs, back legs, belly, the wall of the paddock, and me—if I'm in there with them—until they finally latch onto the bliss of colostrum and milk. When I pick up these fresh-born creatures they're damp and surprisingly hot, with little hearts pounding like the engines of life they are. In lambing season we stay close to the barn because sometimes they'll need help, not just finding the teat but getting through the mortal doorway. I've had to deliver stuck lambs, breech lambs, tangled triplets, and revive two or three that were born not breathing. If I had any chance of pausing first to consider whether I knew what I was doing, I would have said, in every case, "heck no!" And any livestock farmer will tell you that's a regular April morning: save a couple of lives and then go in the house, wash up, and make your oatmeal.

If those are ordinary days, they refuel me nevertheless with a sense of

extraordinary possibilities. I'm moved by these gentle lives under my care, ridiculously proud of myself when I save one, frustrated when I can't, attentive as we vaccinate and nurse the sick, authentically grateful when we harvest them for meat, and generally unsentimental when we make our practical choices. (As I mentioned, our flock ranges in size from twenty to forty and back again. Not forty, eighty, one hundred sixty.) But I got a little teary-eyed this spring when we buried Old Meg, one of the three founding mothers of our flock, who died of old age after more than a decade of turning our good pastures into thirteen lambs and many dozen armloads of ink-black wool. These sheep and cattle are a model of frugal enterprise: solar power and rain make the grass, the animals do the manufacturing, and we just do our best to direct the proceedings. Still, I feel so clever when I cook a roast or knit a sweater that my farm made entirely out of sunshine.

Clever and sometimes really tired. It's not just the animals that tax us. We also pull off dramatic rescues of the vegetable kind, involving frantic sprints with row cover fabric on nights before an unseasonal freeze. We love this life, mostly, except on the days when it threatens to break our hearts or our bones. We've put in grueling days and still lost hay crops to badly-timed rain, lost grape crops to fungus, lost whole seasons of pears and apples to one ruthless late-spring frost. We've gotten up at all hours to bottle-feed an orphaned lamb that still didn't make it. I thank my stars that I have another source of income, but then again, in modern times most farmers do. They have to. In addition to art and work, farming is luck. Between the whims of the market and the fickle cruelties of a changing climate we forge our partnership with the land, always hoping for the best, and sometimes—this goes for all of us—we ask ourselves why we keep doing it?

It's a question anyone might ask, farmer or not: why pay attention? Why not just let an unknown person on the far side of the world do this hard work, enabling our illusion of food as the magically inexhaustible, invisibly created resource we require three times a day? What good reason can we find for keeping up a relationship with our own local food system? It would be so easy to run off with the first plump Peruvian asparagus or Chinese apple that catches our eye. And, of course, less costly to

opt for the calorie-dense, processed packaged foods that are all (somewhat covertly) subsidized with tax dollars in a way that fresh vegetables are not. For plenty of people it's not a question because it's not even a choice.

Ten years ago, we wrote this book about our decision to get serious with eating local, more or less forsaking all others. It was such a novel idea that we had to make up our own language for it, although the word "locavore" germinated so naturally from the lexicon that it was invented simultaneously by many people at around the same time. Now it's in the dictionary and on menus all over the place. What we'd thought of as our eccentric family notion broke out into something of a scene. I don't mean that we created a scene—not at all—but that we happened to publish our family's story at a moment when lots of families were ready to examine and take more control of their own food stories. Our book tour took us from coast to coast, San Francisco to Vermont, Chicago to Dallas. And then from Montreal to Vancouver, then to the United Kingdom, and even to France where we were very surprised that anyone might want to hear anything at all about food from people of the American persuasion.

For us, the pleasure of these tours was not talking but listening. We encountered an amazing number of people who wanted to talk about food, think about it in new ways, and renew their own dedication to a long-forgotten relationship between personal hungers and the land around them. In Philadelphia, in Alberta, in Devonshire, good citizens of their food webs wanted to give us samples of the local fare, take us to their farmers' markets, show us their urban garden projects in co-housing communities and low-income neighborhoods, and treat us to dinner in great new farm-to-table restaurants. (This doesn't get old. Let me just say two words: *Chez Panisse*.) Food-wise, it was the book tour to die for. Our only regret is all the fabulous homemade stuff people gave us—chutneys, cheeses, moonshine!—that we had to leave behind because we were getting on airplanes. We made some taxi drivers really happy.

In much greater numbers and far beyond the scope of our own experience, people wanted to explore this animal-vegetable miracle on their own terms. They wanted to dig up their suburban front yards, for exam-

ple, and plant them chockablock with corn and tomatoes, and send us photos of their adorable locavore toddler out there with his big tomato-juicy grin. We loved these photos and put them up on our website. In the limited way we could manage, we used our website as a local-food forum and posted a rolling photo-farm-tour to give interested readers an ongoing acquaintance with our project in all its seasons. We did our best to keep up our end of a conversation we never expected.

Over time, of course, we've gotten languid about updating that website. We've had crops to take in and other work to do, all of us. I've had novels to write. I had to exercise discipline with myself and others in remembering my place as an author, not a spokesperson for a food and farming movement. Sometimes it felt painful or even unkind to decline these respectful invitations, but the movement has leaders infinitely more qualified than I am to speak for it. I'm not an expert on anything by trade, except being a writer. That word means applying myself not to books I've already published, but to the one that's coming next. It will only get written if I stop parading around and stay at my desk, focused on something new. Everyone in our family has, likewise, needed to get on with life and projects, defining himself or herself in ways quite apart from the question of what we eat.

But, of course, we still eat, and of course we still care. This thing we now call "AVM" for short wasn't just a book but a profoundly influential year of our family life. When we took our locavore vows we did it as a family. When we told our story aloud, readers asked us all sorts of questions ranging from the obvious "How's the turkey-sex going these days?" to the more obscure "How do you keep flea beetles from shredding your eggplants?" But these two questions began nearly every interview and were called out from every audience: "What did you find hardest to give up?" And "Are you still eating this way?" At the time, those answers were straightforward: we set up this project in a way that would encourage us to succeed, so nothing about it was terribly hard and we didn't feel deprived. And barely a year later when the book came out, we were still in the same place, very much in locavore mode. (And yes, we still have Bourbon Red turkeys; Old Tom eventually learned to be quite good with the ladies, and graduated to Lothario Emeritus.)

When we were invited to write an anniversary update ten years after the first publication of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, it struck us as a useful enterprise not just for readers but for ourselves. Has our love affair with local foodways blossomed or faded? Have we been faithful? What does “faithful” even mean in this context? Are we going to keep doing these things? Why or why not? If you could join us at our dinner table you’d see we are a family of passions and strong opinions. These questions have a lot of possible answers.

The world has turned in ten years, inside and outside of our household. We’ve had weddings and funerals, we’ve grown up, gotten married, gone to school, gone gray. We’ve remained ourselves, as people do, by remembering what we love best. The world as we now know it is the world into which we first launched this book, and then some. A global reckoning on climate change is visible on the horizon as islands drown, super-hurricanes pound the coasts, and governments race turtle-wise to reach agreements. Global energy use has changed drastically since Steven wrote the essay “Oily Food,” with economic and social factors shifting the balance away from petroleum and coal, toward natural gas and, little by little, renewable energy sources. Sustainable agriculture has come of age, offering resilience and food security in unpredictable climates, and valuable potential for carbon sequestration. Slow food has gone viral in its own gentle way. Locavore was the New Oxford American Dictionary Word of the Year in 2007. It’s no longer considered impolite to use the word “farm” at the dinner table. Some of the most unlikely purveyors, including big box stores and fast-food chains, are jumping on the bandwagon.

One evening this past summer, as I sat on an airplane midway over the Atlantic, I was amazed to see the words “ingredients from local farmers and artisans” on the in-flight menu. I understood that the word “local” was being stretched to new heights. But I also understood how drastically the ground has shifted under our feet since those cold March days in Virginia when we first waited for our asparagus.