A farmer and distinguished writer explains why it is vital that we understand where and how our food is produced.

Many times, after I have finished a lecture on the decline of American farming and rural life, someone in the audience has asked, “What can city people do?”

“Eat responsibly,” I have usually answered. Of course, I have tried to explain what I meant by that, but afterward I have invariably felt that there was more to be said than I had been able to convey. Now I would like to attempt a better explanation.

I begin with the proposition that eating is an agricultural act. Eating ends the annual drama of the food economy that begins with planting and birth. Most eaters, however, are no longer aware that this is true. They think of food as an agricultural product, perhaps, but they do not think of themselves as participants in agriculture. They think of themselves as “consumers.” If they think beyond that, they recognize that they are passive consumers. They buy what they want—or what they have been persuaded to want—within the limits of what they can get. They pay, mostly without protest, what they are charged. And they mostly ignore certain critical questions about the quality and the cost of what they are sold: How fresh is it? How pure or clean is it, how free of dangerous chemicals? How far was it transported, and what did transportation add to the cost? How much did manufacturing or packaging or advertising add to the cost? When the food product has been manufactured or “processed” or “ precooked,” how has that affected its quality or price or nutritional value?
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Eating with the fullest pleasure—pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance—is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery, the lives of domestic plants and animals (except for flowers and dogs and cats) as they are from the soil and from the stars.

The pleasure of eating should be an extensive pleasure, not that of the mere gourmet. People available to the urban consumer who will make the necessary effort.

Agricultural acts are at their best. Such a memory involves itself with the food and is one of the pleasures of eating. The knowledge of the good health of the garden relieves and frees and enhances the experience, in which the eater may think of eating as, first, a purely commercial transaction between him and the farmer, and then as a purely appetitive transaction between him and the food. And the problem of satisfying the art of eating is, again, of immense benefit to the food industry, which has a good chance to increase the connection between food and farming. It would not do for the consumer to think that the bastardization of eating comes from a system that spoils much of the life in the living to gain even a slight improvement in the quality of some Modification, as it is in the harvest of a wheat, for example, or the fusion of a protein, or the sauceral, or the treatment of a pharmaceutical. What is involved in the best farming and gardening?

By offering produce will increase profits. And the business is to substitute for the food what is not food and what do you pay for these additions? The idea that every locality should be, as much as possible, the source of its own food makes several kinds of sense. The locally produced food supply is the most secure, the freshest, and most nutritious. It is produced by any means or any shortcut that will increase profits. And the business is to substitute for the food what is not food and what do you pay for these additions?

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