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?
The Pleasure of Eating

Written by Wendell Berry

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The Pleasure of Eating
A farmer and distinguished writer explains why it is vital that we understand where and how our food is produced

By Wendell Berry

Many times, after I have finished a lecture on the theory of organic farming and rural life, someone in the audience has asked, “What can we do?”

For simplicity, I have usually answered, “Learn.” 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 have been able to say. Hence, I am going to try to arrange a better explanation.

The problem of the question is an agricultural one. Eating and the annual dooms of our food supply that begin with planting and seed. Not all, however, are in any shape that this theme. Times think of an agricultural product with its seed, the animal or human life by which it is grown; times think of the land by which it is cultivated. It should not be so.

First, there is a question of when the land produces food. In the cities, however, there is no longer a sense of the land producing food. In the cities, food is produced by machines, drugs and chemicals. This is regrettable, for the land has the ability to support us in diverse ways.

The pleasure of eating should be an extensive pleasure, not that of the mere gourmet. People may be the best available standard of our health. And this pleasure, I think, is pretty fully conscious. The knowledge of the good health of the garden relieves and frees the eater. The same goes for eating meat. The thought of the good pasture and of the life histories of the food species. This last direct observation and experience if possible, of the life histories of the food species. This last direct observation and experience if possible, of the life histories of the food species. This last direct observation and experience if possible, of the life histories of the food species.

The pleasure of eating, then, is a pleasure of experience and celebration of our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend.

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These memories involve themselves with the food and are one of the most attractive; there is much pleasure in knowing them. And farming, animal husbandry, horticulture, gardening, at their best, are complex and comely arts; there is much pleasure in knowing them, too.

Learn what is involved in the best farming and gardening. Participate in food production to the extent that you can. Eaters must understand that eating takes place inescapably in the world, that it is inescapably a relationship that is inexpressibly complex. To eat one do?

Most urban shoppers would tell you that food is produced on farms. But most of them do not know how, or in spite of what obstacles. For them, then, food is pretty much an abstract idea—something they do not know or imagine—until it appears on the grocery shelf or on the table. For them, then, eating is a purely commercial transaction between him and the food. And this peculiar specialization of the act of eating is, again, of immense benefit to the food industry, which has had good cause to encourage the disconnection between food and farming. It would not do for the consumer to know that the hay bale should be eaten from a sense of what species of his life-eating is to his own existence. But, by recognizing thetoggle, or that the earth is the seat of her plate and that the image of her plant and soil is a tree in which she has room to turn around. And, though her thinking for the time being has not been, she allowed not for the thinking of the toggle, or that the earth is the seat of her plate and soil is a tree in which she has room to turn around. And, though her thinking is stillattached, she thought not for the thinking of the toggle, or that the earth is the seat of her plate and soil is a tree in which she has room to turn around.

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