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

By Wendell Berry

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Eating is a simple, timeless act. It is the beginning of all life, and the ending of all life. It is the most basic human activity, and yet it is often the most neglected. For many people, eating has become a mechanical, automatic process, something to be done quickly and efficiently, without much thought or care. But eating should be a meaningful experience, a ritual that connects us to the world around us.

Eating should be an extensive pleasure, not that of the mere gourmet. People should learn what is involved in the best farming and gardening. Learn, in self-defense, as much as you can of the economy and technology of industrial agriculture. Both eater and eaten are thus in exile from biological reality. And the result is a kind of solitude, unprecedented in human experience. When food, in the minds of eaters, is no longer associated with farming and with the land, then the eater is suffering a kind of cultural amnesia that is isolating and dangerous. The products of nature and agriculture have been made, to all appearances, the products of industry. Eaters must understand that eating takes place inescapably in the world, that it is inescapably an agricultural act, and that how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is.