

## Kingsolver

In *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (352pp, 2007, Harper-Collins Press) Barbara Kingsolver shows that a family of four can take radical charge of the source and the quality of their daily bread, and become a stronger family into the bargain.

To do this they'll celebrate the seasons and their foods, and seek a genuine food culture with ingrained rules of taste and civility. They'll see if local, homegrown food can make them "groan with pleasure," try to improve the gas mileage of edibles, and send their food dollars directly to farmers. They'll make "dinnertime the cornerstone of (their) family's mental health," and work directly for food, instead of money to buy it. "I pictured us," she says, "wading through ... salad greens, breast-stroking into . . . tomatoes, basil, and mozzarella."

They couldn't do it in Tucson, though, which "might as well be a space station where human sustenance is concerned." So, with miraculous cooperation from teenaged Camille and nine-year-old Lily, they moved to a steep-sided farm in Virginia. There, for a year, they would try to eat only what they could grow themselves or buy within their own county or state.

What spurred such apparently radical, self-imposed deprivation? They wanted to show us an alternative to supporting the dominant U.S. food culture. There 85 cents of every food dollar goes to huge processors, marketers, and transporters, producing 3900 calories per person, per day (twice our need). There flavor and nutrition are sacrificed for road endurance and looks, and dozens or even hundreds of fuel calories burned to transport one calorie of food. There less is spent on food than in any country, ever, and more on food-caused health problems, producing the first generation predicted to live shorter lives than their parents. "We open our veins to the flow of gas-fueled foods, becoming yawning addicts, while our neighborhood farms dry up and blow away."

Because, at our peril, we've ignored biological diversity, we've become "the fattest people who've ever lived, dining just a few pathogens away from famine." "We all subsidize . . . cheap calories with our tax dollars, the strategists make fortunes, and the overweight consumers get blamed for the violation. The perfect crime."

They vowed to avoid "a casual, indiscriminate mingling of food from every season plucked from the supermarket" and to eat well, in every sense, "home-cooked meals from whole, in-season ingredients obtained from the most local source available."

The book follows their experiment, month by month, featuring rhubarb and asparagus in March, mountains of tomatoes and zucchini in midsummer, and freezer foods in January. What they don't raise themselves they buy from local farmers and farmers' markets. But they're not purists. Everyone gets a luxury item – coffee, spices, etc. And, like their unmentioned 19thC model Thoreau, they eat out, though they try to choose "a diner burger that does not come with a side of feedlot remorse."

Besides fruit and vegetables the family raises heirloom fowl, including Bourbon red turkeys and winter laying hens. "The blunt biological truth is that we animals can only remain alive by eating other life." Lily, the nine-year-old entrepreneur, is prominent here, raising chickens for meat and eggs under her own label, "Lily's Lovely Layers," and charging mom \$2.50 a dozen.

Kingsolver admits that their year cost everyone much physical labor. But, as she says with a nod to fast food, "*Eternal* is the right frame of mind. A lifetime is what I'm after." And growing, cooking, canning and making cheese "feels like family life in every happy sense."

The book ends with Barbara and Lily watching the first turkey chicks peck through their shells – a miracle revived. (612)