

Jeff Crump and Bettina Schormann

# EARTH to TABLE

Seasonal Recipes from  
an Organic Farm

"This is  
a beautiful book  
in every way."

**MICHAEL POLLAN**

*author of In Defense of Food  
and The Omnivore's  
Dilemma*

"Elegant  
recipes, sumptuous  
photography and  
charming essays capture  
the appeal of eating local,  
seasonal cuisine."

**THE GLOBE  
AND MAIL**

With photographs by Edward Pond

Praise for  
**Earth to Table**

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“You will not find a clearer or more compelling expression of the values of slow food than *Earth to Table*’s four-season testament to the importance—not to mention delight—of food that has been grown with care and cooked with conviction.”

Michael Pollan, author of *In Defense of Food* and *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*

“From the first pages of this gorgeous book, where, instead of a dish of carrots, you see carrots coming out of the earth, you know that Jeff Crump and Bettina Schormann have taken earth-to-table cooking to a new level.”

Deborah Madison, author of *Local Flavor* and  
*Cooking and Eating from America’s Farmers’ Markets*

“Even if this book is penned by two chefs, the recipes are well-suited to family meals and feasts.... There is plenty here for the amateur cook, and experienced foodies will appreciate the purity and simplicity of letting the ingredients do the talking.”

Ottawa Citizen (CanWest news service)

“This cookbook will resonate with the do-no-harm category of cooks. It’s an inspiration for those who want to eat seasonally, locally and organically.”

Vancouver Sun

“I’ve always believed the mark of a good cookbook is how banged up and stained the pages become, and if I judged *Earth to Table* by this metric after my week of testing it, you’d assume good food must live here. Coincidentally, it does.”

Porsha Perreault, *Taste T.O.*

“Their enthusiasm is infectious, as they write odes to the seasons, and to the pleasures of foraging and preserving: You may find yourself with an inexplicable urge to pickle some beets or buy the last summer’s peaches for Bettina’s Whisky Peaches and Cream.”

Sasha Chapman, *The Globe and Mail*

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**Jeff Crump  
and Bettina Schormann**

**EARTH  
to TABLE**

**With photographs by  
Edward Pond**



**RANDOM HOUSE CANADA**

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For Jules, Maus, Layla & Lawrence with love ... and Gunner, always in my heart—J.C.

Scott. to DO . . . . .

pretty much everything.

- Pork - bone, bones, stock.
- Ribeye, strip not filet
- please watch Alex with  
Gnudi

fish is in today

I will pick-up miso  
for Sablefish

Sockeye is now out of  
season . . . . .

See you @ 3  
JL





**“Eating is an agricultural act.”**

WENDELL BERRY

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# Introduction

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Everybody has some sense of what good food is.

What many of us actually eat may not taste especially good, may not be particularly good for us, and probably comes from a farm or factory we don't want to even imagine. But that's not because we don't know what we want. It's just that we always seem to end up eating something else.

After all, marketers know what we want. There is hardly an industrial-grade fast-food burger that is not advertised with images of dewy, plump tomatoes, wholesome bread straight from the oven, some kind of premium beef. The reality of flaccid vegetable matter, soggy bun and tasteless meat is, of course, rather different. But that's not really news—jokes about fast food that doesn't look anything like the commercials aren't even funny anymore. What is significant is that we are so mesmerized by the promise of fresh, wholesome food that we can be tricked into eating something else. Packages wouldn't be decorated with images of traditional farms and contented animals, and commercials wouldn't depict chefs and Italian grandmothers carefully tasting this or that "authentic" recipe, if these weren't the things we all think of as important.

The desire for food grown and prepared with care is not elitist or limited to a band of hippies. It's what we *all* want.

Similarly, just as no one says they want tasteless, truck-ripened vegetables or feed-lot beef, no one deliberately plans a rushed meal. And yet, again, that is what we end up eating: wolfing down burgers in our cars or slurping a plastic tray of microwaved pasta as we stare hunched over the kitchen sink. Fast-food companies rarely show lonely people eating in the

cubicles at work, or solitary figures heedlessly munching as they watch television at night. As usual, the marketers seem to know what we really want: they show smiling families gathered around the dining-room table. Talking, laughing, spending time together. If marketers know what we want, why don't we get what we want?

In other words, we're promised one thing, and we get something else. We end up gulping down food of dubious provenance when what we really want is to linger with friends and family over a meal of fresh, wholesome ingredients, carefully prepared. Fast food is sold to us on the merit of its illusory resemblance to Slow Food.

In any case, there is no point complaining about the food we don't want to eat. No point being negative or wringing our hands about what other people eat. Besides, I am not invulnerable to the seductions of certain burgers. So I'm not here to wag my finger at anybody. I just wanted to make the point that I probably don't have to convince anyone that fresh, wholesome, carefully prepared food, enjoyed in a civilized manner with people we care about, is the way to go—it's what everyone already wants. In fact, paying attention to what we want is a good way to figure out what's right to eat: tomato salad in August, fish and chips by the sea, a cold beer with lime on a hot summer day, even chicken wings with friends while watching football. Strawberries in February? Beef stew in July? Forget it.

Of course, paying attention to our hankerings won't tell us everything we need to know, partly because industrial-scale farming, shopping and eating have permitted our culture to forget a great deal that we once knew about food, and it's hard to have a craving for something you've never thought of or even really noticed. If you're accustomed to eating fast food french fries, you'd never know that even fries are seasonal (potatoes are not at their best between January and March). And if you're used to nuking your dinner in a microwave, you might not have developed a longing for the experience of a kitchen filled with the aromas of cooking, the warmth of the stove, the steamy clatter of pots or the satisfaction of washing up. There are some things we have to remember *how* to want if we want to do it right.

There are a few basic skills that all people should have: communication, personal finance, basic auto repair and cooking. These have all been slipping through our fingers as we become more and more specialized and dependent on specialists for everything. (I won't comment on my financial acumen, but I can tell you I don't change my own spark plugs.) I'm not sure which came first, the loss of our skills in the kitchen or convenience food that replaces the need for skill. I imagine they happened together. In any case, a couple of generations after the arrival of the TV dinner and the Radar Range, it's pretty clear that big business has given us the tools never to really cook again. Whole generations of kids are growing up without need to cook, much less shop, thoughtfully.

I was giving a cooking demo one year in a ski resort in the Rocky Mountains, a corporate team-building event that featured hands-on cooking. The teams received a recipe and ingredients, then were instructed to cook the dish. Each group was allowed to ask me only one question. After much debate, a team of men approached me with their question, and a head of garlic. The question was, "Is this a clove?" The recipe was roast chicken, to serve six people, and it called for five cloves of garlic. Now, I would have thought it was obvious that nearly a whole head of garlic per person would taste pretty devastating. But I guess not.

Back when food was made by hand, with ingredients offered up seasonally by the

landscape around you, it was pretty easy to know what to eat. You ate what was at hand. You ate what your parents ate, and what their parents had eaten before them. That's what culture is, I suppose: a way of formulating and storing knowledge.

It hardly needs to be said that this is not the way we eat today. To a large degree, we have a food culture only by default; we eat whatever we feel like eating, and that often means that we eat whatever happens to be available. The fact that what is available includes an astonishing array of foods doesn't change the reality that we're often lost as we negotiate the choices we stumble across in the supermarket.

If we don't know how to cook, then we lose the power of choice. You can't buy local seasonal produce if you don't know what it is or what to do with it. Fast food becomes the only option, and that means allowing agribusiness and marketers to make our decisions. And then the smells of the kitchen and the pleasure (and freedom) of putting together a meal will be lost.

**IF THE WORLD WERE FAIR**, we'd have celebrity farmers.

We have celebrity chefs, after all. People stay up late into the night, watching transfixed as charismatic men and women prepare enticing meals on television. It's not hard to figure out why. Food is important. It puts in physical form many of the things we value in life. It tells us who we are, and what kind of lives we dream of living. Food is all about what's best in life.

So I wish the world were ready for the first celebrity farmer.

Here's why. If you don't give the farmer credit for the taste of the food, then you're not giving the food credit either. I once did an externship at the famed restaurant Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California. Of course, the whole point of being an apprentice is to learn something, probably in the course of performing some humble task. I was instructed to shuck and clean a few cases of corn. As I sat there sullenly ripping the waxy green husks from the cobs, the head chef, Russell Moore, approached me and asked how the corn tasted. Since I was an apprentice, I gave the wrong answer. "It's not cooked," I said. "Why would I taste it?"

He snatched a cob from my hand and took a big bite, chewed reflectively for a moment, then told me to prepare the corn for the staff meal and wait for the "real good stuff" that was coming tomorrow. I tasted it myself and thought, "Tastes like corn to me."

The next day, there was a new delivery of corn at my station. It had come from Chiriquito Ranch, a farm that has become justly famous for the excellence of the food it produces. The first thing I did was tear open a cob and take a bite. I still get chills when I think about it. It was one of those rare moments when you discover sheer perfection: the crisp, slightly starchy sweetness was heavenly. I looked up and saw that Russell had been watching me with the knowing smile of a kung fu master. Without a word, he turned and continued his day.

So *that's* what corn tastes like.

Still, it wasn't as though I'd learned all there is to know about food from a single bite of corn. Most of us have already figured out that corn has to be eaten at the right time, and it's one vegetable that tends to be grown locally. No one in their right mind eats Argentinean corn in February. It would taste like porridge, and it would feel wrong. We wait for corn season, and for a few weeks we revel in the perfect confluence of weather and taste. Then it's gone for a year. We have only so many corn seasons in our lives.



We're a little less rigid with strawberries and tomatoes, but most of us get it. If you want a plump, sweet strawberry, grab one in early summer. If you want a fleshy, blood-red tomato, wait a few weeks more. At the right time of year, you might even find ripe, flavorful local produce in your supermarket. But many of us can't wait for those few weeks when strawberries and tomatoes are available at farmers' markets or in the little stalls on the side of the road. Some of us might even get so impatient that we pick up the pale, mealy strawberries and tomatoes that are available year-round, along with apples that have traveled halfway around the globe and avocados that taste like glue. Unnaturally symmetrical, and gleaming like children's toys under the halogen lights, this stuff doesn't taste nearly as good as it looks. In fact, for the most part, it tastes terrible.

Even worse, some people don't know the difference between the exquisite, local, seasonal food around them and the tasteless, rigid fare on offer in the supermarket.

It's the farmers who make good food taste good. They do it not only by taking care of the planting and weeding and harvesting (and peering inscrutably at the horizon, watching for signs of rain), but by doing it right, and simply by doing it at all. A day can make all the difference, and a farmer's life is a year of those days.

I'm grateful that farmers go to all this trouble. Without the men and women who grow and sell fresh produce, or raise range-fed animals, we'd all be doomed to eating bleak, industrial



food. I'm not saying I would never eat a chocolate bar or a takeout burger. But without produce and meat from properly managed farms, life would be pretty grim.

Here's what I mean. We already take for granted that we can buy the food we want: organic beef, non-pasteurized local cheese, pesticide-free seasonal produce and so forth. We think we're entitled to it. But I keep reminding myself that, not that long ago, this stuff just wasn't available, at least not on any scale, unless you grew it or made it yourself. It simply wasn't there. What was available was processed, industrial output (what might be called processed food). You couldn't choose to eat what you wanted, any more than a citizen of the USSR could choose to buy a new car. If what you want isn't available, you're not quite as free as you would otherwise be.

Farmers produce some of the most amazing things in life, and they don't get much credit for it. How heartbreaking it must be to work your ass off in the hot sun, fighting weather, time, bugs and weeds to grow something as simple as arugula, then to cut it, wash it, pack it, and drive it all the way to a restaurant—only to have some chef reject it because of a few holes, or because the leaves are too big or small, or simply because it's not on the menu right at that moment. Once, when I told a farmer I didn't need anything that week, he responded acidly that he would tell the plants to stop growing. On the other hand, an unfortunate cook once asked me what gardening has to do with cooking (I never said I was the *only* person who was foolish when he was young). Just as cooking means everything to the farmer (obviously, that is the destiny of the food he or she grows), farming means everything to the cook.

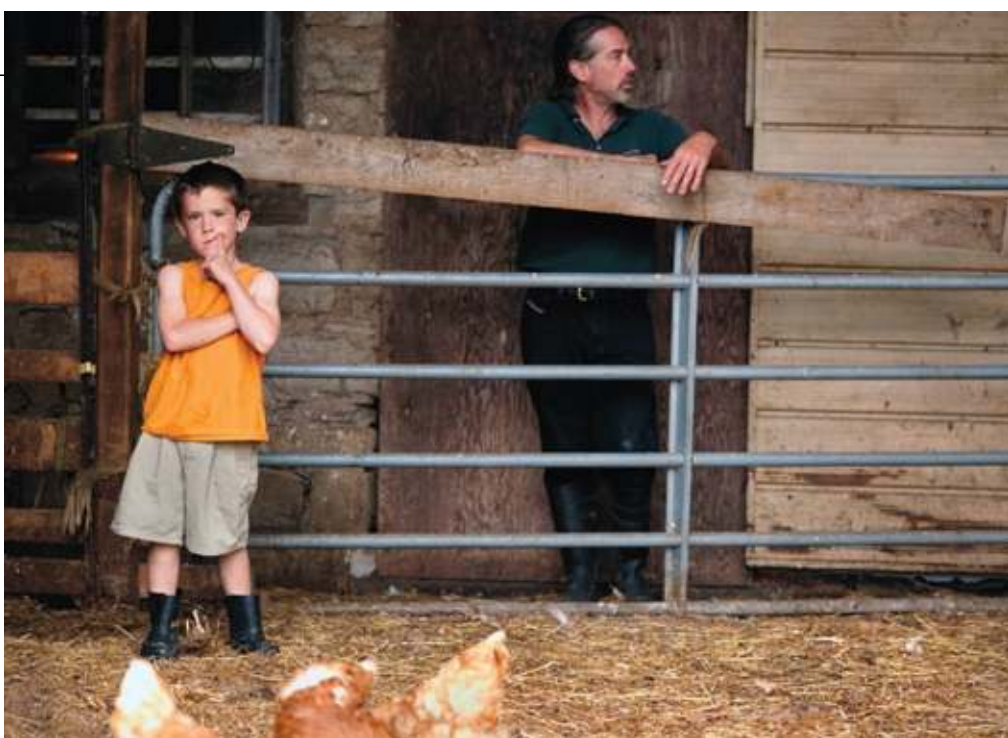
So, would I watch a reality TV show that followed the trials of an articulate farmer pursuing the perfect heirloom tomato? Absolutely.

**I COUNT MYSELF LUCKY** that I don't have to wait for a smart television executive with a taste for good food to come up with a series like that. I get to watch it nearly every day, and the main character is a farmer named Chris Krucker.

I met Chris in the summer of 2005 when I had been the executive chef at the Ancaster Old Mill for a couple of years. I have to admit that when I got a letter from a local organic farmer, I thought "hippie." And when I first shook hands with a guy who wore his greasy, flecked hair in a ponytail under a floppy hat, well, it's safe to say I found little reason to revise my preconceptions.

(Incidentally, even other local organic farmers think Chris has a few things in common with his sixties predecessors. Once, I was working in the field with him when a truck full of guys from a rival farm sped by with their windows down, shouting the inevitable taunt "Give a haircut!" When organic farmers think you're a hippie, you've probably got a little hippie in you.)





Kaleb and Chris Krucker

However, I quickly learned that Chris was not all peace and love. He was already suspicious of me, having been warned that chefs are a pain in the neck. For my part, I knew for a fact that farmers can be impossible. And this wasn't just stereotyping—for as long as I've been washing dishes or peeling potatoes, I've always sought out restaurants that source their produce carefully and locally. I had met enough stubborn, idealistic and ornery farmers to know that Chris might not be easy to get along with.

All the same, ManoRun Farm was everything industrial monoculture is not. Chickens, ducks and turkeys waddled around merrily in the shade of a big red barn. Horses stood at the fence absentmindedly flicking at flies. Cats wandered in and out of a sprawling Victorian house. A few cows and pigs clustered in a small grove of trees as if they were gossiping.

And the fields were a riot of growth. Towering stands of flowering Jerusalem artichokes. Carpets of various lettuces: cavolo nero, red and green oak leaf, romaine, curly endive, spinach. Sprawling nests of pumpkin and squash vines, ranks of corn, a kaleidoscope of beautiful greens. There was a lot going on. Of course, there were also weeds growing stubbornly amidst all this food, but as enticing as a prim garden can be, I'd rather see an abundance of life than a weed-free expanse from which all but a single species has been chemically exterminated.

All of which is to say that Chris's farm was just what I had been looking for for ten years. And so had my friend and colleague Bettina, the Old Mill's Pastry Chef. Bettina and I wanted to create an earth-to-table experience that would not only endow the Old Mill's restaurant kitchen with delicious seasonal produce, but would also allow the chefs to gain from the hands-on experience of working the land. To our delight, we discovered that we were becoming part of something even greater: a sustainable system that now nourishes our community, our traditions and our environment.

Little did Chris know what he was getting into.

We ended up settling on a trial order: fingerling potatoes, spinach, beets, radishes, French

beans and heirloom tomatoes. Of course, Chris grows much more than this, but we agree this would be a good place to start. We'd take it from there.

One thing I soon figured out is that farms have an important difference from restaurants: you don't order from a menu. What you get is what comes out of the ground. If we get a lot of spinach (and spinach is one of those foods that doesn't really have a season—it just keeps growing), we have to be creative enough to accommodate it. We watch the deliveries happen in order to analyze the spinach and review our mental menu items for a dish that suits that particular spinach on that particular day. Do we have a big party who would love a good soup? Are we short on arugula—in other words, can we substitute spinach for arugula in our dinner salad? Is the spinach pristine and small enough that we can keep it as is and simply dress it, or do we have to stew or cream it?

Chris, for his part, learned that restaurants have an important difference from his family kitchen: you can't make people eat something just because you did a great job growing it. One year, he had a bumper crop of radishes and kept showing up with bushels of the thing. Now, I don't care how good a radish is, or how much you love them—you can eat only so many. We could use about two bunches a week, which meant that some of Chris's radishes were going to meet a bad end.

Chris brought us a lot of stuff that year that didn't get used: kale, beet greens, rainbow Swiss chard, big overgrown greens. My cooks didn't know what to do with it all at first, and I had to witness the horror of boxes of produce wilting in the fridge. But that was my problem. I had told Chris that if he got me the goods, I would cook them. I'd had hopes of putting cavolo nero on the map (partly on the strength of its cool name, but more for its robustness and addictive bitterness), but I'm afraid much of it went to waste.

So at first we were paying for food we didn't use, and paying a premium for the food we did serve—even if it was not quite what we ordered. In fact, we still do. The reason we don't order food the way another business might order microchips, or fuel injectors, or lumber, is that food is not just another commodity, and farming is not just another way of producing something. Farmers take risks that other businessmen do not, and they are custodians of an important heritage that they should not be called upon to subsidize out of their own pockets. There were once hundreds of varieties of apples grown in Ontario; now we can buy six in the supermarkets. Many delicious apples, with exotic and enticing names like Foxwhelp, Sheep Snout, Bastard Rough Coat and Bloody Turk, have been lost forever, displaced by the shiny billiard balls we now think of as fruit. (Similarly, there are hundreds of types of cheese made in Italy and France, some only in a single village, by a lone cheesemaker; if one of these artisans dies without training an apprentice, a cheese could be lost forever.)

We want farmers to grow and market high-quality, local, seasonal produce and provide us with tasty, healthy, humanely raised meat. Yet our industrial food system gives them every incentive to get bigger, more energy-intensive, more global. Why on earth would I, either as a chef or as a cook at home, throw in my lot with a food system I know to be destructive, one that leaches the life out of local economies? The answer is, I wouldn't. And I don't.



Jeff Crump

We get our produce from Chris the same way people in cities around the world are not getting theirs: we belong to a Community Shared Agriculture program (CSA). The idea is simple. Customers don't buy produce from the farmer; they buy a share of his crop. This brings the farmer crucial capital early in the year, and spreads the risk that the crop might not turn out as planned. In other words, CSAs mimic living on the farm. You take the good with the bad, and if bugs eat all the zucchinis in August, you get no zucchinis in August. Of course, the more likely outcome is that you'll get a box of delicious, ripe zucchinis (and heaps of other stuff), but still, if something does go wrong, Chris is not the only guy left holding the bag. If he were, he might be tempted to pursue a less labor-intensive line of work. Like farming with chemicals.

And of course, this is not just about zucchinis. It's about supporting the local economy. In a world without CSAs, if Chris's farm were to fail, no one would even notice; we'd just get our zucchinis at the supermarket. This way, Bettina and I and everyone who belongs to the CSA have a stake in the local landscape. We are invited to open houses and even to work in the fields.



Bettina Schormann

We accepted the latter invitation eagerly. In fact, we made sure that everyone involved with the restaurant had a chance to go out to the farm to roll up their sleeves and help out. No one was forced to pull weeds or feed pigs on their day off, and I doubt Chris would have wanted his farm overrun by people who had no idea what they were doing. But we wanted everyone on board. Chefs don't make food, and farmers don't make food—food is the result of a long and largely hidden process, and I found this process fascinating enough to assume that everyone working in the restaurant would be equally interested. If I was wrong, no one has told me yet.

## 10

### THINGS WORTH THE FOOD MILES

(THAT IS, 10 THINGS I CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT, EVEN THOUGH THEY CAN'T BE SOURCED LOCALLY)

FAIR-TRADE COFFEE

VANILLA

OLIVES AND OLIVE OIL

RICE

WHITE TRUFFLES

BUFFALO MOZZARELLA

CITRUS FRUITS (LEMONS AND LIMES)

CHOCOLATE

SPOT PRAWNS

SOFT SHELL CRABS

This insistence on working with and protecting local producers is the key to the Slow Food movement. Slow Food is not about foie gras and caviar; it's about carrots and potatoes. It's about *quality* food, but that's not the same thing as expensive food. The way I see it, Slow Food is the way to defend the world against everything that's wrong with the way we tend to eat.

There are many strange ideas out there about Slow Food, so I will clarify a couple of points. First, it is not an ideological position; I certainly don't turn up my nose at a suspect plate of food and announce, "Sorry, can't eat that—I'm Slow Food, you see." Second, Slow Food does not mean slow cooking; it's just not fast food (globally sourced, industrially produced, unappetizingly prepared and unhealthy). Third, it's not necessarily "health food." There is nothing quite as delicious as lardo, a Piedmontese delicacy, which some people are alarmed to discover is pure cured pork fat. (Even people who would eat a six-piece packet of Chicken McNuggets, which contains eighteen grams of fat, would shrink from the idea of a paper-thin slice of lardo.) Fourth, Slow Food is not anti-globalization; it just struggles to control the exchange of ideas, rather than be controlled by it—in other words, it is an effort to forestall the complete homogenization of taste.

Perhaps I should simply call Slow Food "good food." One of my chefs once complained, "You're always just handing me food." I replied, "That's because I want you to know what it tastes like." There is no argument for good food quite as powerful as tasting it. I sometimes hold classes for kids, in which I prepare both Kraft Dinner and a proper Slow Food version of macaroni and cheese. Most kids are astonished to learn that the bright orange powder in the foil envelope is not, in fact, cheese in any meaningful sense. And I am happy to report that as much as kids love Kraft Dinner, they love real macaroni and real cheese even more.

Adults are no different. I once had a customer send back a crème brûlée because she detected small dark flecks in the custard and assumed it had gone bad. I went out with a vanilla bean in hand and encouraged her to smell it and tease out a few of the seeds—the brothers and sisters of the seemingly ominous dark flecks. She ate the crème brûlée happily, and I'd like to think that, now that she knows what the real item tastes like, she'll never settle for the ersatz version so many of us are accustomed to.



Think of all the food that is more familiar as a counterfeit: Black Forest cake, trifle, ice cream, cheese, ham, mortadella, shepherd's pie. If you've never had the real thing, you have no idea what you're missing. The same goes for new foods. You probably had to learn to like many of the most delicious things in life: olives, oysters, wine and beer, for example. If you don't try lardo, that's one less thing for you to enjoy in life.

In the end, I hope it becomes clear that what Bettina and I advocate when we encourage people to close the gap from earth to table is not that we all adopt some regimen of food purity, or that we abstain from certain foods. This is not about sacrifice (something I confess I have little talent for), it's about discovery. And what you discover may well be right around the corner, or just outside your door.

**THERE IS MORE THAN ONE WAY** to enjoy this book.

You may not try all the recipes, and you may not be interested in everything we have to say about this or that. What we set out to communicate is not the definitive set of answers to all of the questions surrounding our food culture, but a year's worth of our experiences as we did our best to answer them for ourselves. We have talked to a lot of people doing something similar, many of them among the world's best chefs, and we discovered that everybody's take on the issues is at least a little bit different. You'll meet some of these people as you read through the book, and learn what they think about farming and food. Some are animated by big ideas; some are just striving for the highest level of excellence their vocation can take them to. But the fact that so many brilliant chefs are heading in the same direction tells me that we're definitely on to something.

For my part, I can't claim to be an expert on anything but cooking. I'm not in any position to lecture you on farming, or the environment, or questions of sustainability. But I do think and read about these questions a lot, and looking for answers (or at least understanding the questions) made up a significant part of my relationship with the farm over the year described in the book. There are reasons we do what we do, and I thought it made sense to share them with you in each chapter's "spotlight."

We also figured this book would appeal not only to people who like to cook (and read) but also to people who like to *do*. (Not that cooking and reading aren't *doing*.) A lot of what we talk about falls outside of the familiar trip to the supermarket to pick up ingredients, so each chapter includes a "how-to" section that gives you an introduction to a new way of getting food from the field to your dinner table. I hope you are at least tempted to try some of them yourself.

Bettina kept a diary of our earth-to-table experience growing, harvesting and baking with Red Fife wheat, a nearly forgotten heirloom variety that has recently begun to enjoy something of a renaissance. (Bettina also wrote all of the dessert recipes in the book.)

We can't tell you how to read the book, of course. Now that it's in your hands, it's out of ours. But we would like to pass on a suggestion: Don't set your menu by leafing through the book. Instead, first see what's out there—in the garden, in the market, even in the woods. Once you know what nature has put on the menu, come back and investigate how we would cook it. Of course, the food you find may be a little different from what we have available to us—indeed, you may have more choices than we do here in Ontario, with our relatively short growing season. You will figure it all out.



*Everywhere* is local to someone. The neighborhood around our restaurant, the Old Mill, and ManoRun Farm is our idea of local, but everyone has local sources of food. Every strawberry has to be plucked somewhere, by someone. Every farm has a landscape that looks enticing in the morning sunlight; every field has weeds, and every laborer eventually has a sore back. But no farm is exactly like any other. That uniqueness is worth holding out for.

## **What To Cook With WHEN WE MENTION**

**SALT, WE MEAN KOSHER**

**BUTTER, WE MEAN UNSALTED**

**OLIVE OIL, WE MEAN EXTRA-VIRGIN**

**EGGS, WE MEAN LARGE AND ORGANIC**

**PARSLEY, WE MEAN BROAD-LEAF ITALIAN**

**YEAST, WE MEAN INSTANT**

## CHEF HESTON BLUMENTHAL

THE FAT DUCK, BRAY, U.K.

It may seem like a long way from a muddy field to the tables of the best restaurants in the world. But when you think about it, every vegetable has to come from *somewhere*. And there is one thing every forward-thinking chef I speak with has in common, it's the belief not only that great dishes are made with great food (no surprise there) but that great food is, for the most part, local and seasonal. No surprise there either, really. But good to know.

The ideas and philosophies of this book are fairly simple, and there is no reason we can't all go about cooking and eating not only deliciously but also sustainably, at least much of the time. But it occurred to me that the link between the world of Michelin-starred restaurants and the shopping you do at the farmers' market each weekend is not all that distant. We see this in the world of fashion all the time—the ideas that come to life in exotic ateliers and finally see the light of day on runways in Milan (or wherever) soon end up in local stores, at affordable prices. Most of us will never wear \$10,000 gowns, but we may well see dresses that resemble them when we go to the mall (if we go to malls). Even french fries were once haute cuisine.

My point, of course, is not that following trends is a good way to be popular, or that seasonal, local cooking is just another fashion. (Indeed, it's the way our species has eaten for well over 99 percent of its history—hardly a passing fad.) But good ideas do often start off in studios and laboratories and ivory towers before making their way into the mainstream, and great chefs' kitchens can be all of those things.

And none more than Heston Blumenthal's kitchen at the Fat Duck, the restaurant deemed the best in the world by *Restaurant* magazine in 2005 (and second-best in 2006, 2007 and 2008). It's an unprepossessing restaurant in a quiet, tidy village not far from Heathrow Airport, but make no mistake: this place is a chef's dream. So, rather than just dream, I headed over to work there for a month.



Heston Blumenthal (left), showing the author around Laverstoke Park Farm. (photo credit fm1.1)

Was I nervous? Let's say I was eager to see it all. The legendary "bacon and egg ice cream" and the "snail porridge," the now classic dish called "sound of the sea," which comes with an iPod—working in Heston's kitchen would mean preparing the food that earned the Fat Duck its three Michelin stars. Many cooking techniques, such as *sous vide* and something called *flügel*, have been developed in this kitchen. This is not a restaurant known for local, seasonal fare; its reputation is for wild innovation and a sort of mad scientist's enthusiasm for new ideas and techniques. But I wasn't there to have my own thoughts about food and agriculture confirmed. I was there to learn from a chef running perhaps the most exciting kitchen in the world.

It was about three days in when I actually met Heston. I was shucking my hundredth oyster and was about to gently cover it with passion-fruit gel when I felt a hand on my shoulder. "You're Jeff, the Canadian."

I turned and was face to face with the most dynamic chef in the world. There he was, nattily dressed, built like a rugby player, his trademark shaved head gleaming. Instantly likable. "Thanks for coming to the Fat Duck."

He was thanking *me*? I was sure the place would do fine without my help. A few weeks at the Fat Duck can make a young cook's career.

The line cooks at the Fat Duck are the rock stars of the food world. There are only ten oyster so spots on the hotline, and the apps and pastry positions are coveted the world over. Everyone is under thirty, all hard-partying perfectionists, a rare combination. I thought to myself that most of my kitchen staff would be right at home here. The music blares during preservice—Amy Winehouse to techno to Johnny Cash. But when service starts, everyone is deadly serious. The hours are brutal, even for someone like me who works sixty-hour work weeks. My shift was from 8 a.m. till 11 p.m. But morale was extraordinarily high.

The kitchen is absurdly tiny—about one-tenth the size of my kitchen, with the same number of cooks—and working in it was a little like playing tag in a phone booth. My motto was: Just watch your back all day and keep super-clean.

Once I had managed to prove that I knew what to do in a kitchen, I was given some interesting tasks, like receiving deliveries of whole squabs, guts and feathers included. We eviscerated the birds and hung them in the fridge to "ripen." I also found myself on snail duty one morning before I'd had a chance to grab a coffee. There was a knock at the back door and when I opened it I was handed about a hundred pounds of snails. I had never met a snail farmer until that moment, and was struck by how much he actually looked like a snail! Short and plump, not the cleanest chap in the world. (Difficult to stay clean in his line of work, I would imagine.) In any case, I cleaned snails for the first time in my life. Yes, there is a part of the snail that you don't want to eat. It is called the sac (you can guess what it holds). Snails are a cinch to clean, but there were a lot of them. We blanched and marinated them for the signature dish on the menu.

Was it worth a trip across the Atlantic to gut birds and clean snails? Well, yes, it was. Though my feet often ached and my eyes were pretty bleary by closing time, I found it exhilarating to get back to basics—not only the basics of execution as a line chef but the basics of food itself. Whether I was confronted with a feathery bird or a pail of gastropods, it was galvanizing to be reminded that the world-famous dishes these animals would soon become began as living things. We all know this, of course, but you know it more acutely

somehow when you've experienced it up to your elbows.

Still, what I really wanted was a chat with Heston, and I didn't have to wait long. We met for tea at his pub, the Hind's Head. As I was waiting for him in the bar, I exchanged a few words with the hostess, who got a little flustered when she discovered whom I was meeting. When he arrived, he asked for tea before we sat down in a private room to talk. A few minutes later, the hostess arrived with a whole tray of tea. "So sorry," she said. "I forgot which type of tea you wanted, so I made them all!"

Heston manages to be a flurry of activity even when he's sitting still. You can see his mind racing. He speaks with infectious energy, his thoughts galloping away in all directions. His phone vibrates every two minutes, and he takes his glasses off at regular intervals to think out loud to make a particularly important point.



(photo credit fm1.2)

Sustainable gastronomy is clearly an idea dear to his heart, because we ended up talking for twice as long as his assistant had allotted me, and we could have gone on much longer (particularly if he didn't have a book to write, a BBC television show to produce and a column to write, not to mention a family and two restaurants demanding his attention). He made it clear he wanted to support the earth-to-table project.

The thing that struck me most was that, while the Fat Duck is not known for its earth-to-table credentials, Heston is quietly very committed to local food—something I saw first-hand when I visited Laverstoke Park Farm, the farm his food comes from (see [this page](#)). The reason is simple: it tastes better.

### What Heston Cooks With His Son

The dish Heston's son has taken to is a simple carbonara pasta—he thinks it will help get the girls! In a skillet, sauté onions, garlic, bacon and chilies. In a bowl, whisk two eggs with Parmesan cheese. Boil some pasta, then combine all of the hot ingredients with the egg mixture. Season, stir and

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