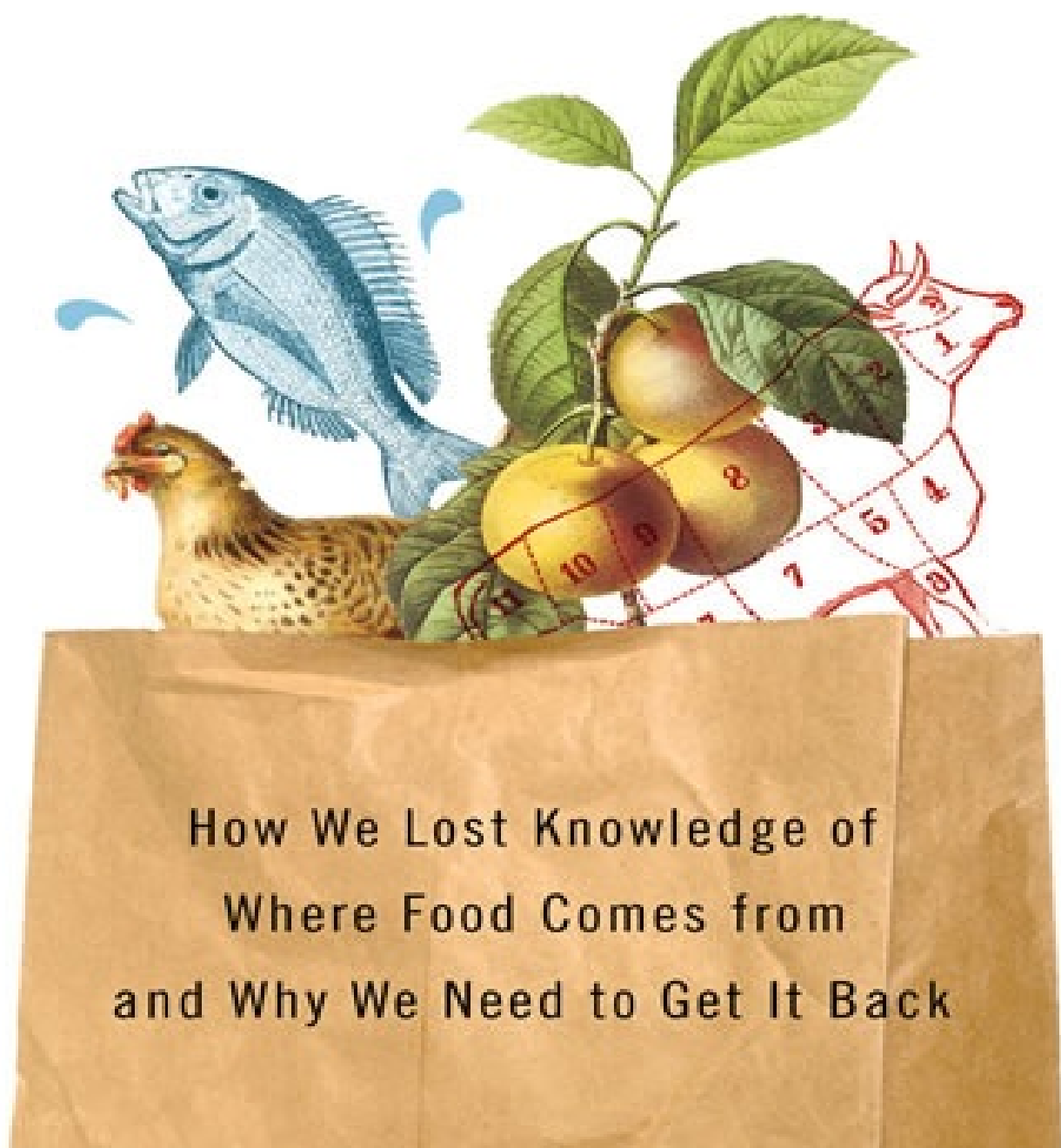


# KITCHEN LITERACY



How We Lost Knowledge of  
Where Food Comes from  
and Why We Need to Get It Back

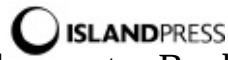
ANN VILEISIS

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# **Kitchen Literacy**

How We Lost Knowledge of Where Food Comes From and Why We  
Need to Get It Back

**Ann Vileisis**



Shearwater Books

*Washington • Covelo • London*



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*To my mother, Janet Taylor,*

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*and my grandmothers, Phyllis Fleming and Vita Vileisis,*

*for teaching me about the ways of the kitchen*

*and for nourishing my curiosity and creativity always.*

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Know thyself.

SOCRATES

---

You are what you eat.

Not to know at large of things remote  
From use, obscure and subtle, but to know  
That which before us lies in daily life,  
Is the prime wisdom.

MILTON

(Epigram in *Mrs. Lincoln's Boston Cooking School Cookbook*, 1902)



# INTRODUCTION

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## Missing Stories

Has it ever occurred to you just how odd it is that we know so little about what we eat? Each day we feast on cereal, bread, salad, soup, chicken, cheese, apples, ice cream, and more. Over the course of our lives, each of us has eaten thousands of different foods. We have tasted their saltiness and sweetness, crunched their crispness, chewed their fleshiness, swallowed them, and incorporated the nutriment into our bones. Yet despite this biologically intimate and everyday physical connection, most of us have little idea where our foods come from, who raised them, and what went into making them.

The absurdity of this situation struck me about ten years ago. The news was rife with stories about how large-scale food production harmed health and the environment: pathogens such as *Salmonella* and *E. coli* had become more prevalent in meat and eggs raised under crowded factory-farm conditions; pesticides used to grow foods were contaminating drinking water and harming the health of farmworkers and their children; agricultural chemicals were causing declines in amphibian and bird populations; the cod fishery was collapsing; and the fungicide methyl bromide, used in growing strawberries, was even linked to the erosion of the earth's ozone layer. I began to wonder, were these the berries and eggs that I bought?

As I pushed my shopping cart through the supermarket aisles, questions rose insistently in my mind: How were my eggs raised? Who grew my tomatoes? Where did my fish come from? What about the milk? The colorful boxes, cans, and jars that had long appeared familiar and comforting now looked cryptic. Each product, I realized, was the culmination of some hidden story that I—and most of my fellow shoppers—had never bothered to consider. Everything we ate had a story, but we didn't know any of them.

I was just starting to grasp that choices I made about what to buy in the supermarket had punch and bite—in real places and in real people's lives. Yet when I shopped, these matters had rarely before come to mind. A much narrower set of criteria had always guided my decisions. When picking tomatoes, for example, I'd rather unconsciously considered their appearance, firmness, price, and gratifyingly low caloric content, along with the culinary possibilities of salads or sauces. I'd never considered where the tomatoes had come from, how they were grown, and who did the work of raising them.

Now I started to wonder: Why did I consider some things but not others? Why did I *think* the way I did about my food? I began to have vague misgivings about what might be happening beyond the scope of my awareness, yet it was difficult to take responsibility when the whole supermarket system seemed to make it almost impossible for me—or for any of us—to know about the origins of our foods.

I was certainly curious about the stories behind my milk, eggs, and tomatoes, but even more, I was drawn to larger questions: How on earth did we get into the modern situation where we know so little about what we eat and yet regard it as entirely normal? How was it that basic ignorance about food

had become truly the norm in our culture, and what difference has it made?

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That's what this book is about.

TO FIND the answers to my questions, I looked to history. By keeping my bead on what American home cooks have known and not known about their foods, I began to track the gulf in understanding that rapidly grew over time as distance between farms and kitchens widened.

Two hundred years ago, most Americans knew a lot more about what they ate in a direct, firsthand, rooted-in-the-earth way because most had an actual hand in growing a sizable share of their foods. America went from being a nation of farmers to being one of workers and consumers, growing numbers of city dwellers had to grapple with procuring and cooking foods in new ways. Over the course of only a few generations, we went from knowing particular places and specific stories behind our foods' origins to instead knowing very little in an enormous and anonymous food system.

Those who have written about food history have dropped clues about this cognitive shift as they've chronicled how Americans adopted new products, new nutritional understanding, and new culinary practices in the dynamic social context of urbanization and ethnic diversification. And those who have written trenchant critiques of America's modern agriculture have generally regarded the separation of consumers from producers as a lamentable side effect of a much larger industrial transformation of America's economy, landscape, and culture.

Yet as I began to wrestle with my own food choices, what intrigued me most was the uncharted terrain in between those other histories and analyses. I wanted to home in on how people's thinking had changed as the experience of eating became wholly separate from that of raising and producing foods. How had our mental habits as shoppers, cooks, and eaters evolved toward the out-of-sight, out-of-mind approach that I'd recognized in myself and in others?

In seeking to understand this drift toward indifference, I found an important clue in the work of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. In the late 1960s, he made the perceptive suggestion that food must be just as “good to think” in a cultural sense as it is to eat in a nutritional sense.<sup>1</sup> The idea that foods must be appealing in our minds as well as in our mouths becomes particularly illuminating when considered through the lens of history. As foods were changed to meet the demands of America's rapidly urbanizing society—often in ways that did not at first appeal to many people—the mental framework we consumers used to understand food was invariably stretched and fudged to accommodate those changes. At the same time, what constituted a home cook's competency was also radically transformed. By investigating these shifting frameworks—the defining and redefining of kitchen literacy that went hand in hand with industrialization—we can better grasp how and why the more shadowy and unappetizing context of our foods' origins was gradually whittled away from the ken of what we know about what we eat. We can also begin to discern some of the far-reaching implications of this subtle but unmistakable drift in our everyday way of thinking.

THIS HISTORY begins in a late eighteenth-century kitchen, exploring the day-to-day work of one woman who depended on a substantial body of traditional knowledge to feed her family. Martha Ballard knew specific, intimate details of the foods she cooked: the age and sex of the animal that became her roast lamb, the garden stories of her knobby potatoes, the contours of the cornfields that supplied her bread.



flour, and the muscle it took to transform raw ingredients into satisfying meals. Martha and many other women of her time knew where much of their food came from and how it was made.

Following the dominant urbanizing trend, this story next takes us into city markets and then grocery stores to explore how the kind of firsthand knowledge Martha possessed was upended and transformed over the course of the nineteenth century. At first, most rural transplants to the city expected to know the same things they had always known about their foods—the places, particulars, and stories of the foods' provenance. In early city markets, shoppers could still pinch a goose's webbed foot, look a fish in the eye, or talk with a farmer. But before long, the scale, complexity, and anonymity of the emerging food supply system made such awareness impossible as fewer and fewer people with more and more machines delivered food products from farther and farther away—especially after the transcontinental railroad linked the coasts in 1869.

Because the lengthening food chain was plagued by problems of adulteration, particularly in the case of factory-made foods, late nineteenth-century women did not readily welcome these new products into their kitchens. Some factory foods challenged a cook's traditional means of appraising ingredients with her senses: cans concealed their contents with tin armoring; oleomargarine with artificial coloring effectively mimicked butter. Moreover, as America's food system industrialized with the logic of mass production, the very idea of knowing where foods came from and how they were made became less appealing. As food production became more abstruse, a newly emerging mass media cut its teeth by helping to ease upper- and middle-class Americans into accepting new ways of shopping, cooking, and eating.

It took a relentless legion of admen and home economists about five decades to convince American skeptical homemakers to adopt the new products and new ways to think and “know” about foods. Over the course of these decades, what had once constituted valued knowledge passed on from mother to daughter was rejected and deemed irrelevant, while what had first been mocked as ignorance was eventually elevated to a desirable and respected status. For example, knowing about the lives of animals that became meat had been considered essential kitchen lore until the 1880s, but then the big Chicago meatpacking plants with their tidy cuts and wrappers made this knowledge obsolete and memories of it repugnant. Before long, as the barnyard was distanced from the kitchen, ignorance about all farm animals became typical and even a matter of prestige. Through the same period, knowledge of brand names, which had seemed at first rather trivial, became the hallmark of contemporary woman's food savvy in the new industrial age.

Eventually, by the late 1920s, a new ideal of modernity had gained powerful cachet in society and exerted new influence on what attributes were valued in foods; the uniform and hygienic trumped the flavorful and distinctive. As homemakers learned to rely more and more on advertisements and outside experts for information, they came to mistrust their own taste buds and kitchen know-how. Indifference about the origins and production of foods became a norm of urban culture, laying the groundwork for a modern food sensibility that would spread all across America in the decades that followed. Over time, the mores that trendsetting, affluent city women adopted in their kitchens influenced broader cultural ideals even for the poorest mothers of the rural South, many of whom aspired to cook, serve, and eat processed foods they couldn't afford.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, American shoppers of every class and gender would experience this transformation in one way or another.

Within a relatively brief period, the average distance from farm to kitchen had grown from a short walk down the garden path to a convoluted, 1,500-mile energy-guzzling journey by rail and truck. As food production became more remote and complex, consumers' fundamental literacy about food

shrunk and wizened even as a guise of new “knowledge” based on brand names and ad-attached attributes was erected. The everyday task of feeding families had once depended on the substantial knowledge of homemakers and other household helpers, but more and more, this work depended on what might well be called an unspoken covenant of ignorance between shoppers and an increasingly powerful food industry.

Ultimately, the ignorance of shoppers became as integral to the modern food system as any technology or infrastructure. The new sense of “knowing” that had been vigorously cultivated to encourage homemakers to trust experts and accept modern foods went on to shield an increasingly industrial style of food production from public scrutiny in the 1940s and 1950s.

During these critical decades, agriculture was utterly refashioned to meet industrial ideals of efficiency: small farms were consolidated into larger farms operated by fewer people with large equipment and more petroleum; more synthetic fertilizers and pesticides were brought into use to grow high-yield monoculture crops; more wetlands were drained to bring more farmland into production; more rivers were dammed to irrigate more cropland in arid but temperate areas; and the expanding use of antibiotics permitted meat production to grow to a scale never before imagined.<sup>3</sup> All these changes had consequences for rural communities and landscapes nationwide—and for dinner tables, too, as hundreds of new additives and pesticide residues became routine parts of the American diet unbeknownst to those doing the cooking and eating.

Although rising interest in gourmet cooking and then widely publicized perils of the chemical age would prompt many Americans to question the modern food system in the 1960s and 1970s, throughout the same period, new generations grew up with paler expectations of what they could and should know about foods and cooking. As more women opted for careers and—by economic necessity—worked outside the home in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, time available for learning about foods and for home cooking became constricted in many households. (Few men were helping to shoulder the work of shopping and cooking just yet.) As families more frequently consumed quick-fix convenience dinners and ate meals out at popular fast-food restaurants, indifference about foods' sources further increased. Ultimately, we have ended up in the absurd situation today that most of us, as consumers, know very little about what we eat; and, sensing a “dark side” to our foods' production, many of us don't even *want* to know.

Typically, the history of America's remarkable food system has been recounted as a singularly progressive tale. Yet for many of us, the marvel of fresh leafy lettuce in the winter nests right beside the uneasiness that our children don't know milk comes from cows. This characteristic modern uneasiness about not-knowing and not-wanting-to-know our foods is just as deeply a part of our history, our personal experience, and our psyches as the triumphant ease of serving Hamburger Helper.

ANY AMERICAN history that examines how we've lost track of where our food comes from must confront a deep, almost wistful question that lurks just below the surface of our collective consciousness: Is the “where” where our food comes from “nature”? Of course, our food does ultimately come from soil, sunlight, and water, and for tens of thousands of years the human experience of procuring food—be it by hunting, gathering, or agriculture—was linked closely to knowing the ins and outs of the natural world. Today, however, beyond the supermarket, food derives not only from an obscured nature but also from behind-the-scenes tractors, gasoline, laser-levelled fields, fertilizers, irrigation ditches, pesticides, combines, migrant workers, laboratories, sanitizers,

factories, stinking feedlots, semitrucks, and highways.

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In spite of this—and perhaps because of this—the cultural idea of nature (as opposed to the so-called sunlight, and water that make up the physical environment) has become an important, if confusing, category for how many of us think about our foods, and one worth examining more closely from a historical perspective. It's not surprising that concern about the “naturalness” of foods first emerged when the food system began to industrialize. Yet over time, our cultural bearings about what “natural” means, in terms of both land and food, have gradually shifted as American society has adopted a more generally urban outlook.

For this reason, from behind today's shopping cart, it's difficult to imagine our food as a means of physical connection to the natural world. When we consider “connecting to nature,” we are more inclined to imagine gazing at a spectacular waterfall than to consider rows of crops on a farm, let alone the frozen-foods aisle. In one of those great modern ironies, food is rarely regarded as “natural” unless it has been so labeled.

Yet each time we eat a turkey sandwich or a bowl of cereal, we are dependent on land and water—we are fixed in food chains that link us to places that are surely embedded in ecological systems. Author Michael Pollan has recently described eating as “our most profound engagement with the natural world.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, through food, we are irrevocably attached to the natural environment. The odd thing is that, by habit, we rarely realize this, and collectively, our lack of awareness has given us a distorted view of our place as humans within the larger world. With the supermarket nearby, we live with a detached assurance that our stomachs will always be full, even as industrial farms severely degrade soils, consume enormous amounts of fossil fuels, pollute waters with excess nitrogen and other toxins, and inadvertently spur pests and microbes to alarming potencies.

Though our modern culture's estrangement from the natural world has oft been lamented from many angles, it seems important to consider afresh how losing knowledge of our foods has contributed to this rift. Through history, we can see that what we know (and don't know) about our foods has played a central role in how we perceive ourselves (and fail to perceive ourselves) in the broader context of the natural world. Understanding this dissonance becomes especially crucial as environmental consequences of large-scale food production become more evident and more troubling.

WHILE URBAN and suburban eaters have, for the most part, embraced the benefits and convenience of the modern food system and adopted its requisite habit of “looking the other way,” a growing number of Americans have recently become more concerned about where and how their foods are produced. Today, interest in local and organic vegetables and meats has burgeoned into a sophisticated revolution, with organic sales growing by 20 percent each year and farmers' markets sprouting up in cities everywhere.

This revolution draws on many motivations and historical tendencies, yet central to them all has been the desire of shoppers, cooks, and eaters to better know the provenance of their foods. By knowing more, these hopeful consumers aspire to both avoid and subvert the harmful aspects of the dominant food system, and—in the process—to find better-tasting, healthier fare.

This movement of eaters remains small relative to America's mammoth food economy, but already it has become a promising force toward reforming some of the most egregious excesses of modern industrial agriculture. In the final chapters, I will discuss this emerging trend of consumers striving

bring knowledge and stories of foods back into their kitchens and lives in new ways.

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Ultimately, if our market-driven society is to build a healthier food system, we as consumers will need to recognize how our everyday choices affect the larger environment and, then, to forge a new and influential role for ourselves. In an age when farms and factories of food production seem impossibly remote from our dinner plates, history can sharpen our outlook with its perspective and ironies, and remind us of the opportunity for change.



## A Meal by Martha

In the center of a wooden table on a pewter platter sat a baked leg of lamb. One earthenware bowl held a heap of steaming, fresh string beans, while another contained sliced cucumbers, likely drizzled with vinegar. The table was plain, but the savory smell of the roast meat made mouths water and elevated this meal, like many simple meals, to a humbly exceptional status.

At the time, it was ordinary, but in retrospect, it seems utterly distinctive: everyone sitting at the table knew exactly where the foods came from. The lamb came from a nearby farm, while the string beans and cucumbers came from a garden just down a path out the kitchen door.

This particular meal was prepared and served on August 15, 1790, by Martha Ballard, who recorded it in her diary with an understated satisfaction: “had bakt lamb with string beens and cucumbers.”<sup>1</sup>

Martha Ballard is one of few eighteenth-century American women who left a diary. Over the course of twenty-seven years, she made notes about her daily life in a series of small hand-sewn booklets. Best known for her work as a midwife (her career is brilliantly chronicled in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's book *A Midwife's Tale*), she delivered over eight hundred babies, hastening at all hours—under the serene dome of starry nights or through blinding snowstorms—to aid laboring women in the area now known as Augusta, Maine.<sup>2</sup>

During that same period, Martha also conceived of and prepared thousands of meals for herself and her family. Her diary is filled with details of weeding and cooking, seeds and eggs, turkeys and cows, and through its pages we can begin to grasp what a woman two hundred years ago knew about the foods she cooked.

Martha's baked lamb dinner is a good place to begin. In the intimate circle of a meal, our attention is directed to the physical and the sensuous, to aromas and flavors, to smaller scales and specific places. Through the details of dinner, we can begin to unearth a consciousness about cookery very different from our own.

In 1790, the year this lamb was served, Martha was fifty-five years old and living in a home beside the mill that her husband, Ephraim, leased. The couple had made their lives there along Bowmar Brook for five years. At this place, her oldest daughters had grown through adolescence, while her youngest son had just reached his tenth birthday. The Ballards' waterwheel powered not only a gristmill but a sawmill, one of several that formed a backbone to the budding industrial economy of the Kennebec River valley, based on felling and milling trees from northern forests and then shipping the timber south to the growing city of Boston.<sup>3</sup> While Ephraim's mill was integral to the greater regional economy, Martha's garden was central to the family's household economy.

At the time, it was customary for women to have purview over the garden. In her diary, Martha most often referred to it as “my garden,” claiming authority for what happened on the small patches of land she presided over. In 1790, Martha spent parts of sixty-one days working in her garden.<sup>4</sup> Imagine her moving amid rows of plants in her long, home-woven flax skirt, the billows of indigo

dyed fabric catching on cabbage leaves and her hem unavoidably sullied by garden dirt. She starts by picking bugs in her “east garden,” which was nestled up against the house and situated to catch the morning sunlight. Then she walks around to inspect peas tendrilling in another plot, located by the back door to take advantage of an already-fenced-in space used for storing firewood in winter and there well mulched with “chips.” After a shift of kitchen work, she might head down to pull weeds in yet another garden sited alongside the barn. Finally, in the late afternoon, she might find time to do some hoeing in a plot set by the brook, convenient if summer proved droughty and wilting plants required extra watering by pail.<sup>5</sup> It was in this plot that Martha had planted, tended, and picked the string beans and cucumbers she served to her family on August 15.

In the case of the “bakt lamb” dinner, as with most meals, the distance that most ingredients traveled from field and barn to table was within a walk of the housewife. Because 95 percent of colonial women lived outside towns, this farm-to-table distance was typical.<sup>6</sup> During the summer, a housewife could walk twenty steps into her yard to gather eggs or herbs. Vegetable gardens stretched farther from the kitchen door—often covering one or two acres with squash, cabbage, turnips, peas, and potatoes. In the early spring before the garden came ready, she might venture somewhat farther to gather wild greens for “sallets.”<sup>7</sup>

In the course of their work, housewives like Martha walked these short distances back and forth countless times. These walks wore a woman's body, but they also drew her attention to the land and the animals she tended. She knew exactly where to look for eggs laid by a furtive red hen, where wild grapevines hung from oaks, and where the muskmelons sweetened best in a warm spot against the side of the barn. The details of the place were part of her everyday life, her work, and the meals she prepared.<sup>8</sup>

The lamb served for dinner in August 1790 came not from the Ballards' pastures, but from the farm of a Mr. Porter, who lived ten miles to the west.<sup>9</sup> The lamb came as payment for the work of Martha's eldest son. Such barter tied families together in a close web of relationships; neighbors traded help and food all the time.<sup>10</sup> The web of exchange served as a safety net. If hard times hit one neighbor, others had the wherewithal to help. While most families had the capability of raising nearly all their own foods, they usually chose to grow some and to buy and trade for the rest. For example, meat other than lamb could have come just as readily from the Ballards' own pens and pastures—from the animals cared for by Martha, her husband, and their children. They had a milk cow, pigs, and chickens but had not yet started a flock of sheep, probably for want of space at the mill site.<sup>11</sup>

When Martha noted the baked lamb dinner in her diary, she did not specify bread, but a coarse and crusty loaf likely rounded out the meal. Most often, Martha made her bread from rye and wheat—she called it “brown and flower bread”—and sometimes from corn as well.<sup>12</sup> Martha baked with flour milled from grain that came from fields cultivated by her husband and sons but also with wheat, corn, and rye that came from other farms as payment for milling or midwifery. In her diary, she noted with particular satisfaction baking bread from wheat grown by her husband: “I have Sifted our flower Bakt, it makes a fine bread indeed.”<sup>13</sup> As her hands plunged into the sticky sponge of dough, as she kneaded in the wooden trough hewn by her son, as she formed loaves and set them to rise, and as she pulled the hot fragrant bread from her oven, Martha knew exactly where her flour came from.<sup>14</sup> The flour was not an anonymous powder. She knew the curve of the fields where the wheat grew, the hardened muscles of her husband's arms that cut it, and the coursing waters of Bowman's Brook that ground it between millstones. Her mind, hands, and palate could discern how bread made from grain grown by Mr. Ballard differed from grain grown on a farm up the Kennebec at Sevenmile Brook. Whether you or I could taste a difference between these crusty loaves she baked, we can never know, but for Martha, a deep sense of place was a fundamental part of cooking and eating.



Starting with the lamb, string beans, and bread, and imagining some of the places that Martha depended on to bring this meal to her table, we become aware of a foodshed. This modern-day term refers to the area of land from which food is drawn.<sup>16</sup> I like to envision foodsheds from a maplike aerial perspective: the kitchen sits at the center and shaded lobes reach out across hills and swales to encompass the areas that supply a meal's ingredients. In the case of this meal, a large lobe would reach to Mr. Porter's farm ten miles to the west; a small lobe would reach two hundred feet south to the garden patch by the brook; and a lobe for bread would reach to the northwest where the Ballards' corn and wheat fields yielded their grains. From the perspective of a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century New England cook, the notion of a meal's food-shed would have been more grounded: most ingredients were drawn from an area of less than fifty acres, much of it in view from the kitchen door.<sup>17</sup>

In the relatively small and familiar space of such a foodshed, the interdependence of field and kitchen was abundantly clear. A farmer had to mesh his knowledge of the place with the demands of the table. For example, to bake a typical 1,300 pounds of "rye and injun" bread each year, a housewife needed twenty-eight bushels of grain—half rye, half corn. That meant a New England farmer would have to sow two to three acres each year to provide for the family's bread and also to feed livestock through winter.<sup>18</sup> The very way a farm looked was shaped to a large degree by a family's appetite.

Washington Irving evocatively captured the close relationship between appetite and land in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, published not long after Martha baked her lamb. When a hungry Ichabod Crane arrived on horseback at the Hudson Valley farm of his beloved Katrina's father, he saw before him a banquet. "In his devouring mind's eye he pictured to himself every roasting-pig running about with a pudding in his belly, and an apple in his mouth; the pigeons were snugly put to bed in their comfortable pie, and tucked in with a coverlet of crust; the geese were swimming in their own gravy, and the ducks pairing cosily in dishes, like snug married couples, with a decent competency of onion sauce."<sup>19</sup> To Crane, the landscape appeared not as the gardens, orchards, farm fields, and pastures but as a vast table set with mounds of mashed potatoes, pens of pork chops, and paddocks of pies. In his hungry imagination, the bountiful land morphed into a feast.

The scene reminds me of cartoons I watched as a child—ones in which fleeing chickens and pigs turned into giant drumsticks and pork chops in the mind's eye of a comic predator. However, Irving's metamorphosis of landscape into opulent feast was not just fantasy; in a fundamental way, it reflected preindustrial Americans' sensibility about land. Well-tended and improved land could yield a cornucopian spread and was regarded as a source of food and a sign of wealth, not just as backdrop scenery. Envisioning and knowing a landscape as one's fount of food is far different from what most of us know and experience when driving through the countryside today.

MARTHA'S baked lamb dinner is a single meal, but it could stand for many others mentioned in her diary and for thousands of others cooked by women in preindustrial America. Of the more than seventy different foods mentioned in Martha's diary, most came from local sources in a small, known foodshed; they were eaten in season, when available, or in preserved (dried, brined, or sugared) form. The few items that came from afar tended to be those used only in small amounts, such as cinnamon and nutmeg, or the special, once-a-year Christmas-day orange.<sup>20</sup> Though corn bread and salt po-



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