

**The Kitchen Table:  
Relationships with the People, Food, and Land that Sustains Us**

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Liberal Arts  
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*Due to the Covid-19 crisis, the theses were approved by Program Directors, and are often unsigned.*

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**Dedicated to:**

My parents, Peter and Ande Frost, and my brothers, Read and James Frost, whose endless love and support inspired me to pursue this opportunity in the first place.

My late grandparents, Fred Frost and Elaine Ramsden, who valued education and the pursuit of knowledge above all else.

And to my loving partner, Scott LaMay. Without you, this experience (and life in general) would be far less fun.

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# **The Kitchen Table**

**Relationships with the People, Food, and Land that Sustains Us**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which interactions *with* food and *around* food affect an individual's sense of self, connection to community as well as to friends and family, and sense of place. Short, personal narrative gives way to discussion of such themes and ideas as home, homemade food and terroir. It becomes clear that acts of celebration of and gratitude for food, particularly in connection with a specific place or line of heritage, play necessary roles in the development of our personal identities and in our search for belonging. These stories are based on personal experiences of the author's, and are therefore contextualized with references to her hometown in the state of Rhode Island and its cultural and gastronomical history and demographics.

*“Eating with the fullest pleasure—pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance—is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery.”*

- Wendell Berry

My desire to explore the magic that occurs around a kitchen table began years ago, when my sole duties as a human were to clean my room, not flunk out of elementary school, and set the kitchen table for dinner. My favorite of the three was obviously the latter. There were a handful of mismatched table settings in the small drawer of linens, including blue placemats with a dark green trim and large peaches painted in the center. These were the most beautiful. I placed five at the table, taking special care to line them up perfectly with the edges of each chair. I rolled pairs of forks and knives into paper napkins and poured water into a glass for each place at the table. Sometimes I added ice cubes.

The coveted chore of setting the table was mine because the kitchen was where I liked to sit to do my homework. It was the warmest spot in the house, for starters, and that time of day usually meant that something delicious-smelling would be bubbling in a pot on the stove. My mom, leaning against the counter, would occasionally hand a spoon off to me, instructing me to keep stirring, stirring, stirring while she ran into the next room for something. When she came back, she usually found me stirring at a too-slow, perfectionist pace, my child-like caution allowing the creamy liquid to burn onto the bottom of the pot. She would wrap her fingers around my small hand and quickly whisk the sauce back to life. It would feel too fast and imprecise, and when I tried to imitate her speed, I always inadvertently painted the floor and countertop with buttery splatters. But she kept employing my efforts, and I increasingly found comfort at the stove, entranced by the alchemy of ingredients coming together in thick, rolling bubbles before my eyes.

Just before dinnertime, I would arrange the places the same way I always did: mom at the head of the table, dad to her left. I sat across from him, and my two brothers sat to our sides, across from each other. That way, I would be right in the middle of the conversation – my favorite part of the evening. Long before I started enjoying a glass of Zinfandel (dad's favorite) with my dinner,



I grew aware of the love-drunk cloud of warmth that descended upon us as we ate together. We were grateful to fill our bellies with a warm, home-cooked meal, our imaginations tickled by the stories we shared. Even tired, grumpy nights contributed to the comfort of consistency that came from our nightly gathering in the kitchen, leaving me with only tender memories of happy mealtimes. The kitchen table sat at the center of my family's relationships, witnessing arguments and tears and laughs and late night secrets. It also carried the weight of thousands of meals and snacks, always shared. There was always enough. I knew that made me one of the lucky ones.

It was early in my childhood when I discovered that accompanying my mother on one of her countless weekly grocery trips meant that I would have a say in what we had for dinner. Just a small say, but still. And that meant finishing my entire meal would not be an option, but rather a requirement. I often requested asparagus, or bacon, or cheese. Mom grew up in South Africa, the daughter of a single woman with simple means, and so she instilled in us the importance of being grateful for our meals and the responsibility we had to avoid wasting any food. She often reminded us of her own childhood grocery store trips, which included careful allocation of funds and close attention to sales and seasonality. Because of her stories, I grew up believing that wealth could be defined by the ease with which a person could walk into a grocery store or food market and walk out with everything she could need. When I find myself in financially difficult circumstances, nutritious food is one of the very last things I make compromises on. The time I spent in our family's kitchen and on weeknight trips to the grocery store taught me that delicious foods nourished not only my body and my mind but also my relationships with the people I shared it with.

My childhood afforded me the benefits of spending time with interesting and caring people while sharing meals with them around a kitchen table. Conversations over food, however mundane

or even, at times, exhausting and painful, fostered within me a collection of values and skills which I otherwise would have had to work hard to develop. Within my particular social circle, I am not the only one who feels that sharing food and time with family and friends throughout my childhood helped me to better understand who I am, where I am, and where I come from.

Inspired by this notion, I spent the time between April of 2020 and October of 2020 taking note of my interactions with others where food was involved and trying to find common threads or themes that ran through many or most of these experiences. Specifically, I looked for ways in which these interactions affected my sense of self, my connection to my community and to my close friends and family, and my connection to place. I wrote a collection of short stories about these interactions and have chosen to share those which I feel best epitomize my impression of how people within my hometown engage with the people and world around them, within the context of food. These stories are connected by consistent themes, which I discuss throughout this paper and which I will now introduce.

The first story is about a small dinner party that we hosted. It wasn't meant to be a party, but somehow the joining of close friends and homemade food and wine turned it into a memorable event. I use this story to speak specifically about our concepts of home and homemade food, as well as to explore how human interaction in the context of home or in the presence of homemade food contributes to strong relationships and a deeper sense of belonging. The second story is set at the local farmer's market, where I often watch different kinds of people express their interest in and varying levels of familiarity with food. This leads into a discussion of terroir and merroir within southern Rhode Island, and ways in which these concepts might be used as tools for developing connections with place and positive relationships with food. Terroir also necessitates intimacy with the ways in which a particular region experiences the seasons, an intimacy which

inspires celebration and gratitude, two more tools that contribute to the development of healthy relationships. This leads into the third story, which is about a local man who grows and sells fig trees, among other plants, out of his backyard. In teaching me about his trees, he displays a deep loyalty to his Italian heritage, a piece of his identity that clearly contributes to a healthy sense of self and connection to place. I conclude with a short reflection on an evening around a campfire, where my family and I discuss legacies and what we leave behind when we're gone. It is here that I find a satisfactory answer to some of my guiding research questions.

All three of these stories take place within a few months of each other, and all within a few miles of each other, in my coastal home town of Narragansett, Rhode Island. This town boasts a unique gastronomical history based on its Native American stewardship, its early settlement by European explorers, and its substantial protected coastline. As a child raised in this predominantly white, middle class town, I participated in such local activities as pumpkin picking in the fall, snowball fights in the winter, maple tree climbing in the spring, and summertime days at the beach. These geographically and culturally (and demographically) specific experiences have heavily influenced my relationships with people and food, as well as my unique sense of place. My understanding of where I come from was also formed, however, by the myriad places I've lived outside of Rhode Island. Most significantly, my worldview has been shaped by childhood years and family ties in South Africa, time spent living in The Bahamas and traveling there frequently throughout my life, and a summer spent working on a fishing boat in Alaska. Additionally, I have close family members living in both France and Hawaii, who participate in and share with me their experiences of the unique food cultures in those places. Clearly, my opinions and stories which I share on the following pages have been framed by a lifetime of diverse circumstances.

I began this project in the Spring of 2020, amidst the onset of the COVID-19 coronavirus global pandemic, which limited human interaction for everyone and drastically altered the makeup of our daily lives. With government-mandated stay-at-home orders in place, many of us were forced to spend an inordinate amount of time with our families and/or close neighbors. This time was marked by fear of a mysterious, deadly virus that spread easily and rapidly, which meant that, for those of us lucky enough to be able to choose who we came into contact with each day, we relied heavily on our deepening sense of trust or distrust of people around us. As our wariness and suspicion of others evolved, we leaned harder on those in our immediate circles. Without the shared living spaces of office buildings, college dorm rooms, or school playgrounds, we found ourselves spending much of our social time in the kitchen of the home to which we were confined, if we were lucky enough to have such a space. Therefore, I interacted with very few people, and those I *did* spend time with were those who I trusted enough to know that I could be sure that their own choices and interactions would not put myself or any of my loved ones in danger of contracting the virus.

Regardless, my specific demographics have afforded me a relatively comfortable experience within the context of the COVID-19 virus lockdown and beyond. During the months of minimal socializing, I shared my research ideas with the limited circle of people with whom I was interacting. Most of these people were also of a white, middle class upbringing, who had consistent and reliable access to healthy foods and close relationships. Many of my ideas were received with excitement, and often reacted to with personal stories about sharing food with loved ones. Due to our unique historical timing, most people I spoke with emphasized their sadness at having to miss out on certain familial traditions involving food, whether that meant harvesting, cooking, or eating with others in person. I believe that emotional attachment to food and to

traditions involving food is universal, whether those emotions include fear and anguish or love and comfort or otherwise. As I will go on to discuss, and as my social circle seemed to confirm, food exists as a symbolic as well as a material object around which people create their own personal identities, identify their homes and places of belonging, and build most of their close, meaningful relationships.

The more people that validated and expanded these ideas I had, the more I kept returning to questions that began with “why?” Why does food seem to be such an integral ingredient in our capacity to build relationships with people and, by extension, with the world around us? Why does a meal often seem to taste better when shared? Why does it feel even better when the people around that table had a hand in growing the food from seed or baking it from scratch? And how might we describe that fuzzy drunk glow of happiness that nestles a group of people around a table full of food? It’s important to acknowledge that though this is not everyone’s interpretation of food-sharing events, these experiences have been proven integral in my own personal development and degree of satisfaction with life, and have the potential to be similarly important for people from a wide variety of demographics. Fostering connection through food might prove to be an integral factor in altering the current trajectory of our planet’s and species’ health.

I have explored these questions while pursuing a Master’s Degree in Nature-Culture-Sustainability at the Rhode Island School of Design. Food is a popular topic throughout discussions of sustainability because it is something that all people interact with every day, and which therefore offers myriad opportunities to shift our habits and behaviors. Interactions with and around food very clearly display an individual’s or group’s relationship with the natural world, as well as with their communities and cultures at large. These interactions show varying levels of respect for

animals, care for food and laborers, or awareness of harmful chemical ingredients, and they often depict a gross ignorance of the damaging amount of waste we produce. Changing the way we interact with and around food can drastically affect the long-term sustainability of our behavior as humans. It is conversations about these interactions that have driven me to further examine my own experiences with food and to explore relevant literature with this specific buffet of “why?” questions in the back of my mind.

There is an emotion or field of emotions that courses between the syllables of existing literature about food, and even between the physical plates of food that share residency on the kitchen table. Sometimes it is spoken about or hinted at. Somehow, the magic that happens when people come together to share a meal can be compared to the way ingredients come together to make a meal. Alone, each ingredient shines. Their compositions impart an array of delicious qualities to their consumers: spicy, tangy, earthy, crunchy, salty, sour, creamy... and on and on. But when they come together in particular combinations, reactions occur which transform a simple list of recognizable ingredients into a single, whole, fantastical meal that seems to supersede the sum of its parts.

When people engage in the cooking process of a meal, and then sit down to enjoy the fruits of their labor together, something similar happens. A table of people sharing in the same meal together induces a sense of abundance and love and care and connection, feelings and experiences which hardly exist when one of those people eats the same meal alone. Somehow, once again, the entire group together produces a whole—which includes love and care and connection—that is greater than the sum of its individual members.

Much of the existing literature that I have used to better understand this phenomenon approaches these topics from an angle that confronts the human/nature dichotomy, all while touching on the romanticism of shared meals and human relationships with nature, food, and each other. Written predominantly by North American authors, this literature questions how we, as humans living in North America, have created a world where humans and nature do not necessarily exist on the same continuum. These crucial texts put forth the concept that perhaps the acts of gardening and cooking are two of the last places where culture and nature meet, even by our own definitions. As of 2017, the National Gardening Association reported that approximately 35% of households in the United States were participating in some form of food gardening, whether in their own back yard or in a nearby community food garden. This was the result of a 200% increase in food gardening since 2008 (National Gardening Association, 2014). In 2020, interest in food gardening boomed throughout the month of April, right after the COVID-19 pandemic took hold and US residents were finding themselves with greater food insecurity than in the past, as well as with more time at home due to stay-at-home orders. Food garden installation businesses such as Gardenary, based in Texas, reported a more than doubling of website hits within the first week of April alone (Murphy, 2020). Raising, cooking, and eating food with and for other people, particularly those we care deeply about, contributes not only to our sense of safety, but also to our senses of connection and belonging. It is my intent to explore and share how the health of our relationships with our food, specifically, can affect the health of our relationships with other people, which are directly related to our sense of personal identity, our sense of place, our sense of gratitude, and our ability to experience pleasure. The act of cooking with or for other people establishes an intimacy that can really only be described as love.

~

This is where our friends gather. The front door opens right into the kitchen, where I'm usually standing with my glass of wine. I'm not sure if this is so much my "spot" because I actually like it, or because it's where I always saw my mother and both grandmothers whenever I've walked into their homes for a meal or just a chat. But I've been in this spot since those early days of sauce splattering. Tonight, I have a recipe for pasta sauce (my grandmother's) open to my left, and a semblance of confidence (my mother's) as I freehand a batch of pesto, pausing every few minutes to welcome each visitor with a garlic-y hug. The kitchen is dark, lit only by a harsh fluorescent light overhead and the glowing red electric stovetops, but it's hot with the dry air escaping the old oven. Across from the stove, a cutout in the wall looks through to the hallway, forming a makeshift bar space and opening up a sort of bar/bartender dynamic between the people on either side. I'm always on the kitchen side, where the temperature is somehow ten degrees hotter. I pour sweat and hand off odd chopping jobs to the willing assistant across from me.

As a reward for helping, I offer drinks. Last summer, I took a bartending class and received my "Professional Bartender" certificate—whether that's worth anything is yet to be determined—and then proceeded to make the mistake of telling people about my achievement. I quickly became the resident bartender, even though my mixologist comfort zone lies somewhere in a muddled fog of lemon juice, simple syrup, and fresh mint from the garden. However, when I'm eyeballs-deep in sautéed onions, most people have figured out that they are expected to find the answers to their own questions. "Help yourself" is no longer something I need to say.

We keep a small selection of liquors in the top cabinet, sodas in the laundry room, juice in the fridge. It has taken years, but everyone more or less knows how to help themselves here. Often,



people will show up with some beers, leave them in the fridge, and join me in my glass of wine. They know where the glasses are, above the dish drying rack, and the bottle opener that's mounted on a magnet and stuck to the fridge door. They check in with me, comment on the delicious smells wafting off the stove, and proceed into the living room, where they happily take on the role of DJ and greet whoever is already lounging in there.

The small house warms and spirits lift. It's hot, yes, and the rising can be found in the corners of smiles and the gestures of arms during an evocative story-telling. Despite work challenges, or relationship woes, or just plain weekday stress and exhaustion, somehow everyone settles into an easy, lively energy, feeding off each other's comfort and settling into a slow, happy evening.

Scott, my soon-to-be-husband, taps in for pasta rolling duty. We don't have any kind of machine, so we use the ever-reliable empty wine bottle to roll out the dough, and a chef's knife to slice it into wonky lines of linguine. Imperfect, tender tendrils drop into the salted boiling water and are ready in minutes. Someone slices the bread I made that morning, pours olive oil into small bowls, and brings both to the table. I send Casey outside for lettuce. He knows where to look, in the third planter all the way to the right, and he also knows that if he comes back with something else he found, we'll eat it all the same. I squeeze a wedge from the cocktail lemon onto the pile of greens, and carry the small cauldron of salt to the table. Pasta, pesto, and tomato sauce is piled into bowls, often along with an extra glug of olive oil. Never too much olive oil. Our fingers sufficiently greased, we pull up all available chairs around the one-meter-diameter circular table, shoulder to shoulder, a little sweaty from the kitchen heat, and smiling ear to ear. Book recommendations are exchanged, goings-on are discussed, advice is given. Bread is passed, pleasurable groans are heard and felt and shared, wine glasses are refilled, and all is well. Somehow, beyond the corners of my

mouth and my expressive gestures, I feel my whole body has risen. I float above my own head, awash in a glowy haze that feels like wine and olive oil and love all swirled together. I almost can't hear what Moriah is saying through the cloud that hovers around us, enveloping us. Its warm embrace draws us in and we huddle there, lingering in each other's eyes and finally leaning back into our creaky chairs, holding our full bellies and wondering at how it feels like we could sit there for hours. Dishes and wine bottle recycling and drives home will be saved for tomorrow. Tonight, like all of our "family" dinner nights, time stands still.

It feels natural to refer to nights like these as "family" affairs, though none of us are actually related by blood. Scott and I have always made a point of inviting our friends to cozy up in our home, wherever we might be living. It is common knowledge in our social circle that a spare bed or meal or toothbrush can be found here, even if we ourselves aren't here. Help yourself to coffee or fruit or a nap. There is always room on our giant sectional couch and in the spare room for our visitors to spend the night after a few shared glasses of wine, should they need or want to. We even keep spare clothes and raincoats on hand that might have otherwise been donated because we often find ourselves handing them out during impromptu gatherings or adventures. Since March of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced everyone we know into unemployment or, if they were lucky, a work-from-home situation, we have found that this small group has often sought refuge in our colorful, quiet living room. Beyond its identification as *our* home, this place is *a* home. Its walls are somewhat porous, both literally, in that they are old and poorly insulated from the cold, and figuratively, in that they don't exactly protect us from the outside world but rather invite the world in. For me, this begs the question of how we actually come to understand what a home is, and how the boundaries of a home can be stretched or shrunk through the use of food as a tool.

Elia Petridou, author of *The Taste of Home* (2001), more thoroughly explores the meaning of “home” and how we form our understanding of it. Her essay establishes the need for an expanded definition of “home” from one that limits our understanding of the home as a physical house to one that better represents our modern, mobile lifestyles. Specifically, Petridou works off of a definition of home that is established by Liz Kenyon, which refers to the home as a place where one has the “right to return,” (Kenyon, 1999). Individuals go through a process of self-creation through interaction with material objects associated with the home, like food. Food has proven itself to be a particularly potent symbol of the home because it invokes all of the senses, which helps the individual to establish a sense of whole-ness despite a more fragmented, fast-paced lifestyle.

It is clear to us that we have successfully endowed our friends with the knowledge that they have the “right to return” to our home, which is also therefore their home. We keep various foods and drinks on hand that this close circle enjoys, and they often leave items, such as a specific Mezcal (Casey’s), in the cupboard for their next visit. In exchanging and interacting with these foods and over larger meals within this space, we have each developed both an acute sense of comfort and belonging, and an expansion of our personal identities. Through physical items, smells, and stories shared here, our home has become a merged composition of all the places each of us have been and which have affected our worldviews. It is also, then, a place which embodies many cultures and ideas and foods. Because it also acts as a home to our visitors, it becomes the culmination of all of the places *they* have been and which have affected *their* worldviews.

As Petridou (2001) states, it is not enough to define “home” as simply a house, even—or especially—if it is the house in which one lives. It is a place and a space that holds all of the things which have influenced the people that live here, where individuals come together regularly to share

each other's time and food and company. This environment of sharing contributes to every individual's sense of safety. In reference to food, it is important to define what kind of food helps to promote this sense of safety and a sense of communal belonging. For example, a microwave meal might not contribute to a sense of communion or, as previously discussed, whole-ness. Michael Pollan tested this theory by committing to a family dinner of microwave meals:

*Microwave Night turned out to be one of the most disjointed family dinners we have had since Isaac was a toddler. The three of us never quite got to sit down at the table all at once... Harry Balzer might be right to attribute the triumph of this kind of eating to laziness and a lack of skills or confidence, or a desire to eat lots of different things, rather than to a genuine lack of time. That we hadn't saved much of at all. The fact that each of us was eating something different completely altered the experience of (speaking loosely) eating together. Beginning in the supermarket, the food industry had cleverly segmented us, by marketing a different kind of food to each demographic in the household (if I may so refer to my family), the better to sell us more of it. Individualism is always good for sales, sharing much less so. But the segmentation continued through the serial microwaving and the unsynchronized eating... Microwave night was a notably individualistic experience, marked by centrifugal energies, a certain opaqueness, and, after it was all over, a remarkable quantity of trash. It was, in other words, a lot like modern life.*

- Michael Pollan (2013)

This experience of Pollan's signifies that some form of hearth (or stove or oven) plays a kind of important role in the development of individual senses of belonging, recalling early cooking around an open fire. It has been argued by Pollan, among others, that around the cook-fire was where our human ancestors began to develop communicative and cultural norms. Fire gave people the opportunity to take a break from foraging, as it provided the means with which to render raw meat (a far more calorie-dense option) edible. While foraging was most lucrative as a solo mission, fire gave way for cooking and the sharing of food to become group activities. And so the

hearth, the birthplace of all homemade meals, became the ultimate symbol and tool in the creation of a home.

Today, an increasing modern interest in domestic cooking has vastly expanded our impression of what constitutes homemade food. We can assume that it often involves the use of a stove or oven or fire of some sort. But how do we define it? Most people are heavily influenced by the curated imagery that accompanies food journalism, and while it has altered what we think homemade food is supposed to *look* like, it has increased the popular impression that delicious food is accessible, inspiring many people to cultivate freedom in the way they experiment with taste. The understanding of homemade food as an imperfect representation of a place where culture, creativity, and nature comes together suggests that “homemade food expresses norms of family cohesiveness and solidarity,” (Moisio et al., 2004). This same body of research supports the idea that homemade food “invites collective participation characterized by shared practices and common experiences.”

Homemade food is often understood as the physical embodiment of sharing and reciprocity. Food creates a “context for the expression of intimacy in close familial relationships... [forging] a semiotic connection between the producer and consumer inaccessible to market-made goods,” (Moisio et al., 2004). Food products therefore become gifts of a certain kind, as producing homemade food is a kind of performance of love. Unique qualities of homemade food, as identified by research participants, include: irregularities that mark the food as personal and identifiable, a sense of safety and understanding due to greater knowledge of where food products and ingredients are coming from and how they are prepared, and a sense of love and emotional connection that is somehow baked into a homemade meal that someone has made for you. In our home, food has become the natural tool through which we communicate our love for, connection with, and care

for our friends and family who visit. People get excited to help cook, because it helps them feel connected and worthy of time, love, energy, and family. This, in turn, contributes to each individual's ability to develop their own personal identities within the context of this space and especially in relation to the food that is shared in this space.

I have a deep fondness for cooking, both as a creative exercise and as an expression of love for myself and for those I feed. Much of my cooking style is influenced by the food I grew up eating: rich, balanced meals that included meat or fish, vegetables, and grains. It has also been shaped by the places I have been and the places I hope to go. I explore new places through cookbooks. I have collected (and been gifted) cookbooks which celebrate all kinds of cuisines such as Cuban, Mexican, Thai, South African, and Bahamian. Some of these come from places I have been to, others not. Some are more specific and highlight particular foods or food groups: vegetables, chicken, spices, cheese. Occasionally leafing through and cooking from these books helps me to better understand how a particular culture treats certain ingredients or ingredient combinations, knowledge which I usually bring along with me in my cooking practice. Certain ingredients I use have been picked up along the way, and often lose their specific origin but maintain their level of meaning for me in my cooking. Beef extract from South Africa, coriander from my experimentation with South African and Indian cooking techniques, masa harina from making homemade corn tortillas. I make the tortillas using a tortilla press that I acquired while living in The Bahamas. It had belonged to a British couple who bought it years prior during a trip to Mexico. And now I keep masa harina in my baking drawer.

My point is that our diverse backgrounds and experiences (and those of the people I meet along the way) come together in a home in a multitude of ways: through ideas and conversations, as well as through ingredients and cooking styles. Petridou writes, "In the process of making sense

of the new environment and themselves within it, the displaced draw on their past experiences, constructing as they do a concept of home against which they contrast their present situation."

In his monumental book about cooking, entitled *Cooked* (2013), Pollan explores how each of the elements (fire, earth, water, air) are used in cooking techniques, and how those techniques in turn bring people together. In the section of his book on cooking with water, Pollan romanticizes the cookpot, where ingredients come together, exchanging molecules and taste profiles until something new and better and somehow more whole is created. He references the popular idea that a *good* (read: cast-iron, clay, heavy) cookpot is one that holds onto the flavors and character of meals past. In this way, the current meal is imbued with those elements and is somehow more or better than it would have been otherwise. Many cooking vessels made of traditional materials are not washed with modern grease-stripping dish soap, and it is therefore true that bits of seasoning and umami are left behind to be soaked up by a future meal. Pollan compares the pot to the larger kitchen, whose walls have similarly borne witness to all of the aromas and splatters of meals past.

I would like to draw out this analogy to include the people who, just like the ingredients, came together in the kitchen while that pot was in the oven, conversed and laughed and drank and cried and allowed these moments to soak into the walls as a part of those meals, where they are held until they energetically inject every future gathering with light and love, or so they seem to, anyway. Like the ingredients in the pot, people come together and intermingle, exchanging ideas and jokes, sharing moments and creating memories, until they have somehow created an environment that feels so much greater than the sum of its parts.

Pollan commits much of his writing to trying to extrapolate what, exactly, causes such deep connections and relationships to be forged through the cooking and eating of food. He begins by

acknowledging that, as a species, our relationship to food—especially homemade food—in 2020 is one that is often defined by its association with work and drudgery. The twentieth century social liberation movements brought with them a space for the rapid expansion of food corporations and industries, which moved in and convinced us that industrialized food products were equivalent with freedom. As women were marshaled into the workforce, they were still expected to uphold their domestic role, and so prepared, packaged meals in some sense contributed to women’s domestic freedom. Cooking from scratch became, in many households, just another item on the list of chores. Some families maintained their tomato patches and their chicken coops, but the culture shifted towards one which prized leisure time, which for many was better spent in front of the television rather than in the kitchen. Pollan agrees with this notion, reminding the reader that “back in the 1970s, KFC ran billboards depicting a family-sized bucket of fried chicken under the slogan ‘Women’s Liberation.’ And so perhaps it was, and still is for many women even now, and especially when both partners work at jobs outside the house,” (Pollan, 2013).

The one thing that has stayed true to us throughout history, whether our food was cooked by a mother, a corporation, a servant, or otherwise, is the vague knowledge that food has the capacity to bring people together. Gatherings for birthdays and weddings and holidays become exciting celebrations when food is involved. Yet, without the confidence or knowledge of how to produce this food, and the faint growl of our ego when it is suggested that we actually cook it, we let the food industry take on the hard part and all we have to do is go to the store, pick out the chips and the dip and the cake and put it on a table for people to eat. Without any interaction between the people and the food during the cooking process, the opportunity for development of personal identities and familiarity with a home space are lost. Additionally, there is an absence of



interpersonal interactions and therefore a void in the place where connections and relationships could have been built.

And we are wondering why it seems like more people are feeling lonely and disconnected than ever before, at least according to popular news sources such as CNN (Lamotte, 2019) and Psychology Today (Whitley, 2020). As the host in this theoretical chip and dip situation, there are so many opportunities for interacting with, building respect for, and connecting with the ingredients and with other people that I would miss. First of all, I don't know what half the ingredients are that are listed on the chip bag, or the dip jar. The few ingredients I do recognize are mostly in forms that are unfamiliar to me: modified corn starch, soy lecithin. Some ingredients are whole: egg yolk, cream, jalapeno pepper. But where is the chicken that laid that egg? Is she healthy? Does she live in a cage just big enough to stand in, or is the cage so small that other chickens are standing on *her*? Regardless of the answers to these questions, I have no one to ask. The sterile environment of the grocery store offers no hints. The only interaction I might have around the gathering of these food items is with the teenage clerk who, when asked where I might find the chips, would point lazily past me and say "party aisle, aisle three." Oh.

I lose more opportunities for interaction during the cooking process, which has been simplified to opening a bag and pouring its contents into a bowl, hardly a two person job. I place the bowl on the table and forget about it. I don't care if people like the chips; they probably know that particular brand of corn chips anyway, leaving zero chance for them to build associations between me and the food I have provided, or with the home in which they consume the chips. Maybe they opt for the cake instead. The cake which I didn't make. I can't even be sure that the grocery store made the cake. Not that a grocery store can make a cake – a *person* inside the grocery store would have had to have done the job. But perhaps the store actually buys its cakes from an

even further removed party that specializes in pumping out chocolate cakes with colorful icing for people they don't know. The point is that I don't really care about my guests' reactions to the food I've provided. I didn't make it, so it doesn't reflect on me as an individual. As guests, they probably don't really care about the food either. It wasn't made *for* them. If any connection with the food is made at all, it is probably related to an excitement about the food being "free" to them, or perhaps that particular chip brand is their *favorite* chip brand. Eating this kind of food is a uniquely individualized event, as it is isolated from the process of cooking and the experience of contributing. Their presence at this little get together is to celebrate what is probably a controversial national holiday that likely revolves around either fireworks, presents, or candy, or all of the above. None of these things necessitate a gathering of friends and family, except for maybe a birthday, which is also a highly individualized event. Food experiences have been simplified to be meaningful only as far as they apply to the individual. Rarely do we think about how they influence us as a group or how they alter or enhance our interactions with other people.

As a society, we are often exposed to language about food which reduces it to a rather abstract element of our daily lives. Macronutrients, fats, carbs. Food as fuel. Food is sustenance, nothing more, and the way we consume it dictates how we look and therefore whether or not people like us – a rather distracted understanding of such a complex, symbol-ridden subject. I am speaking specifically about the rise of professional fields that benefit from the simplification of foods to mere nutrients, such as healthcare (including weight loss specialists), exercise nutrition, bodybuilding, and sports in general. As a former collegiate athlete, I have been exposed to ideas generated within these fields for years. These ideas also happen to dominate modern popular news, bombarding us with phrases like "burn fat" and "snacks under 200 calories!" as we stand in the

checkout line with our bag of brand-name chips. As such, the use of the term fuel implies that food is often interpreted by Western thinking consumers as nothing more than its caloric worth, providing us with the narrow understanding of food as a simple means to an end, an idea which has been abstracted from its literal existence as part of a large and complicated system, which includes farmers, importers, transporters, governments, grocery stores, and us, the consumers. It also includes the much wider web that holds space for Community Supported Agriculture, farmer's markets, food subscription services, restaurants and specialty food shops, food writers, family traditions, holidays, and more. In considering all of these enormously variable ways in which we interact with food and with people in the context of food, it feels appropriate to ask: how in the world did we ever reduce it to such an elemental idea as fuel? Because, while it *is* responsible for fueling our bodies insofar as we think of them as machines, it is also a vital symbol, which we use to understand who we are, how to be, and what our place is in this world. Without a more nuanced observation of the symbols our food hold for us, we lose sight of this understanding.

Many of my neighbors and acquaintances view trips to the grocery store as significant opportunities to cut costs and save money, without consideration of the social, medical, or economic repercussions that come from choosing the cheaper options (or being forced to choose the cheaper options). Maybe it is because we have to purchase food so often that we see it as an obvious way to reduce our spending. It makes sense, too, because there are so many different options to choose from within every food category, and often very little financial justification for purchasing the more expensive options. This has created a new socioeconomic problem, where poorer families can no longer afford to feed their families adequately nutritious foods or to teach their children the pleasures of a home-cooked meal made with natural and organic ingredients. Some families struggle to put food on the table at all, a struggle which threatens not only the

physical health of the family members, but also their social and emotional health, due to their inability to combat feelings of disconnection through the cooking and eating of traditional foods.

Food manufacturers and farmers have found that the methods which they use to grow their food can significantly affect their costs and therefore the prices we pay on the consumer end. More chemical pesticides and fungicides applied to crops means more plants can be grown in an area that might have otherwise succumbed to disease, and also fewer crop losses. Fewer losses means more to sell, driving prices down. Farming technologies have allowed for a widening in the range of market prices—and therefore product qualities—of foods you can buy at the grocery store. Yet we only see the prices, not as indicators of quality, but as shortcuts to achieving those lofty standards of “optimal” nutrition and health that have been sold to us by magazine covers. The farmers that use the most chemicals or processing techniques are able to produce on a large enough scale to keep prices down, but that means cheaper foods are also somewhat contaminated foods. And because this technology is relatively young, we are only just beginning to observe the consequences of using unnatural chemicals to grow our foods, such as soil depletion and erosion, long-term health conditions including various autoimmune diseases, and groundwater contamination.

Time around a kitchen table is a luxury afforded only by those who can afford to make that time and provide the food to make the meal. However, the social and emotional benefits of this time are more accessible than they may seem, and require only a conscious, consistent effort to engage more with the food we eat and the people we eat it with. This might include spending time talking to farmers at the local farmer’s market, or perhaps asking the person behind the butcher counter at the grocery store whether they carry any meat from local farms, and if not, where they source their product from? It might also include sharing a meal with someone every day, even if

that meal is macaroni and cheese or something from the corner store. For me, the beginning of my own journey of reconnection with my food began at my local farmer's market.

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On most Sundays, I visit the small farmer's market near our house. I tend to forget about it in my Sunday morning drift around the yard, reminded only by a weekend kind of craving for my favorite slow, sweet breakfast pastry: chocolate croissants. A well-known local bakery sets up a tent between the man selling fresh honey and a pair of teens offering kombucha tastings. I go for the one croissant, but usually leave with an armful of assorted pastries and a crunchy loaf of grainy bread for dinner. Croissant flakes take up residence on my chin and my dress as I begin my stroll along the line of vendors. I'm late, as evidenced by the absence of tents and tables at random intervals throughout the row, but one familiar farmer is still there, standing in the shade behind his long table, flirting with the older women who fondle the tomatoes.

A flock of customers hovers just far enough back to avoid conversation, yet they are communicating a number of things including their understanding of farmer's markets as a vacation activity, more for entertainment than for practicality. They try to read the prices from afar, declining offers from the farmer to assist them in finding what they're looking for, unknowingly conveying their lack of intimacy with vegetables and their desire to remain non-committal in this grower/consumer interaction. Ultimately, one brave group member approaches the table and buys a bag of lettuce, and maybe a curly, novel hot pepper. It is clear that the sterile social scene at a grocery store has left these wanderers unprepared for the possibility of conversation over real, *raw*

food. The familiarity of a plastic bag is what draws them in, helping them to overcome the guilt that might linger should they leave without purchasing anything.

The tomato-fondling women approach the farmer, holding out a pink fruit and asking whether it will ripen. Their nervous smiles at his answer give away their surprise at new information: it was a Pink Brandywine tomato; this tomato *is* ripe. The grocery store had wordlessly informed them of Roma tomatoes, tomatoes-on-the-vine, cherry tomatoes, and the charmingly expensive yet non-descript “Heirloom Tomatoes.” While beautiful, these women had likely bypassed those latter fruits in the store, likening them to the display pumpkins come October rather than actual edible items. Regardless, they had been unaware that “Heirloom” is in fact an umbrella term, an adjective, rather than the proper noun they had assumed, and this Pink Brandywine was a real, in-the-flesh example of something that is described as an “Heirloom.”

A young man, who appears to be another vendor, approaches the farmer behind the table, shaking his hand and picking up a bulging bag of vegetables, and confirms their social plans for that weekend. He leaves behind a small box of, presumably, something edible, placing it on the table and tapping it to make sure our farmer noticed it there. I watch this other man turn and walk back to a smaller tent at the end of the row, where he and another person in boots and jeans pack up the back of a small red truck.

I slid up to the end of the table and started gathering what looked good: the sweet peppers were beautiful, piled together in a rainbow of bright, warm colors. They were sorted by taste, instead of by color, shape, or size. A similar pile of peppers sat next to them, but these ones were labeled “HOT!” I threw two into my bag, hoping I’d be able to recognize them later and avoid the inevitable hot pepper roulette that I always seemed to play. The bouquets of rainbow chard lay sleepily in a row, beginning to wilt after three hours in the August heat. I decided to rescue one,

along with four bunches of fuchsia radishes, whose tangled roots still retained the soil from which they were pulled that morning. Finally, I fill a separate bag with the softest tomatoes he had, dreaming generously about the marinara sauce, salsa, or Bloody Mary mix they would become later that afternoon. Salivating at the thought of roasted tomatoes, I hand the bag to the farmer to weigh. Once I've paid, the farmer predictably offers me more radishes or whatever else I'd like to take home. I come late on Sundays for a reason: this man is in the home stretch of three straight days of hot, long market work. He has sold everything he can hope to sell, and is weary of the heavy boxes of leftover produce. They are destined for the compost or the local food pantry; either way, he will have to tote them elsewhere. So what I interpret as sheer generosity and neighborliness is actually also serving his needs.

Looking around the farmer's market, I notice that I am standing in the middle of a microcosm of Rhode Island's food and farming industry and history. All summer, an abundance of corn of diverse varieties can be found at every farmer's market and even more roadside stands. Early colonists, starved of familiar foods, survived by relying heavily on Indian corn, whose native name was *mahiz* which translates to "Our Mother" and "She Who Sustains Us," (Stavely & Fitzgerald, 2004). In an effort to convert this crop into a palatable (for the English newcomers) food, Johnnycake (a combination of cornmeal and rye) was born. Johnnycake remains to this day an easily accessible baked good. Wheat grew poorly in rocky New England soil, and often succumbed to fungi and disease, turning eighteenth century colonists into wheat importers. Providence is now home to multiple renowned bakeries, including Seven Stars Bakery, which has a tent at every local market I've been to. Breads made of various combinations of cornmeal (accessible in New England), rye, barley, and wheat (preferred by settlers) often accompanied

soups and stews, which were favored dishes for housewives who cooked at home in their traditionally large New England hearths due to their low maintenance qualities. These hearty meals filled many bellies during the harsh, cold winters of the northeast. Today, soups and stews remain staples in New Englanders' diets, the most popular of which might be Clam Chowder. Rhode Island, only forty-eight miles wide at its widest, boasts an incredible four hundred miles of coastline, which are home to an array of shellfish, including Quahog clams, and the ever-so-popular oyster. In fact, Rhode Island's most prolific catch is calamari, landing more pounds of squid per year than any other seafood and accounting for more than half of New England's squid landings (Rourke, 2014). Easy access to the open ocean has also afforded Rhode Island an impressive reputation as a fishing destination, where species such as tuna, marlin, swordfish, bass, and trout are (or have been) abundant, and can be purchased at local markets all over the area.

Other successful food industries involving animals include the dairy (cheese specifically), beef, and pork industries. When early New England settlers supposedly negotiated for land from the native peoples of the area, they did so with the intention of cultivating it and creating open space for livestock, and much of this land continues to be used for this purpose, or has since become overgrown with new-growth forests, filled with another New England staple: maple trees. I can always find a local farm stand selling maple syrup, distilled from the sap of this prolific native tree. It has been used by New England settlers since the earliest days of colonization as a sweetener.

Syrup, beef, pork, fish, shellfish, bread, and Johnnycake can all be purchased here at my local farmer's market, along with all kinds of berries, squashes, and apples, the latter of which has been used for centuries to brew cider, after the Barley crop initially failed for early settlers and beer became hard to come by. Not only are these products staples of New England cuisine and



dinner tables across Rhode Island, but they have also been instrumental in shaping relationships between colonists and natives, and farmers and fishermen alike. Rhode Islanders are lucky to have access to one of the historically richer food cultures in America, but it has unfortunately not proven to be enough to prevent the modern deterioration of interpersonal connections that had once been built through food.

Observing multiple groups of people interacting with fresh, naturally raised food and the farmers who grew it lent me the opportunity to consider how we relate to food and the land it grows on and how the tone of each of our relationships is set by our parents, the media, and our cultures at large. That tone, in the United States, at least, seems to be a largely negative one.

Author Robin Wall Kimmerer describes a class she taught to third-year university students who were majoring in environmental protection, in which she asked them to consider the positive relationships between human beings and the land. The students claimed that there was nothing positive about the way humans interact with the land. “How is it possible that in twenty years of education they cannot think of any beneficial relationships between people and the environment? Perhaps the negative examples they see every day – brownfields, factory farms, suburban sprawl – truncated their ability to see some good between humans and the earth... How can we begin to move toward ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like?” (Kimmerer, 2013).

A student of environmental studies myself, I can say that I have very rarely been made aware of the positive and successful relationships between people and land. News media and environmental classes discuss expiring species and deforestation and pollution. In the context of environmental protection, we are not taught about the symbiotic relationships that humans have developed with the earth over millennia, particularly those involving food crops. Perhaps an

academic field such as agronomy offers a more positive image of the relationships that exist between humans and the earth. But Kimmerer argues that the Western science worldview has taught us to view our interactions with other species as inherently negative. First of all, this idea implies that humans are somehow separate from nature and have some level of control over nature, a concept known as anthropocentrism. Second, assuming that the best way to help a species (plant or otherwise) on the brink of extinction is to leave it alone leaves little room for understanding humans as part of the global system, and part of the natural community of beings. In addition to this, the Western scientific process requires a separation of the observer from the observed, obstructing the inherent relationship between the two and discrediting the impact that relationship can have. Though social scientists are taught to consider the observer *effect* on the observed, it is inherently impossible to observe the relationship itself, as a relationship is multi-faceted and more complex than simply one's effect on the other. In fact, the theme of the whole as greater than the sum of its parts holds true in this scenario as well. How, by separating ourselves from that which we study, can we be expected to fully understand that a consequential relationship exists between us and the land, beyond our one-dimensional framing of the land as merely a resource.

A term commonly used to describe our interactions with the land is “cultivation,” yet this word leaves ample room for ambiguity as well, as it is used commonly as both a negative (we till and overturn and rearrange and flatten) and positive (we grow, raise, support) verb, which confuses consumers' ability to understand how their need to eat affects the planet from which their food comes. Whether we consciously consider this or not, we are filled with either a sense of superiority (negative) which rises from our dominance over the land and other species, or a sense of guilt (also negative) for human overpopulation and stress on the planet due to modern agricultural practices.

It seems to me like a natural thought progression, then, to assume that our relationship with food itself might have developed similarly.

The language we use to talk about what a healthy relationship with food should look like is also inherently negative. We all seem to have been taught which foods are “bad” for us, and why other foods are “good” for us, introducing a dichotomy that suggests our choices make us “good” or “bad” people and creating an opportunity for food to be used as a tool for self-sabotage, rather than for pleasure. With so many different options in grocery stores and restaurants and even in convenience stores and other alternative food markets, we don’t even realize that we succumb to overwhelm every time we try to make a “good” choice. The overabundance of products (particularly manufactured—as opposed to naturally grown—food products) leaves us aching for some kind of set of guidelines around how we should make our decisions. This explains our society’s insistence on picking up, obsessing over, and moving on from every popular diet that presents itself. We crave rules and a cultural understanding of how we are supposed to interact with food. “What the fad diets don’t offer is any sense of national and biological integrity. A food culture is not something that gets *sold* to people. It arises out of a place, a soil, a climate, a history, a temperament, a collective sense of belonging. Every set of fad-diet rules is essentially framed in the negative, dictating what you must give up. Together they’ve helped us form powerfully negative associations with the very act of eating,” (Kingsolver, 2007). Even those who are wholly educated on the topic of nutrition and how best to nourish themselves have a concept of those elements which are “good” for you and those which are not. Folks who have poured effort into removing fast food and overly processed foods from their diets are also plagued by the negative associations that come from banning certain food products or food groups. This fails as a food culture. “At its heart, a genuine food culture is an affinity between people and the land that feeds

them,” (Kingsolver, 2007). And the fact is, most Americans lack enough tactile knowledge of their land to have developed this kind of intimacy. Instead, American food culture is defined by negativity, fear, and deprivation, even as the United States boasts one of the largest obesity rates in the world (according to ProCon, a Britannica-owned statistics database, the U.S. ranks 12th)(ProCon.org, 2020). We desperately seek a culture of our own, but we are looking in the wrong places. Instead of starting at the very end of food’s natural cycle (at our consumption habits) with fad diets, why not seek meaning and identity in the earlier stages of food production, while the food itself is still growing and requiring care and attention?

A tendency to abstract food to this basic role of providing us with caloric energy has caused many of us to—knowingly or unknowingly—disconnect from the natural processes that produce the food on which we rely for survival. It almost seems as though perhaps our North American world has been built to convince us that we have no need for knowledge of these processes. I can only speak from personal experience here, yet I am not alone in these sentiments: I am aware that plants need water and sun to photosynthesize and to grow, but what else do I know? All I can remember from science classes of my youth is simply that: water and sunlight. I don’t recall ever learning about the soil, and that there are many different kinds, all of which have different capacities to sustain plant life. If I *did* learn these things, I doubt their significance was contextualized for my ten-year-old mind, which is why I might not remember them. Similarly, no one told me that most plants only grow in certain climates, and therefore only in certain parts of the world. For a long time, I didn’t understand how the seasons shape food availability. Sure, I could see that the trees and the grass cast off their green clothes come wintertime, but the same exact food products remained available throughout the year at the grocery store, and my brain was never forced to leap across the hole in that understanding. There might be more watermelons on

display in July, or more pumpkins in October, but my only understanding of these displays was that they somehow correlated with holidays which, to me, could never have possibly been the other way around (that maybe the holidays were planned around, or in celebration of, a particular food's seasonality). I remember a parent mentioning one day that the perfectly round Crayola-colored oranges came from Florida, but I didn't question why they might grow in Florida and not here. I just knew they didn't. I once drove to Florida with my father, stopping only in Georgia to buy peaches. He emphasized their supposed superiority to the peaches I'd had in New England before, but I couldn't yet see how or why the climate of central Georgia might better host peach trees than that of our northern home. Besides, I have found watermelons in December and squash in May. The supermarket seemed able to transcend seasons, offering me whatever I might have a craving for, at any particular time of the year. If I wanted an apple in March, there it was on the usual display table. Who would question that?

Not only are those apples consistently available year-round, they present themselves to us as shiny, clean, pock-less pieces of perfect fruit. They are "perfect" in shape, according to our collective kindergarten memories of walls decorated in cartoon apples, and they are often arranged in a crate-like container, recalling a romantic image of freshly-picked farm apples awaiting a crisp bite. This is food to us. Our standards for foods that look *good enough to eat*, to draw on further memories of childhood books and nursery rhymes, have risen to impossible heights. Bruised bananas, stale bread, slightly asymmetrical fruits or vegetables... it has become easy to reject these forms—despite their uses (banana bread, bread crumbs, etc.)—and to demand perfect foods, and it seems that we have therefore forgotten how to recognize value in imperfection. Many of us have forgotten how to recognize value in anything *but* those curated, misted, clean displays of apples, because we have been taught that anything outside of that narrow definition of food could

potentially be harboring disease or rot or some other kind of threat. And for those who easily overlook blemishes on stone fruits or moldy corners on blocks of cheese, wouldn't you still reach for the the peach with no bruises first, so as to get the most time out of it?

Our desperate clamor for health and fear of disease (and desire to save money) have led us to a societal set of beliefs and understandings about food that deny us a diverse diet of foods which, in fact, having battled natural threats to their own health, offer us humans a greater nutritious bang for our buck. Instead, we happily sit in the dark, believing that the shiny perfect apple that is layered with preservatives and pumped full of fertilizers is more appealing than the one that fell off of the old tree in our neighbor's yard with a brown spot and a whole lichen-covered branch still attached to its stem. Kingsolver touches on this idea as well: "I used to take my children's friends out to the garden to warm them up to the idea of eating vegetables, but this strategy sometimes backfired: they'd back away slowly saying, 'Oh *man*, those things touched *dirt!*' Adults do the same by pretending it all comes from the clean, well-lighted grocery store. We're like petulant teenagers rejecting our mother. We *know* we came out of her, but *ee-ew*," (Kingsolver, 2007). Perfectly illustrating our ignorance, this quote reminds us of the interconnected nature of our existence within the world around us despite her myriad threats. Hopelessly entangled we are, yet helplessly we mistreat her. Hence my proactive visits to the farmer's markets (if only to peruse and make conversation) where I try to closely examine foods and pose curious questions of the vendors.

It is this same desire to proactively participate in the systems by which our food is produced that led Kingsolver and her family to embark on the year-long journey that inspired the book I am drawing from. Kingsolver, her husband, and their two children agreed to source all of their food from within their geographical community for an entire year, pledging to grow and tend to the

majority of it. They refused to sit in the dark alongside the majority of the rest of us, instead choosing to actively grow, process, and make the food items which they required to not only survive but to truly enjoy life. They crawled up and into the light, exposing truths about their local food system and its ready ability to support and nourish them, combating the ignorance that many American consumers choose (or are forced) to exist in. Intimate involvement with the life cycles of our food births a keen sense of gratitude and investment in the process. Investing in the process is investing in our own health and quality of life, and promotes a radically different relationship with food and with each other, one that isn't so marred by negativity.

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A few weeks later, I place an order for a whole bushel of tomatoes from the same farmer that I observed interacting with his customers back at the farmer's market. That's around sixty pounds of fruit. I planned to use my new canning equipment to practice processing and preserving my own food. On Thursday, I drive to the farm to pick them up. One other customer is waiting there with his car trunk open and cleaned out. I look around, though there's not much to find: farm equipment, a tractor, some tables and a shed, two greenhouses. From around the corner, our farmer comes riding up on another tractor and leads us to the entrance of the shed. I peek inside and am shocked by the sheer volume of tomatoes, piled high in plastic grocery bags marked with black ink listing their weight in pounds. This specific kind of tomato is bred for canning. It has minimal water and easily removable skins. All of these boxes and bags must mean... other people want to can and preserve fresh, local, organic tomatoes, too! They were in such high demand, in fact, that I ended up only able to purchase forty pounds, for a total of \$50. It didn't look like that much, even

though they were divided into three double-bagged plastic grocery bags to help manage the weight, but when I got home and spread the tomatoes out on the kitchen counter top (and the floor and in the sink), I laughed at myself. Posting a photo of this bounty online, I waited for viewers to offer me some motivational respect for taking on such a wholesome afternoon project. A gentle social media ego boost to help me get through the mountain of tomatoes currently blocking me from leaving the kitchen. Instead, I found that my tomatoes brought about a connection with one of my neighbors.

She sent me a message, asking if I could spare a few tomatoes for her family's homemade pizza night. I put a few bright red tomatoes in a recycled paper bag and dropped it on her back step, just a few doors down from us. The rest I peeled and canned: some whole, some crushed, and some as a spicy Arrabiata pasta sauce, based on a recipe my grandmother learned during her time at cooking school in Italy. I appreciate the amount of control that canning gives me over the food I have available through the winter. Each jar contains just tomatoes, lemon juice, and salt. Each jar I open tastes like Rhode Island earth mixed with my grandmother's cooking – a delightfully comforting combination.

I find myself thinking about recipes, and how they can be altered by the makeup of the soil from which each chosen ingredient is pulled. Does this pasta sauce taste the same as it did when my grandmother made it in Italy, with fresh Italian produce? Understanding the impact of different geographies on tastes and compositions of specific food items as well as larger cuisines has been heavily observed as part of the concept known as *terroir*. Simply put, *terroir* is that quality of a food product that is specific to the place which the product is from. It is the reason that specific foods from particular regions become renowned. Used predominantly to describe wines and cheeses, *terroir* can and should be applied to food products of all kinds. For much of its existence,



the term generated negative connotations with the literal taste of earth, or of dirt. This was true until the early 20th century, when it began being used and then treated as a marketable term by French winemakers (Jacobsen, 2010). American citizens, however, were still preoccupied with their efforts to be seen as dignified and somehow separated from their “rustic” (Jacobsen, 2010) and rural backgrounds, and therefore sought food items that lacked locale and boasted their generic tastes, or lack thereof. Finally, the 1950s and 1960s American household launched a broad rebellion against the government and what had until now been considered a desirable life of refinement, bringing about a new reverence and nostalgia for the countryside and a back-to-the-land movement (Jacobsen, 2010). In a renaissance where Americans began to once again see food as a means through which they could craft their personal identities and anchor themselves to a specific time and place on this planet, terroir was suddenly a trait worth advertising. And because Americans haven’t been on this continent for very long, terroir has seen itself used less as a relationship between a land’s history and the food it is capable of producing, and more as an opportunity for farmers to create new tastes and celebrate terroir as a way to look into the future.

While its definition is now transdisciplinary in nature, terroir was first established as a geographical term in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and evolved quickly to include a range of related definitions. Its earliest definitions include “a stretch of land limited by its agricultural capacity,” and “a social unit at the village level,” which allows for a relationship between the agronomic qualifications of a piece of land and the socio-cultural elements of people living on that land. The conceptualization of terroir as a socio-cultural heritage links local communities and their identities to a place (Basset et. al. 2007). This is an important idea because it makes space for human understanding of their specific role on earth. Not only, terroir implies, are humans *of* nature or the land and therefore capable of impacting its wellbeing, but they are also responsible for the upkeep and preservation

of the land which supports the cultivation of food. Understanding our role in the context of the natural environment as one that is exceptionally entangled with the food that we eat forces us to consider the extent to which we impact the planet's health with each of our actions, because we are also impacting ourselves.

It seems, however, that because the majority of us are so removed from the physical places which host the crops that produce the food we eat, we are unable to see or even imagine that impact. It's difficult to *cultivate* respect for or even just develop a relationship with land (or plants or animals or people, for that matter) that we never actually interact with. This seems to be one of the utmost reasons why the local food movement is taking such a fervent hold throughout many communities in recent years (Norberg-Hodge, 2019). To carry on with the tomato example: I prefer to purchase the majority of my tomatoes from a farmer who sells his crops on Sundays at the local farmer's market. The actual location of his farm is fewer than ten miles from where I live, and to get there, I must drive myself the full round trip of about twenty miles, burning about a gallon of fuel. When I think about my bags of tomatoes, it's easy to imagine them as somehow separate from the land that is impacted by my driving a gas-burning car. But as I pull off the highway and onto the farmer's property, my imagination also affords me a bird's eye view of this idyllic farm and the screaming, fuming highway filled with cars just beyond the treeline. The exhaust that pours from my vehicle (and everyone else's) floods the air that comes into immediate contact with my tomatoes, maybe not permeating the skin of the fruit, but definitely affecting the quality of air the growing plants have access to.

The history of this parcel of land is somewhat consistent with much of the land throughout New England. Rapid European settlement included the clear-cutting of forests for pastureland and a sharp rise in the development of industrial infrastructure. Factories in Rhode Island have been

famously producing manufactured metal products and textiles for centuries, requiring excessive fossil fuel burning and cross-state transportation. Agriculturally, Rhode Island has benefited from rich glacier run-off, which is also responsible for the considerable numbers of ponds and lakes in the state (Rhode Island Farm Bureau). In addition to 32 salt ponds and the previously mentioned 400 miles of coastline, Rhode Island is also home to hundreds of freshwater ponds, all of which contribute to the state's popularity as a recreational and commercial fishing destination (RIDEM). The extensive coastline contributes to the notable salinity in the soil, particularly those that are in proximity to one of the many salt marshes across the state. Additionally, the exposed coastline in Rhode Island, much of which is South facing, leaves much of Rhode Island's coastal farms (including fish and oyster farms) vulnerable to hurricanes. Rhode Island's oyster habitats, for example, have crawled back to life (with the help of oyster farmers) slowly since almost being completely wiped out by the Hurricane of 1938. All of these factors and many more have been major contributors to what we now know to be Rhode Island's terroir (or merroir, in the case of oysters), imparting a particular flavor profile onto our tomato farmer's plants and affording him a unique reputation for his vegetable growing abilities.

The reason I stop to explore terroir is because I believe it could be used as a valuable tool in teaching people of all ages to consider their relationship with their food on a microbial level. Not only does sunshine and water affect a plant's ability to thrive, so too does the history of its geographical location's climate and pollution, as well as farming and direct human interaction with the land itself. "At the core, our interest in terroir is an enduring desire to partner with the landscape, survive on it, and live well," (Jacobsen, 2010). The practicality of a term of this breadth has, in the last four hundred years, shifted from one which delineates geographical areas to one

that is used to emphasize product regionality in an increasingly globalized market (Deloire et. al. 2008). Terroir encompasses the soil itself, the space a particular piece of land resides within, the weather experienced by that land, as well as the history and human understanding of that land, and the identities related with that land. Where each of these factors intersect and manifest within a food product, we come to know that product's terroir. Because terroir is so entangled with our sense of place, and therefore cannot be quantified, it remains a qualitative factor in the determination of our appreciation for a product as well as our self-identification in the context of that product. Deloire et. al. (2008) maintain that our appreciation for a product is the principal criterion used to evaluate it. Therefore, our understanding of place and of our own relationship to that place is the most important factor in determining how we feel about a particular food or food product.

It follows, then, that the definition of terroir which includes a place's history must also allow space for future dwellers of that land to leave their indelible mark and to forever alter the terroir of foods grown on that land, for better or for worse. "Slowness is [a] recurring theme. It's almost as if goodness can only accumulate so fast in a thing, no matter the production tricks." (Jacobsen, 2010). In this understanding of terroir, the factor of responsibility is introduced to every generation of dwellers. It is not the responsibility of the land or the climate or the space or the history to create a taste of place (Paxson, 2010), but rather those elements *combined* with the actions of each human who interacts with that space over time. In the modern sustainability movement, those interactions will be relied upon to carry our planet forward into the future, evolving and creating new terroir, rather than depleting and destroying it.

As the concept of terroir has evolved, the geographical boundaries associated with its use fell away and were replaced by socio-spatial processes and limits (Basset et. al., 2007). This new

meaning has made way for nature conservation groups, political entities, and landless groups alike to implement the term in efforts to “reclaim” the land, an effort which has different goals depending on the group. What each of these uses have in common is the use of terroir by communities to construct locality and develop personal and cultural identities. What we eat is a product of the geology of the place we live in. Our identity is also shaped by the place we live in and food therefore becomes symbolic of our identities (Pietrykowski, 2004). As we distance ourselves from the source of our foods, we lose a sense of our identity.

We are among the first generations of people to exist largely without an intimate understanding of and connection to the land on which we rely. How many of us can determine a soil’s quality just by feeling it? Or can navigate by the stars? Or know how long our growing season is or can recognize and identify the bugs and birds in the sky? “Paying attention to terroir is one of the best and most enjoyable ways to reestablish this sacred relationship. It can teach us so much about who we are, why we like what we like, and how we might go about living on this earth. It can allow us to rediscover a romance that is exhilarating, fortifying, and real,” (Jacobsen, 2010). Jacobsen’s use of the word “romance” in this context implies, once again, that the path to connection and a meaningful life full of wholesome relationships might be found in the way we relate to our food and the people we interact with in the context of food. It feels good to understand these relationships and ones backed by love and gratitude, the same emotions which we find present with us at a jovial kitchen table.

However, in the global food marketplace, terroir has become a tool used by value-added product manufacturers to set their goods apart from the competition. Most often, this means sourcing ingredients from a specific region using geographical indications (for example, Champagne can only be made out of grapes sourced from Champagne, France). The problem is

that these indications allow for the appropriation of certain product characteristics without including the socio-cultural history that shaped these characteristics such as inherited farming techniques or the specific terroir of that region (Bowen & Zapata, 2009). This has left room for increased chemical inputs by large industrial players, decreased quality of products, and the displacement of local farmers, which in turn is allowing for the loss of historical practices and cultural identity, as well as further homogenization of food products from around the world. Emphasizing the socio-cultural elements of a product's terroir allows for the preservation of cultural identities, the promotion of diversity and biodiversity, improved ecological health, and the fostered growth of healthy, thriving communities.

My reasons for buying tomatoes from a farmer I've met before in person might seem like a noble exploration of my local food system on the surface, but in fact the truest reason for this recent effort of mine is my desire to regain some sense of control over what I eat. We think we have control because we've been told that we can buy whatever foods we want whenever we want. All we have to do is go to a grocery store with dollars in hand. No one tells you that there's a difference between the tomatoes-on-the-vine at the store and the tomatoes-from-the-farmer-down-the-road. In fact, that difference is hidden well behind the glossy, taut skin of the tomatoes on display right inside the grocery store's front doors. Sure, it might be February. Sure, they might have been gassed en route to the store in order to turn red from their otherwise under-ripe, green state. Sure, they might have been grown with chemical fertilizer rather than naturally fortified, healthy soil, if they ever even touch soil at all. But they're so.... Pretty. And we've been told that fruits and vegetables are good for us. So we buy them.

But if we stop and consider our diets outside of our own personal needs and desires, it becomes impossible to ignore the complete *lack* of control we have. And we are looking for more than just control over the physical matter that we ingest; we seek tools to aid in our personal quests to develop our personal identities and to understand the roles we embody and the ways in which we contribute to our larger communities. Food, as we've already discussed, and especially foods that come from the same places as we do, provide such tools. So the question is now: how might we regain a semblance of control over the ways in which we eat? In our desire for a clear-cut solution, we might jump right into all the hot-button words and phrases like “eat local” and “know your farmer,” and while those ideas are both simple and important, before we can do that and in order to do that, we must learn.

We need to develop our personal knowledge of the place we live in and the plants that grow there. This requires drawing on some collective knowledge—cultural wisdom—that develops in particular geographical areas over generations upon generations of dwellers who, through endless trial and error, have fostered a keen affinity for and intimacy with their place. Indigenous knowledge has, for this reason, been considered of great importance in indigenous cultures where elders are revered for the information they hold about how to care for their world.

Colonial North America, however, was founded (in part) upon ideals of independence and individualism, efficiency and progress (Paxson, 2010), all of which promote a separation of the individual from the collective as well as a sense of competition and privacy. Without a culture of knowledge preservation and sharing, and with the advent of social media and the internet, we have lost further control by hindering the creation of unique cultures which are connected to the land. Even those of us who are still interested in learning about the land or about plants or about growing food or flowers or any other kind of farming find ourselves looking to the internet for information

and inspiration. Few of us have personal, familial, or local mentors to guide us through the rediscovery of knowledge that has surely been forgotten. Many of our older family members that are still living were indoctrinated by the post-World War II thought patterns that are responsible for introducing chemicals and other artificial technologies into what is meant to be an organic process: the growing of food. And while plenty of people consider themselves to be “foodies” or food bloggers or writers or cooks, I find that many of the cookbooks I have leafed through or purchased are, in fact, entirely disconnected from a place. Even those which are based on particular food cultures require the purchasing of ingredients based on their brand names rather than their flavor profiles or their local equivalents.

This is evidence to me of our lack of a collective identity. The sad truth is that American food culture is, if anything at all, about addiction, efficiency, and distraction. Distraction from the world, not a means by which we engage with it. Blinded by the lure of what has been sold to us as freedom of choice, we walk around the grocery store, mindlessly picking out the same items we bought the previous week, month, six months, feeling lonelier than ever before. While it is becoming fairly obvious that eating foods grown close to home is a healthy and socially proactive choice, even those who can afford to choose those items find the shift away from “whatever we want, whenever we want” to be a scary one. Many people have only finally established health habits that have been promoted for years: eating bananas instead of Cheez-its and fish instead of cheap ground beef. But the banana was flown halfway around the world. The fish was farmed and fed food pellets made out of leftover chicken parts. So how are we supposed to eat? Without fully considering the immense food-supply needs of an over-populated planet with densely populated mega-cities, we can look to some of the more idealistic alternative food movements of the moment. According to fast-growing food movements such as the local food movement or Slow Food, we



should be allowing our environments to dictate when and what we have access to for food, at least to some extent. “If many of us would view this style of eating as deprivation, that’s only because we’ve grown accustomed to the botanically outrageous condition of having everything, always,” (Kingsolver, 2007). In this way, though, we will find a much greater sense of gratitude for foods while they are in season and perhaps even declare each season and each bloom cause for celebration.

If we aren’t celebrating a food or a particular time of year, we are usually at the very least celebrating *with* food. “Food turns events into celebrations. It’s not just about the food, but the experience of creating and then consuming it. People need families and communities for this kind of experience... Becoming familiar with the process of food production generates both respect and a greater sense of calm about the whole idea of dinner,” (Kingsolver 293). A celebration is a coming together of individuals to share in the joy of an opportunity, an achievement, or the mere existence of something like a food or a season.

A celebration is also an act of respect and of gratitude for a reason to celebrate at all. We exercise gratitude for the opportunity to relish in the comfort of company and community and shared goals. Together we acknowledge the importance of sharing our own abundances and in exercising reciprocity and engaging in gift exchange. These are crucial elements of a communion around a kitchen table. They establish trust and encourage feelings of belonging to a group or community, and also offer opportunities for discovery and expansion of knowledge of the world around us and the people in it.

I have wondered for so long about how to articulate the relationships that are built between people around a kitchen table. Why is it that, when people come together to share food, they seem

to leave feeling more satisfied than if they had simply eaten that food alone? Author Robin Wall Kimmerer presents the idea that through gift-giving and gift-exchange, we are able to establish and build relationships with others. These relationships are defined by reciprocity. Kimmerer speaks more to this idea in terms of how it offers a framework through which we (humans) might understand that we take for granted our relationship with the earth (Kimmerer, 2013). We have long since forgotten to acknowledge the miracle it is that food can grow in the ground, and that anyone can do it. It is, technically speaking, a gift from the earth. Perhaps a good place to practice rekindling our relationship with the earth is with each other, or vice versa.

Our context for expressing gratitude has shrunk to include only interactions in which gifts are given or exchanged. If somebody does a favor for you, or if they bring you a bottle of wine on your birthday, you might thank them. Their generosity and care for you is the life-force within that gift, and is the real reason to be thankful. But what if we expanded our concept of “gift”? There’s a reason that gratitude is a practice recommended by mental health experts around the world: it forces you to see so many of the things we have that we take for granted as *gifts*. When it comes to food, it can be difficult to recognize an opportunity for gratitude when food is sourced solely from a grocery store where it might come wrapped in plastic or on a Styrofoam tray. It’s difficult to recognize the life in that object – which is what there is to be thankful for. Besides, in a grocery store, there never seems to be a shortage. We can never know whether we are taking too much.

Kimmerer, author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, emphasizes in a Buddhist fashion the need to recognize the life force in non-human beings, particularly those that we consume as food. It is that life-force which gives these forms their nourishing characteristics. They are, after all, somehow more than simply the vitamins and minerals that they are composed of. All the dietary supplements in the world could not replace the real thing. And it’s hard to know why, exactly, but it must once

again be assumed that something irreplicable gives a non-human being the quality of being more *whole* than the sum of its parts.

In a story told by Michael Pollan in his first published book, *Second Nature* (1991), he recounts an experience he had as a child whereby he left the seeds of a watermelon scattered behind a bush and discovered—with absolute delight—that they had in fact germinated and grown into a full vine with fruit just a few short months later. He describes the moment he found the ripening melon as the feeling of finding “treasure” (Pollan, 1991). Treasure can be defined as a concentration of wealth of any kind that is considered lost or forgotten until rediscovered. Its rediscovery contextualizes it as a sort of gift from the earth, and calls for a measure of gratitude which introduces some level of reciprocity between the giver and the receiver. The essence of this relationship is the reciprocity between the (capital “e”) Earth (from which the treasure came) and the human receiver.

No gift-giving is truly a one-sided, one-off event, however. In our relationship with the Earth, it is not without some form of human intervention that our crops are able to produce. Kimmerer uses the example of maple syrup. Without intervening in the maple tree’s natural seasonal processes, we would not be able to extract the sweet syrup within. Between humans, the act of gift-giving injects a relationship with reciprocal energy. “The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity,” (Kimmerer, 2013). Lewis Hyde, a writer out of Boston who focuses on such subjects as human creativity and property, calls this a feeling-bond (Hyde, 2007). While some might feel this energy as an obligation, it is in fact a life-bridge between the two over which love and other emotions (those which can also be found around a warm and inviting kitchen table) have the opportunity to flow. This remains a positive exchange as long as both parties want the best for each other.

Similarly, it is not without some form of respect for or reverence of the Earth on the part of the humans that the Earth continues to produce its gifts. Lewis Hyde's extensive research on gift economies notes that 'objects... will remain plentiful *because* they are treated as gifts,' (Hyde, 2007). Because we are dependent upon nature and have the power to participate in her abundance, Kimmerer agrees with Hyde, arguing that gift economies are the ideal form of exchange because they exist in harmony with the Earth's natural processes and abundance. Gratitude becomes a vital tool. "...when there is no gratitude in return—that food may not satisfy. Something is broken when the food comes on a Styrofoam tray wrapped in slippery plastic, a carcass of a being whose only chance at life was a cramped cage. That is not a gift of life; it is a theft," (Kimmerer, 2013).

Like food items, cooked dishes, and people in a kitchen, Kimmerer also references a secret ingredient that is added to a relationship when gifts are exchanged. Kimmerer repeatedly mentions that gifts are "multiplied in relationship" – that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. She uses such examples as the three sisters – a method of planting corn, beans, and squash together so that they each support and aid in the growth of the others (she even suggests that this relationship could be called the *four* sisters, to include the role of the human farmer). "In ripe ears and swelling fruit, they counsel us that all gifts are multiplied in relationship. This is how the world keeps going," (Kimmerer). In contrast, caring too much about personal property can divide people into unnaturally singular, lonely lifestyles. Negating the reciprocity inherent in healthy relationships disconnects us from our food, the land we live on, and the people around us. Money and technology can trick those who have them into believing that they don't need anyone else to survive.

In moving toward a life filled with relationships defined by gratitude and reciprocity, it is necessary that we develop a deeper knowledge of our own familial or cultural ancestry, as well as (or at the very least) the ancestry of the land we live on (if they are not related).

*Whether we are digging wild leeks or going to the mall, how do we consume in a way that does justice to the lives that we take? When we rely deeply on other lives, there is urgency to protect them. Our ancestors, who had so few material possessions, devoted a great deal of attention to this question, while we who are drowning in possessions scarcely give it a thought. The cultural landscape may have changed, but the conundrum has not—the need to resolve the inescapable tension between honoring life around us and taking it in order to live is part of being human.*

- Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013)

Fully understanding the scope of both our family's or culture's historical food-related practices and the ancestry of the land we currently live on will contribute to a greater appreciation for the resources we have, as well as a more fulfilling relationship to those resources as well as the people we share them with. A primary human need for survival, food offers us some of our earliest opportunities to become naturalized to a place. Kimmerer argues that becoming naturalized to a place means that you live as though this is the specific land to which you give your gifts, that these are the specific plants and waters that nourish you, and that your ancestors lie in this ground. Becoming naturalized means that you understand how your relationship with your place on Earth will frame your neighbors' and your children's relationships with the land. A place becomes a home when it sustains you, when it feeds you in body as well as spirit," (Kimmerer, 2013). Inheriting a relationship to the land which sustains you fosters a deeper sense of connection with not only the place you live but also with the other people who live here. It provides you with a reason to transcend the merely human realm through acts of love and ceremony.

While my family heritage may include linkages throughout the northeastern United States, South Africa, and parts of Europe, my actual family lives on soil that historically belonged to the Narragansett Tribe of Native Americans. Knowledge of this history has filtered the lens through which I have developed my own relationship with this land. Of European descent, I have partially

inherited a settler's mind, which views land as property, real estate, capital, or natural resources (Kimmerer). Additionally, I grew up within an educational model that recognizes a hierarchy of living things, with human beings at the top. These are two extremely narrowed ideas which directly contradict the worldview of the people who originally inhabited this land. To many native peoples, land is not even viewed as an economic concept; rather, it encompasses these people's identities and their connections with their ancestors. Land is the shared home of their nonhuman kin as well as the place where they are able to source medicinal, structural, and educational needs. It sees no hierarchy except that which identifies human people as "the younger brothers of Creation [due to the fact that] humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn," (Kimmerer).

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As I continue to explore all the avenues through which I might learn more about the land I inhabit, I have found myself alluding to my budding interest in all kinds of conversations, in the hopes that I might learn something new. I recently mentioned to my dentist that I had applied to the Master Gardener program at the local university, and she looked shocked. Young people were actually interested in plants? In soil? In manual labor? With sharp tools and gloved fingers in my mouth, I decided not to respond. She took my cue and told me all about her garden at home – and in particular about her recent discovery that purslane, a common weed, is *edible*! I nodded and made a vaguely familiar noise that implied "yes! I was surprised to learn that as well!" She had spent most of last weekend pulling it out of her garden bed, but now she might try adding it to salads or even turning it into pesto. She carried on, filling me in on the rest of the plants she had

added or removed from her back yard this year, including the new trees she planted in the pots by her back door.

They were fig trees. Lush, leafy sprouts sat like a cloud atop a skinny trunk, making her back porch look like maybe she had just been to France for the first time, and perhaps paid a visit to Versailles. The trees had clearly been manicured, and they framed her doorway such that someone exiting the house might for just a moment be emotionally transported to an idyllic countryside property. She gushed about the trees and the man she gotten them from. He was a sweet, old Italian man – another patient of hers. That’s who taught her the most about plant and soil care, the older visitors to her practice. They’d had their hands in the ground for as long as they could remember, like their fathers before them. This particular man lived just down the street. “There’s a small white sign that reads ‘PLANT SALE: BLUEBERRIES’ – you can’t miss it.”

From the bottom of the driveway with the white sign, I could see a man in a green shirt, standing proudly over a small table of plants, gently showering them with water from a hose. It seemed at first that there weren’t many plants, just a hobby-sized collection of herbs and biannual flowers. He looked up at me, waiting for me to approach. Hard of hearing, he cupped his right hand around his ear while I repeated our dentist’s glowing review of his work. He seemed flattered, yet unsurprised. We gazed at the herbs for a moment before I spotted what I had been looking for: the figs. Three large trees sat by a shed, with plastic bottles around the base of the lower branches. The bottles contained damp soil and what looked to be a pile of string. This proud plant parent, who we will call Robert, described his method for propagating young fig trees, and explained that the small plants that I had initially passed off as weeds were actually young figs, a few years out from their first fruiting. Robert reached his hand up under the netting that coated the larger trees. The leaves rattled as he plucked a small purple fruit from the elbow of a branch. Holding it out to

me, he asked if I liked figs? Yes! I could feel my eyes widen with excitement, and already had to convince myself that I didn't *need* to buy three fig trees.

Robert used very few words to tell the history of these plants, all of which had been propagated from larger trees belonging to his father and grandfather. His grandfather had emigrated from an island near Capri, off the coast of Italy, bringing with him little besides his knowledge of fig trees and a specimen or two. His own father, a mechanic, had kept the fig gene pool alive in his own backyard. And now, Robert was explaining to me how he kept these trees alive through our harsh (at least by Mediterranean standards) New England winters. He motioned his hands downwards as he told of the trees' tendency to drop their leaves during the month of October, then motioned toward the shed as he explained how he wrapped the branches together in a layer of burlap and tucked them away inside for the winter, where they would lie dormant for a few months. The look on my face must have been one of intrigue, because he grew excited to tell me of his father's method of laying the trees down in a trench, dug on the sunny side of his house, and covering them with leaves, effectively burying them in the ground. Come springtime, these trees would awaken, dotted with pale green signs of life.

Sold. He asked only eight dollars for the small tree, so I peeked around and found a few more flowering plants to take home with me, in an effort to support his hobby. At the end of my visit, we stood across from each other over a table of plants, another fig in hand and the seedy pulp of the purple fruit awash against the inside of my cheeks. The plants between us were all edible, and I couldn't help draw a similarity between them and a spread of food on a kitchen table. We continued chatting as though over a green lunch. Robert promised me another baby fig tree come spring, one with fruit, he said. We exchanged excitement over the tray of plants in my arms,



imagining the spider web of connections drawn between each customer of his, a trail of history traced back to one old Italian man with a fig tree and a love for his heritage.

Then I was on my way, to return in the spring.

It is interesting to meet someone who is so engaged with his own ancestral relationships with plants, as well as with his own reciprocal practice with the land he lives on. It is particularly beautiful to discover the ways in which this man has so successfully found a way to marry the two heritages. He connects to his ancestors through the cultivation of fig trees, and the taste of the fruit has the power to send him back to the Mediterranean soils of his youth. Yet, his passionate exploration of fig growing in New England has brought individuals within his community literally to his doorstep, themselves eager to send roots down into their own backyards, where they might tangle with the old maple and oak roots that have navigated this rocky soil for centuries. “The consumption of traditional foods has been linked to economic, social, and environmental sustainability; therefore, the main challenge of a changing marketplace is to ensure that young generations continue consuming traditional products,” (Garanti & Berberoglu, 2018). Garanti and Berberoglu examined the way that individuals use their traditional products to identify themselves with the culture and to feel that they are part of the community. We all, in some form or another, do this.

The food we share is, at its best, an extension of ourselves out into the world; it is a piece of our own heritage, knowledge, and self that we can give away as an expression of care and love. Participating in the raising, cooking, and sharing of food propels us into a position of deeper connection with the Earth, the plants, and the people around us. In every way that we interact with food, we have opportunities to build relationships. Around a meal, we have the time and the literal

nutritional energy to engage with each other, support each other, learn from each other... and therefore care for and learn about ourselves. Through a heartier relationship with our food, we might also find that we are driven to protect the ground from which our food grows. We may learn to see our relationships as cyclical, rather than linear, and as interconnected, rather than inconsequential.

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Tonight, I sit outside with my family, huddled in blankets. It's November, and the sun has long since set. We share a bottle of my grandpa's favorite Chianti and snack on cheeses from Vermont, where one of my brothers now lives. Inside, a binder full of recipes lies open on the kitchen table. I have a similar binder. A few years ago, as a gift for my mother, I helped collect all the scribbled recipes of recent generations of women in my family. It includes my grandmother's recipes from her time in Italy, as well as other ideas she clipped from food magazines throughout the years. It contains my other grandmother's unbelievable banana bread recipe, and her own mother's instructions for the perfect chocolate cake. It even contains recipes my mother learned from her Home Economics classes in grade school, including basic instructions for mixing a salad dressing. We keep these women, and the people who ate and enjoyed their cooking, alive through these recipes. We exist on the same, endless continuum of cooking from a recipe, enjoying the end product, and passing down the written recipe for others to do the same. We maintain the cycle's endlessness by building relationships with our loved ones, sharing our love for a specific food, and teaching them how to make the food, so that they might carry on cooking it and tweaking it to their own tastes for the enjoyment of loved ones to come. Connecting to our heritage is most easily and

viscerally accomplished through food. Even if it wasn't *your* grandmother's recipe... it was *someone's* grandmother's. Or someone's brother's or grandfather's.

The cheese and wine exchange molecules on our tongues, connecting us to those who aren't present and somehow elevating the experience for each of us, entangling the relationships that each of us have with the food and with the people who the food reminds us of. Our small circle of blanketed feet feels larger than it actually is, as it holds space for both our memories of our grandparents and for the people we all love in common. And that feels to me like an answer to my questions. Why does food taste better shared? Because it is shared atop (or in this case, beneath) a blanket of woven stories. Interconnected lives and relationships that have impacted us in one way or another. It is our capacity to build these relationships, and the context that food provides for doing so, that makes a shared meal more memorable and meaningful than it might be if we enjoyed it alone.

At the end of the evening, we huddle close around the fire pit. Staring into the waning flames and glowing coals and sipping on the wine dregs, we talk about our legacies. What will we leave behind? The conclusion we come to is a simple one: the legacy we *all* leave behind, regardless of wealth, status, heritage, religion, education, or sex... is the way we affected the people we connected with along the way. How did we impact the people we met? How will they feel when they think about having met us? I feel the warmth of the flame heat my right leg, drying my eyes out enough that they begin to water. I hope my legacy feels something like a home cooked meal, shared around a table: warm, nourishing, loving, and whole.

*We have enjoyed the feast generously laid out for us by Mother Earth, but now the plates are empty and the dining room is a mess. It's time we started doing the dishes in Mother Earth's kitchen. Doing dishes has gotten a bad rap, but everyone who migrates to the kitchen after a meal knows that that's where the laughter happens, the good conversations, the friendships. Doing dishes, like doing restoration, forms relationships.*

- Robin Wall Kimmerer

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