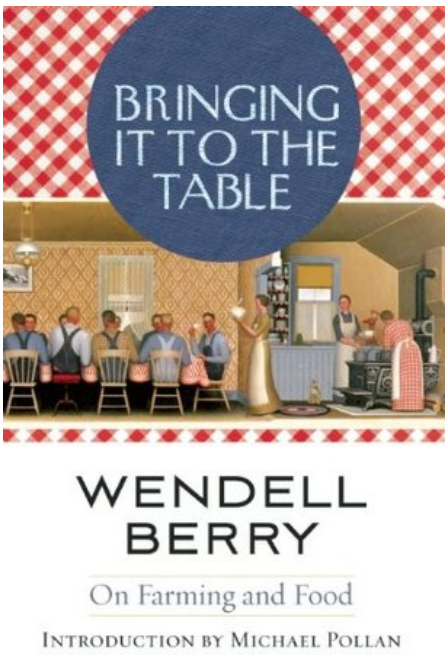

Bringing it to the Table: On Farming and Food

Wendell Berry , Michael Pollan (Introduction)

Bringing it to the Table: On Farming and Food

Wendell Berry , Michael Pollan (Introduction)

Bringing it to the Table: On Farming and Food Wendell Berry , Michael Pollan (Introduction)

Only a farmer could delve so deeply into the origins of food, and only a writer of Wendell Berry's caliber could convey it with such conviction and eloquence. Long before Whole Foods organic produce was available at your local supermarket, Berry was farming with the purity of food in mind. For the last five decades, Berry has embodied mindful eating through his land practices and his writing. In recognition of that influence, Michael Pollan here offers an introduction to this wonderful collection.

Drawn from over thirty years of work, this collection joins bestsellers *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, by Pollan, and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, by Barbara Kingsolver, as essential reading for anyone who cares about what they eat. The essays address such concerns as: How does organic measure up against locally grown? What are the differences between small and large farms, and how does that affect what you put on your dinner table? What can you do to support sustainable agriculture?

A progenitor of the Slow Food movement, Wendell Berry reminds us all to take the time to understand the basics of what we ingest. "Eating is an agriculture act," he writes. Indeed, we are all players in the food economy.

Bringing it to the Table: On Farming and Food Details

Date	:	Published August 18th 2009 by Counterpoint (first published July 1st 2009)
ISBN	:	9781582435435
Author	:	Wendell Berry , Michael Pollan (Introduction)
Format	:	Paperback 234 pages
Genre	:	Food and Drink, Food, Nonfiction, Science, Agriculture, Writing, Essays, Environment, Sustainability

From Reader Review Bringing it to the Table: On Farming and Food for online ebook

Ian Caveny says

(I'm not going to lie, I finished this one late on New Years' to get a jump on my 2018 Reading Challenge.)

On no topic is Wendell Berry more succinct and persuasive than on the lived reality of *food*. The convincingness of his rhetoric is simple: everyone eats. Forget the Marxist discourses on "economic base" - however useful - and let us instead come to the semi-Aristotelean base which is food. Everyone eats. Everyone must eat. And eating informs a great deal of who we are. It isn't for nothing, for example, that the pinnacle of Christian worship is an act of eating.

As such, a critique of culture that begins with agriculture is a critique that begins at the base of all culture, food. Berry, of course, knows all the philosophical lines involved in his work (his training was humanistic), but he writes not as a philosopher but as a farmer, and that is perhaps what makes him one of the single greatest public intellectuals of our day. He is not interested with "wow"-ing his readers with his supreme intellect or his persuasive rhetoric; he is interested in convincing us that food is the base of culture, and that we are in a food crisis.

This particular collection shares in some essays that I have read before (in *Citizenship Papers*) and discusses many topics and turns-of-phrase with which readers of Berry will be familiar. The first major division, Farming, felt very familiar (maybe too familiar; but, then again, I've read a lot of Berry this year).

It is the second major division, Farmers, though, that is the highlight for this book. Whereas in other collections Berry talks in terms of theory, politics, agricultural science, and the like, the Farmers section of *Bringing it to the Table* is a collection of anecdotes and stories of real farmers who are farming according to Berry's proposed "old" methods. It is a delight to hear of farms with biological diversity and livable overhead.

Finally, in the last division, Food, Berry shares a more affective (as opposed to instructive) set of texts: excerpts from his Port Williams stories that involve food. The result is a little here-and-there - some stories do a great job of expressing the nigh-sacramental perspective Berry exposits on food, while others are not so effective - but, nevertheless, they all convey a radical departure with late modern American food practices. The whole book could be taken as a critique of McDonald's.

As always with Berry, I recommend this text for anyone who is interested in the problems of food and farming in our country; but for those who have read a lot of him (like me), I would recommend simply reading the middle division and its stories of real farmers and not bother with re-hashing what we've already heard from Berry in the other sections.

John says

Wendell Berry is one of our most important contemporary writers, for his criticisms of the materialist worldview at the foundation of modern America. His criticisms focus on agriculture, place, and industrialism, symbolic of how we've wandered from the ways of our fathers.

We moderns have sacrificed the intangible for what we perceive as tangible—believing more is always better, efficiency rules, and anyone who gets in the way is a luddite or crank. Our measures of success are in terms of GDP, dollars per share, test scores, and approval ratings. But there is an inherent compromise in accepting these terms. Berry writes, “To regard the economy as an end or as the measure of success is merely to reduce students, teachers, researchers, and all they know or learn to merchandise. It reduces knowledge to ‘property’ and education to training for the ‘job market.’” p. 171

But people aren’t merchandise, nor value mere economics. He writes that “if you want to evaluate the agriculture of a region, you must begin not with a balance sheet, but with the local water. How continuously do the small streams flow? How clear is the water? How much sediment and how many pollutants are carried in the runoff? Are the ponds and creeks and rivers fit for swimming? Can you eat the fish?” p. 177

Industrialists and agribusinesses do not want to measure these things because they conflict with their balance sheets. If they are accountable for the availability of water, the quality of it, the pollutants they spill into our waterways, or the fish that live in them, they would compromise they would lose their competitive balance. I write this, not as one advocating for further environmental regulation, but as one in favor of giving individuals and communities equal protection under the law, rather than favoring large corporations with special interest funds and agendas.

Berry is a bit confused here—the role of government in the problem, and the solution to the industrialization of American culture. He does acknowledge that agribusiness is in bed with the government when he writes, “the advocates of factory farming are not advocates of farming. They do not speak for farmers. What they support is state-sponsored colonialism—government of, by, and for the corporations.” p. 15 Statements like this do approach the problem in the right way, in articulating the destructive nature of corporatism.

But he also argues “the price of farm products, as they leave the farm, should be on a par with the price of those products that the farmer must buy. In order to achieve this with minimal public expense, we must control agricultural production; supply must be adjusted to demand. Obviously this is something that individual farmers, or individual states, cannot do for themselves; it is a job that belongs appropriately to the federal government.” p. 43 But the very next page he writes, “It may be that the gravest danger to farmers is their inclination to look to the government for help, after the agribusiness corporations and the universities (to which they have already looked) have failed them. In the process, they have forgotten how to look to themselves, to their farms, to their families, to their neighbors, and to their tradition.” p. 44

This is one of Berry’s most glaring weaknesses. He has a knack for seeing problems that we collectively ignore, but his worldview has some glaring inconsistencies, like this inability to fully understand the government’s role in fostering the industrialization of American agriculture.

The disconnection of man from the land, which is what happened when millions of families moved away from family farms throughout the 20th century, has caused us to lose our sense of connectedness to the land and the production of food.

Berry says it well, when he writes that the family farm, “died for want of people with the motivation, the skill, the character, and the culture to keep them alive. They died, in other words, by a change in cultural value.” p. 58 Berry doesn’t use the word “materialism” often, but it is clear this is his target. We think little of what we feed our livestock because they are “only calories.” We think little of what we put onto our crops, because they are “only chemicals.” We think little about what is in the soil, because it is only raw material.

It is here that we begin to see some of the consequences: “For decades now the entire industrial food

economy, from the large farms and feedlots to the chains of supermarkets and fast-food restaurants, has been obsessed with volume. It has relentlessly increased scale in order to increase volume in order (presumably) to reduce costs. But as scale increases, diversity declines; as diversity declines, so does health; as health declines, the dependence on drugs and chemicals necessarily increases. As capital replaces labor, it does so by substituting machines, drugs, and chemicals for human workers and for the natural health and fertility of the soil. The food is produced by any means or any shortcut that will increase profits. And the business of the cosmeticians of advertising is to persuade the consumer that food so produced is good, tasty, healthful, and a guarantee of marital fidelity and long life." p. 231

We've traded freedom from farm life and the perceived drudgery of traditional farming for a decrease in health and an increase in health-care costs and reliance on pharmaceuticals. But farming should not be drudgery, but a life in harmony with the natural order.

Here is where we see Berry at his best—describing the beauty of the pastoral life. His novels are a vivid picture of this in action:

"Farmers farm for the love of farming. They love to watch and nurture the growth of plants. They love to live in the presence of animals. They love to work outdoors. They love the weather, maybe even when it is making them miserable. They love to live where they work and to work where they live. If the scale of their farming is small enough, they like to work in the company of their children and with the help of their children. They love the measure of independence that farm life can still provide. I have an idea that a lot of farmers have gone to a lot of trouble merely to be self-employed, to live at least a part of their lives without a boss." p. 74

It is hard to imagine agriculture returning to something like what it was, prior to the mass industrialization of it, but it is also difficult to imagine it continuing as it is. Modern farming is more "akin to mining" (p. 66) than it is to traditional farming. How can such a thing persist in perpetuity?

What is the solution? I don't think any individual has the answers, but we can learn together by assimilating the best ideas of men like Wendell Berry to build a future that is closer to the cadence set in motion by our Creator. That means slowing down and acknowledging, and working within the rhythms of God's order, not man's.

Bradley says

When I've told a couple of people so far how excited I am about this book, they've said "so you want to become a farmer?" Tempting as that idea might be, the answer is no. The amazing thing about this book is that through the lense of looking at agriculture, Berry describes a positive, sane and workable way of looking at life that could be applied to any "profession"--seeing the work, the worker, the family, the place, the community, and larger political scene as one inseparable, interdependant whole, and figuring out how to resist the way our current industrial economy strives to divide and conquer that whole for the sake of short-term profit.

Kim says

I was going to rate this two stars, but it finally had part of what I was seeking on the 232nd page out of 234 pages.

The first 1/2 of this book explains repeatedly the problem with big business farms. I'm well acquainted with the problems. So glad the subject changed.

The next 1/3 of the book told how great small farms are. I appreciate this, but this I already know.

The last portion shared how people look at food.

Finally, near the last page was what I was seeking: solutions for changing the problem. Except they were only for individuals. Nothing on how to improve the situation of getting large farms to become better managed or smaller farms. For that neglect, I was very disappointed.

If there's a problem, please seek a solution. Don't keep beating a long dead and stinking horse.

Susan Albert says

Bringing It to the Table is a treasure-house of Wendell Berry's work, an important collection of essays and excerpts gathered from his essays and fiction. A cantankerous, argumentative, eloquent writer who knows farming and food from field to table, Berry has been writing for more than forty years about the sadly declining state of American agriculture, the dangers of industrialized food farming, and the importance to the human community—and to the human body, mind, and soul—of good husbandry. If you've been reading Berry over the years (my husband and I chose an excerpt from The Unsettling of America for our wedding ceremony in 1986), you'll find some jewels here, all the richer for their association with other pieces in the collection. If you're new to Berry's work, you'll be astonished at his prescience: as Michael Pollan writes in his introduction, Berry is among the very first to point out the dangers of our American industrial agriculture and our disastrous separation of food production from food preparation and consumption.

Bringing It to the Table is divided into three sections. In "Farming," the essays (1971-2004) provide a compelling review of the central argument of all Berry's work: that we must "adopt nature as measure" and create farming practices that deeply connected to the "nature of the particular place." Industrial agriculture arming ignores and attempts to overcome the natural limits of place, seasons, soils, and resources. It is, Berry warns, "a failure on its way to being a catastrophe."

This place-focus continues in the second section, "Farmers." It includes seven elegiac essays that describe true farmers, not dependent on fossil fuels or large farm debt, in touch with their soils, their climates, their animals—people who understand and work within the limits of responsible husbandry. These farmers range from the traditional Amish to the Land Institute, where a radical new science adopts the natural ecosystem as "the first standard of agricultural performance."

The third section, "Food," brings farm husbandry and farm housewifery together, with excerpts from Berry's fiction: people sitting down to eat the food they have planted, raised, harvested, cooked, and served. It is beautifully illustrated by the cover image: Grant Wood's Dinner for Threshers. The painting frames Berry's argument that "eating is an agricultural act," that we must eat what is grown locally and prepared in our own kitchens, not prepackaged, precooked, premasticated. It also demonstrates what, in Berry's view, is the central stablizing force and foundation of the agricultural partnership: that women and men work together to

unite household and farm, and that "traditional farm housewifery"—helping with the work of the farm, preserving the harvest, and preparing the family's food—is the essential contribution of women to the farm household economy. Within this context, it is an honored contribution, not to be "belittled" as "women's work."

As we face climate change, resource depletion, financial insecurity, and health issues created by poor food choices, the sustainable production and consumption of our food will undoubtedly be one of the most challenging issues of the twenty-first century. Wendell Berry has been trying to tell us this for many decades. It's high time we began to listen.

Josh says

A truly incredible book! Wendell Berry's essays really encourage me to be watchful and care for nature. When he speaks of the complexities in the soil and all the life that exists beneath our feed, I am reminded how foolish it is to claim to fully grasp God's hidden wonders in creation.

Pete says

if you are into michael pollan or the politics of food/farming/etc you are legally required to get down with wendell berry.

Jacob Aitken says

I wept as I read every page. The warnings of Agrarian writers are now too familiar (if too readily ignored). Berry admits he is not an economist--which is why he can see the problem correctly and offer the only real solution.

His thesis is relatively simple: the closer food remains to the land, the better it is for the person and the land. This thesis restructures what community and farming are. If this thesis is rejected, which is the dominant religion of America, by the way, then farming becomes industrialized and food is produced simply to be mass-produced.

When food is mass-produced the land from which it is produced is cheapened. In the natural order, one uses resources wisely and the "waste" goes back into the land as fertilizer for the next cycle. In industrialism, artificial waste is imported into the land and then dumped into it after the farming.

One may rebut this, though: but does not industrial farming and mass-production give us a lot of food and allay starvation? Not really. Yes, we may get cheap food (let's loosen our definition of "food" for the moment) but all the while we are making the land from which we derived the food unsustainable. We now have to go somewhere else to get our "cheap food." This is why most of the top-soil in America is gone (please google the podcasts of Fr Matthew Raphael Johnson on agrarianism on this point).

So what should we do today? The Empire is in its death-throes. Those who have laughed at me on Agrarianism for almost ten years can no longer seriously maintain that the "City" will provide their salvation.

In a time of economic turmoil (and probable revolution) where will your safety lie: the city of the countryside/small town community?

As Wendell Berry said, "Practice Resurrection."

Faith says

This was a very interesting and scary book! This man wrote essays decades ago and what he said seems to be happening. When it involves food and the future, it is a scary thing that he talks about. What we have done to the land and the way we look at things is concerning. I think everyone should read this book. We need a wake-up call in this country.

Ben says

I love this book. The middle section about Farming is the only section I wouldn't necessarily recommend to my foodie friends, but one which was valued by me.

This book consisted of three sections: Farms, Farming and Food. The first section were essays which were mainly examples of good stewards of the land they were given. Many of the farmers' stories had the same theme: "I remember using horses and oxen", use tractors minimally if at all, practice permaculture and sustainability wherever possible, build up the soil and honor your family. These attributes are things that I would love to live by, but don't think I'll have a chance of in my lifetime. The best I think I can do is read and practice these ideas in an urban area and pass on the knowledge and philosophy to children.

The second section is in regards to farming. This section has a lot of technical information about fertilizers, pest management, economics of the farm and marketing. Once you have the qualitative goals in mind after reading the first section, section two will add some quantitative factors to the mix.

Finally, the third section about food. Wendell Berry admits that he isn't a great cook and has only written about food in his fiction writing. So this section is a number of excerpts from his fiction. I wasn't as much interested in this section except the fact that all of the stories are about sharing what you have with people who don't. It seems that the consumption part of agriculture is the biggest disconnect even after Jamie Oliver visits one's school. Sure, these kids now know what a tomato really looks like on a vine, but what about the emotional experience attached to preserving and preparing foods, and then sharing them with unexpected guests. The sharing experience is one that is almost gone from our culture. This is probably what most attracted me to agriculture from the roots - the result of hard work is a friendly experience reminiscent of "youth" for me. Youth is something that isn't as subjective as one would think. It's what it means to be taken care of. It's sharing mashed potatoes and Twix at a sleepover.

Bringing It to the Table is a collection of essays from one of the finest writers on agriculture in recent history. Reading Wendell Berry is as easy as reading Dr. Seuss but as informative as Noam Chomsky. He is a true craftsman and an inspiration. While this book didn't change my life like other reviewers, it did add to the fire of getting back to peasantry.

Jamie says

I was reminded of Wendell Berry from a Nick Offerman (Ron Swanson from Parks & Rec) interview. I had heard a little about him previously, but figured if he's good enough for Offerman/Swanson, I should give him a go. The recommendation was definitely a good one, as I thoroughly enjoyed Berry's commonsense and plain (in a very good way) writing.

Berry writes in fairly simple language, but his ideas are wrapped in his own experience and those whose stories he shares. He approaches farming and agriculture with an earth-first attitude, while showing that this attitude does not decrease production of viability of the land. It is a refreshing approach to the green/organic/slow food concept in that he does not rail against factory farming so much as show how much better stewards we could be of the land. In a time when polarizing and attacking language is the norm, I am thankful for Berry's voice. I get the sense that rather than wanting to tell our society that it is wrong in how it sees agriculture he is amazed at how much better we could do things, if we were more conscious. For example, suggesting that we try to look at food and imagine where it might have come from. The McDonald's hamburger doesn't come from a hamburger factory, but from an animal, which is born, raised, and slaughtered in very specific ways, ways designed to treat that animal as an object rather than a living thing. Extrapolate that thinking to the land and the earth - Berry exhorts us to see the land not as a factory, but as our provider of everything essential for life. A good reminder and one that we would do well to hold in the front of our minds.

Charlotte Dungan says

I got this book from the library again just to I could quote this one section (page 35):

"With industrialization has come a general depreciation of work. As the price of work has gone up, the value of it has gone down, until now it is so depressed that people simply do not want to do it anymore. We can say without exaggeration that the present national ambition of the United States is unemployment. People live for quitting time, for weekends, for vacations, and for retirement; moreover, this ambition seems to be classless, as true in the executive suites as on the assembly lines. One works not because the work is necessary, valuable, useful to a desirable end, or because one loves to do it, but only to be able to quit - a condition that a saner time would regard as infernal, a condemnation. This is explained, of course, by the dullness of the work, by the loss of responsibility for, or credit for, or knowledge of the thing made. What be the status of the working small farmer in a nation whose motto is a sign of relief: 'Thank God it's Friday?'"

He discusses at length the importance of the family farm, the reason that they are fulfilling for both the farmer and the land and the community and our country. From the next page:

"The family farm is failing because it belongs to an order of values and a kind of life that are failing." There is too much to quote here, but it is worth reading.

Elizabeth says

This was not what I expected, after seeing poetic Wendell Berry quotes all over for years. This collection of essays on Agriculture is a short, intense intro to Berry. And he is mad, frustrated and right. I'm super glad I

read this (excepting part 3, which really could just contain his essay, "The Pleasures of Eating"), even though it wasn't an easy swallow. I feel more educated and aware of what I'm participating in, as an eater and human. And that's the start of any big change.

Lexi says

Important book. True, good, and beautiful, in typical Wendell Berry fashion.

Emily Bertholf says

While looking for books about gardening, I happened to pick up this book on a whim. I'd been familiar with Wendell Berry through some poetry and quotes of his work picked up over the years, but had never taken the time to read his work. In the pages of his collected essays on farming, food, and agriculture, I found well formed ideas, practices, fears and beliefs and frustrations I've heard from many once farming families in Wisconsin. I was surprised how moved I was, a city girl in Milwaukee, reading this book, but as he says, "To be interested in food but not in food production is clearly absurd." If you eat, you should read this book.
