



Fields of Plenty: A Farmer's Journey in Search of Real Food and the People Who Grow It

Michael Ableman (Photographs)

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In the face of supersizing and a fast-food nation, a growing community of organic farmers and food artisans are producing sustainable nourishment that is respectful to the land and rich in heritage, flavor, and passion. In *Fields of Plenty*, respected farmer, teacher, and ecology advocate Michael Ableman seeks out these innovative and committed farmers to reveal how the fruits of those who till the soil go beyond taste. From Knolls farm in California, famous for succulent figs tree-ripened to perfection, to an urban farm in Chicago that sustains an entire community, his odyssey takes him to farmers who are trying to answer questions of sustenance philosophically and, most importantly, in practice. Illustrated with evocative color photographs of the land and the people who work it, and accompanied by a bountiful selection of recipes, this beautifully written memoir reveals the power of food as a personal and cultural force.

Fields of Plenty: A Farmer's Journey in Search of Real Food and the People Who Grow It Details

Date : Published October 13th 2005 by Chronicle Books (first published September 29th 2005)

ISBN : 9780811842235

Author : Michael Ableman (Photographs)

Format : Hardcover 256 pages

Genre : Food and Drink, Food, Nonfiction, Gardening, Science, Agriculture, Travel, Cookbooks, Cooking, Environment, Sustainability



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Eva says

I loved this book. I want to buy a copy for my father, a former farmer/dairyman who taught organic farming in 1938. Michael Ableman is a photographer turned organic farmer whose trip across America interviewing organic farmers is a beautiful tribute to the creative nurture involved in growing a diverse crop and feeding a community. The photos are lovely, the life tales enthralling, and the recipes - yum!

Betsy says

In this book Michael Ableman shares the story of the journey he and his son took across the United States visiting various farms in Washington, Oregon, California, Wisconsin, Illinois, Vermont, Maine, New York, Delaware, Polyface Farm in Virginia, etc. I enjoyed his words and the beautiful pictures of beautiful food.

Alissa says

Wonderful vignettes told with flair of an anthropologist, beautiful photographs and crazy recipes you'll copy into a new collection. Makes you believe small-scale local agriculture may have a future in North America, as the author (a farmer himself) travels to the ~50 different farms and families and takes a close look at a wide range of farming philosophies, farmed products and cultural backdrops that comprise today's small farms. I've kept this book on my bedside table (despite its huge size) for over a year.

Dree says

I found this book through goodreads--either through recommendations or through the "people who read this book also read" feature.

In this book, Ableman chronicles his summer of driving the US, visiting a variety of organic farmers. We meet them, and learn why/how they came to their work, who they market to, how it goes. The vignettes are written well, and each farmer's/family's voice comes through.

Interesting, with some delicious-sounding recipes included.

Ethicurean Reads says

The memoir of farmer, writer, and photographer Michael Ableman about traveling with his son from his own farm in British Columbia across the United States in search of innovative and passionate farmers who are making a difference in what we eat and how we experience food.

JB says

if you're interested in food politics and the local food industry, this book is a must read. michael ableman is a farmer, activist, writer and photographer that decides it's time to go out and meet some other farmers. this book is a document of all the small farmers working their magic. makes you want to run to your nearest farmer's market and meet all the people that grow the food you eat (or should eat).

Meg says

I do enjoy Michael Ableman's books. He provides great insight into the perspective and philosophy of the most important people in our society: the farmers.

Three stars because I find it rather foolish that he perpetuates the myth that meat can ever be sustainable (it can't).

Liz says

In the same vein as *From the Good Earth*, in which the author traveled around the world to visit farms and learn about traditional practices, *Fields of Plenty* is the story of his road trip around the United States with his 23-year-old son Aaron, visiting farms, talking to farmers, taking pictures, and sometimes working side-by-side with people who do the same work he does. Michael Ableman currently lives and farms in British Columbia, but in the early 1980s, he started a farm in Southern California, Fairview Gardens, which currently serves as an education center, the Center for Urban Agriculture, in addition to continuing life as a working organic farm. (The story of Fairview Gardens is told in Ableman's second book, *On Good Land*, which I intend to find and read.) Of great interest to me was finding out that Michael Ableman's roots are right here in my area, where his great-grandfather settled and ran a general store!

In this book, Michael Ableman visits about twenty-five farms all over the country. He leaves his own farm in the hands of his wife and farmworkers, a first for him, as *From the Good Earth* was undertaken during the winter, rather than at the high season. As he drives, he thinks about the lessons learned at each farm, and mulls that over, along with his own hard-won experience of many years. I quote here some of the passages that struck a chord in me:

“Figuring out how to feed people sustainably is a messy process of unraveling old ideas and experimenting with new ones. To conclude that, once chemicals are replaced with steer manure, the job is done misses the opportunity to explore a wider range of social, ecological, personal, and political possibilities tied to our food system and the way we eat.”

“A more sustainable food system is inevitably decentralized. It should take advantage of local knowledge and solve local problems, and it must be accessible, humane, ecologically responsible, and biologically and culturally diverse. That means rethinking how our society participates in the food system, where food is produced and by whom, and what scale it is grown on. We've got to question the idea that a tiny handful of folks can sustainably feed the vast majority. And we've got to question whether a problem that is essentially

social and ecological can be solved by science and technology.”

“...the most important aspects of a healthy food system are relationships – interpersonal, biological, and ecological. Food shouldn’t be just another fuel, grown out of sight by anonymous people, prepared and consumed as quickly as possible as if it were an inconvenience.”

“Growing and eating food are sacred acts; we need to reclaim them from the scientists and the industrialists, the bureaucrats and the organicrats.”

“I went on the journey in search of a movement, as if there were some unified group of people across the country following the same path. I return home realizing that each place requires a different response, and each individual is unique in his or her creative expression. I traveled to gather new ideas, innovative techniques, seed and tools; I return inspired. I left exhausted from too much work, worried about the fate of the earth, deeply concerned about a nation that had turned its back on its land, its food, and its agrarian roots. I return with a sense of hope and possibility.”

That sense of hope and possibility makes this a valuable read all by itself. The stories of these farmers give me hope, just as a trip to the local farmer’s market awakens me to what is already happening all around me.

Patti says

What a gorgeous book! The pictures of the crops and the farmers are breathtaking, but better still are the descriptions of the many ways to approach farming while taking care of the land and being in control of how the crops are planted, grown and harvested. Only a fellow farmer could travel the country with appreciation and respect for his compatriots who fill the farmers markets with food.

"In the quiet and repetition of field work, the mind has a chance to expand, the imagination to loosen. It's in those moments when our hands are busy bunching or hoeing or pruning that the essence of our work reveals itself. It comes in small and subtle revelations, like discovering how a certain insect or wild plant has been contributing to the well-being of the farm, or finding one tomato or carrot among thousands with unique qualities worth propagating, or hearing music in the mundane and repetitious work of filling boxes or burlap bags."

My connections to this book are strong. I buy vegetables from Harmony Valley at the Madison Farmer's Market every summer. Better still, my husband and I have a CSA share in the amazing Future Fruit Farm from which we are savoring all but lost varieties of pears and apples every other week deep into the fall. Both farms are described in the "Classical and Jazz" section.

We also just returned home from the annual Prairie Festival at The Land Institute in Kansas where we too listened to the thoughts of Wes Jackson and Wendell Berry. We brought home a small bag of Kernza, a perennial wheat developed and grown at the Institute. Ableman shares his visit with Wendell and Wes, "Here, among colleagues I have admired for years, I'm reminded of the broader tribe I still belong to.".

Tammy says

I completely enjoyed reading about Michael Ableman's journey from farm to farm. I loved hearing about the different approaches to farming as well as each farmer's history. Even more, it was easy to feel and hear Ableman's love of land and farming in each word he wrote. I checked it out at the library thinking it wasn't a book I would "need" to have, but now I'm wondering if that was such a wise choice.

Dana says

My father gave me this book. He got it from a church member whose brother is one of the subjects of this book. It is a perfect book for me because it has a journey, recipes, personal stories and contemplation on our relationship with food and our environment.

The author has a farm on Salt Spring Island in British Columbia and decides to spend three months visiting 25 farmers spread out from B.C. to Maine. He drives a Volkswagen van and takes along his camera and his eldest son and does the unthinkable by leaving his farm at the peak of summer season.

The farms he visits range from the tiny rural family affairs to inner city abandoned lots-turned-gardens for the community. There is a wide range of characters and meals with beautiful photos to illustrate. His arrival home is accompanied by a pile of potatoes, watermelons, peppers, honey, poppy seeds, eggs, tamales, beans, a trumpet, a drum, and the remains of a garlic braid he left home with three months prior. The customs agent waves him through and he gets on the ferry to his home.

It left me with memories of places he described that I've seen and lists of places I'd like to visit next...the first of which is his own farm since I now live within a short drive and a ferry trip away.

I know my list of books is heavy with food-related causes and that is the evolution of my thinking since the beginnings of the local food push, but this is THE book for me. Fast Food started it and the Omnivore's dilemma educated me in depth about my choices, but this book gives me resources and ideas - a sort of Bible for a contemplative eater - and encourages me to be involved with my food choices rather than let others make the decisions for me.

Barbara Splett says

I enjoyed this book but felt that as the book went along it lost a little momentum. The first couple of farms that the author visits are talked about very patiently and with great detail as he goes along there is less and less detail. I still loved all the farms he talked about and it made me even more excited to grow my own food and buy local!

Bryan says

Excellent book. Great taste of sustainable agriculture from across the country. If you want to farm and want to get inspired read this book! Farmers of different cultures, styles, sizes and types. Highlights are the sheep chapter and the elliot coleman chapter. Big yes!

Kimberly says

I loved this book about a farmer's journey back and forth across the US talking to a variety of organic farmers. It was nice to see such a wide variety of farming covered, from large to small, grain to cheese to vegetables to meat. It made me feel hopeful that we can regain control of our food supply and its safety. It also had some really great recipes sprinkled in to help you feel like you were traveling right along with the author.

Eric says

This is a travel account of Ableman's trip to discover innovative and successful small farmers in Canada and the United States. Ableman was a very successful farmer on 50 acres near Santa Barbara California that was swallowed by encroaching development. Recently he moved to British Columbia and started farming there. In an unusual move he took a summer off for this road trip with his son.

Through beautiful photos and well written text he provides insights into the mindsets of farmers who are engaged in a wide variety of agricultural enterprises. From a grower of heirloom chilies to a stone fruit paradise, from a movable farm in Chicago to a cave aged cheesery, from a highly organized CSA in Wisconsin to a farmer in California who doesn't weed, this book abounds with interesting people and places. Ableman also shares recipes at the end of each chapter. I very much enjoyed this book because of its beauty and the beauty of the people and places that he chronicled. Meggan bought it for me for my birthday and had it signed when we heard the author speak at APU. Highly recommended.
