**Taking Local on the Road** by Camille Kingsolver

I have a confession to make. Five months into my family’s year of devoted local eating, I moved out. Not because the hours of canning tomatoes in early August drove me insane or because I was overcome by insatiable cravings for tropical fruit. I just went to college. It was a challenging life, getting through chemistry and calculus while adjusting to a whole new place, and the limited dining options I had as a student living on campus didn’t help. I suppose I could have hoed up a personal vegetable patch on the quad or filled my dorm room with potted tomato and zucchini plants, but then people would really have made fun of me for being from Appalachia. Instead, I ate lettuce and cucumbers in January just like all the other kids.

Living away from home, talking with my family over the phone, gave me some perspective. Not having fresh produce at my disposal made me realize how good it is. I also noticed that how I think about food is pretty unusual among my peers. When I perused the salad bar at my dining hall most evenings, grimly surveying the mealy, pinkish tomatoes and paper-like iceberg lettuce, I could pick out what probably came from South America or New Zealand. I always kept this information to myself (because who really cares when there are basketball games and frat parties to talk about?), but I couldn’t help noticing it.

I suppose my generation is farther removed from food production than any other, just one more step down the path of the American food industry. More than our parents, we rely on foods that come out of shiny wrappers instead of peels or skins. It still surprises a girl like me, who actually lives on a real farm with real animals and stuff growing out of the ground, that so many young adults couldn’t guess where their food comes from, or when it’s in season where they live. It’s not that my rising generation is unintelligent or unworldly—my classmates are some of the smartest, most cultured people I know. But information about food and farming is not very available.

Most of the people I know have never seen a working farm, or had any reason to do so. Living among people my age from various cities across the United States made me realize I actually know a lot about food production, and I don’t take that for granted. I also won’t forget to appreciate how much better local food tastes. Next to getting a good night’s sleep on a comfortable mattress, cooking good food became my main motivation for coming home from school to visit. Of course seeing my family was nice, but priorities are priorities, right? It was great after weeks of dorm life to eat eggs with deep golden yolks, and greens that still had their flavor and crunch. I loved being able to look at a table full of food and know where every vegetable was grown, where the meat lived when it was still a breathing animal.

During my first year of college I found two campus eateries that use organic, locally grown produce in their meals, and one that consistently uses free-range meat. For the most part, these vendors did not widely advertise the fact that they were participating in the local food economy. I only found out because I cared, and then tried to buy most of my food from those places.

My generation, I know, has the reputation of sticking iPods in our ears and declining to care about what might happen in ten years, or even next week. We can’t yet afford hybrid vehicles or solar homes. But we do care about a lot of things, including what we eat. Food is something real. Living on the land that has grown my food gives me a sense of security I’m lucky to have. Feeling safe isn’t so easy for people my age, who face odious threats like global warming, overpopulation, and chemical warfare in our future. But even as the world runs out of fuel and the ice caps melt, I will know the real sources of my sustenance. My college education may or may not land me a good job down the road, but my farm education will serve me. The choices I make now about my food will influence the rest of my life. If a lot of us felt this way, and started thinking carefully about our consumption habits just one meal at a time, we could affect the future of our planet. No matter how grave the predictions I hear about the future, for my peers and me, that’s a fact that gives me hope.

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