Grow Food, Cook Food, Share Food
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Food, Share Food

Perspectives on Eating from the Past and a Preliminary Agenda for the Future

KEN ALBALA
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Questa con erudita varietà si rappresenta, per mezzo
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CONTENTS

Foreword by Anita Guerrini  ix

The Appetizer  xi

FIRST COURSE:  Grow Food  1

SECOND COURSE:  Cook Food  25

THIRD COURSE:  Share Food  47

Dessert  65

Cordial  67

Notes  69

Index  73
I would like to thank all the marvelous people I met during a perfectly delightful week in Corvallis in the fall of 2011 while delivering the lectures that were the basis of this little book. Above all, thanks to Anita Guerrini who arranged everything and even let me mess up her kitchen. Thanks to the late Benjamin B. Horning whose munificence made the trip possible. Thanks also to Joan Gross, Sara Jameson, Mary Jo and Bob Nye, Flo Leibowitz, Jon Katz, and all the fantastic students and people from the community who prompted me with thoughtful questions. Thanks also to Allen Goodman and Hilarie Phelps at the Harrison House. I never suspected a stay at a B&B would include great conversations over breakfast. Thanks to Laura McCandlish with whom I took a fabulous tour of the 2 Towns Ciderhouse. And thanks to all the lovely people who shared food with me or provided great ingredients at the farmer’s market. A big thanks to all the people at Oregon State University Press who turned this into a book, especially Mary Braun and copy editor Julie Talbot.

The lectures on which this book is based are partly drawn from my research as a food historian, but also from my personal experience growing, cooking, and sharing food. Whenever people ask me why I spend so much time cooking and writing cookbooks, I tell them this is the activist phase of my career. As you will see herein, I believe that practice of history, while valuable in and of itself, should also engage the public and inspire people to generate social change. In my small way, these ruminations on the garden, kitchen, and dining room are designed to do just that. I hope you can follow me and get your hands a little dirty.
In these lectures I discuss the historical development of three crucial components of human nourishment and their disjuncture in the industrial era. I have tried to describe without romantic sentimentality the ways our food production system, our methods of food preparation, and our modes of consumption have changed over time to the detriment of human happiness, health, and community. I have also made some creative suggestions regarding ways in which we can recapture the positive aspects of past foodways without endangering food security or abandoning the many valuable advances of the last century. History offers constructive examples of how we can better grow food, cook food, and share it, if only we have the means to listen and learn from food writers of the past.

KEN ALBALA
There is a certain magic to watching little shoots nudging their way up through the soil, spreading their first leaves and soaking up sunshine and water. I think at some level, at least for the past 10,000 years, we have evolved so closely with domesticated plants and animals that it makes us happy to just observe their fecundity. There is also something so rewarding when the yield from your labor in the field can be harvested directly to provide nourishment for yourself and others. Even just wandering through gardens and orchards sown by others gives us a palpable feeling of wellbeing. Farming and processing food are an inherent part of what it means to be human, yet so many of us in the last century have lost contact with the soil and have completely forgotten how to prepare basic raw ingredients for storage. Growing and preserving food have always been two sides of the same process. Beans and fruits were dried, vegetables were pickled, milk was transformed into cheese, and meat was cured right on the farm. Yet since the advent of industrial food production, the farm has become completely detached from the food factory, and basic knowledge not only of how our food is grown but how it is processed has been lost. This is partly due to the scale of today’s farming and food processing operations, but it also has to do with the physical space we occupy and our relationship to the land.

When I was very young, my family moved from Brooklyn to the township of Manalapan in central New Jersey. For my parents this was the equivalent of moving out to the country. Although we lived in a new, mass-produced housing development built by
Levitt (the company that effectively invented suburban planning), the area was still almost completely rural. It was 1966, and you could hear cows mooing early in the morning. My friends and I used to walk to nearby cornfields, by late summer towering maybe seven or eight feet high. We would scatter, dashing through the rows, our arms being scratched by wayward leaves, until we were dizzy and lost. Most importantly, there were produce stands that sold vegetables, including tomatoes of unspeakably intense flavor and beauty. In these days the term “Garden State” was not facetious in the least. We were surrounded by farms, and at the time there still stood many old farmhouses. The area was settled in the 1680s by Scots and Quakers and a mile away there was the old, spooky Topanemus Cemetery set in a patch of woods where we would visit the old farmers’ graves, families like the Barriclos and Reeds, and muse upon the weathered headstones with their gruesome skull and crossbones motifs and macabre rhymes. “As I once was, so you shall be, so prepare for death and follow me.”

From the time these first settlers arrived until about the 1960s, for nearly three hundred years, the principal economic base of the region was agriculture. This was not subsistence agriculture, nor even production of fruits and vegetables for the local market. These were fairly large farms supplying processed ingredients to the cities. The grain grown here was milled and shipped to New York or Philadelphia in the form of flour; the apple orchards all through the area processed fruit into alcohol known as applejack. Laird & Company, started nearby, has been in business since the eighteenth century and is the last surviving producer of applejack. By the 1830s, food was transported by cart or canal to the Raritan River, the Hudson or the Delaware. By the time my family had moved there, only the names remained of the many mills that straddled the network of streams: Taylor’s Mills Road; Lafayette Mills School, which was a few hundred feet from my house; and Clark Mills, where I went to kindergarten.
Within a decade of our moving there, the housing developments began to proliferate. We had no right to complain, we were merely the first trickle of what would eventually become a deluge of houses, making up bedroom communities that stretched without break from Boston to Washington, D.C. If you visit the area today, there are still a few green patches, preserved as state parks, like the site of the Battle of Monmouth in 1778, and the odd little remnants of what was once extensive farmland. But now it is mostly houses, strip malls, and business complexes. The showroom on Route 9 that once sold John Deere tractors now carries lawn mowers. Remnants of the little cemetery are still there, but now surrounded by housing developments, the old dirt path long ago paved for traffic. This is a story replicated through much of the country, and there is no point in being nostalgic about it. Populations rise, cities sprawl, suburbia engulfs everything in its path. Communities like these were a fascinating social experiment, but when people of my generation grew up and began to notice the wider world, we were indeed “sprung from cages on Highway 9” as local Bruce Springsteen put it. Most fled suburbia and the soulless commuter’s life it engendered. In any case, it was no longer a place to farm.

Agriculture itself has profoundly changed in these years, too, not merely in becoming mechanized. Wheat production has moved to huge industrial farms in the Midwest. The applejack is made from neutral grain spirits, flavored with a little apple shipped in from Virginia. The vegetables, like those tomatoes, are now available year-round, picked green, gassed, and shipped all around the country. They are now a little rounder, harder, a brighter shade of red, but not tasting much of anything. This, too, was perhaps not inevitable, but it has already happened and it is impossible to turn back the clock.

It is still worthwhile to consider what we have lost in this process, now that the food we eat is grown by less than two percent of the population. What are the consequences of losing a direct
connection to the soil and, if not growing food ourselves, then at least knowing the people who did, and having a direct concern for their personal welfare as members of the community?

Not that these connections are completely severed everywhere in the country—I am fortunate to live now in Stockton, California, in the center of the great Central Valley. It is a city surrounded by vineyards, almond groves, dairies, and every imaginable type of farm, from small family operations with farm stands to some of the biggest industrial agribusinesses on earth—the very ones that grow those hard, flavorless tomatoes. I am not merely arguing for the relative merits of small family operations over big factory farms, but for the human connection to growing food and caring for animals, and the sense of responsibility that familiarity breeds, as well as the now-severed connections that once linked cities directly to the countryside.

There are many good reasons to be optimistic nowadays. I need not recount the success of farmers’ markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) that delivers produce in boxes straight from the farm (cutting out middlemen), school and home gardening, and urban farms, or even the brave efforts to localize the food supply. These are all entirely laudable, even though they may make up only a small percentage of total production in the United States. There is still something missing from these efforts, something we have lost with modern food production. These things are all positive and forward looking, but I think we might also learn something invaluable through a serious glance backward, by gleaning lessons from agronomic texts of the past. What attitudes did farmers years ago apply to their efforts? What sense of wonder did they express at the fertility of the earth, and with what kind of respect did they tend to cooking and serving food that issued from their efforts?

I began with the story about the growth of suburbia to suggest that its modern version is essentially just an extension of the city.
It encroaches upon the rural landscape, devours it, but has no real synergistic connection to it, apart from the few surviving farm stands, farmers’ markets that bring in produce, or the backyard gardens that people tend. I could say much the same even about where I live now; although it is an urban area with farms just beyond the city limits, the vast majority of produce from those farms is shipped elsewhere or sent to factories to be canned. The wealthier farmers and even some farm workers may live in the city, but the rural and urban are otherwise two entirely distinct and disconnected spheres. You might meet a farmer at the market and buy his tomatoes, but there is no direct economic incentive for the city dwellers to be concerned with his welfare. They can always get tomatoes elsewhere. There might be a good reason to reconsider the entire way we think about food production, to restore this direct connection to the earth and its produce, rather than merely act as consumers.

There once existed agronomic models that were radically different from modern systems. These were biologically diversified, equipped to process ingredients in situ, and most importantly, they were connected directly to cities. These bygone arrangements offer some lessons, even if we would not want to implement them entirely today. They come from Italy, and flourished from ancient times through the seventeenth century. Different forms of farm operations are described by three agronomists in particular: Cato the Elder (234-149 BCE), a Roman statesman; Pietro de’ Crescenzi, a retired lawyer from Bologna writing in the time around 1304-1309; and Vincenzo Tanara, a Bolognese nobleman writing in the seventeenth century. Each composed an extensive treatise on agriculture, the first two being classic, the latter less well known.

To get a sense of how these systems worked, let’s take a look at the unique features of Italian landholding. Historically, Italy was largely urban, especially in the north, but the majority of cities were relatively small. Each city dominated the surrounding
contado, or countryside, even ruling it politically, and the majority of land was owned by people living in the cities. There was feudalism in the Middle Ages, but it was never as important in Italy as elsewhere in Europe. Even in Roman times, large estates or latifundia, although prevalent elsewhere in the empire, were atypical in Italy in the Republican period. Cities were by and large fed by a surrounding rural ring of about fifty miles, or as we might say today, they were locavore in a very real sense. That is not to say some products such as wine, oil, and cheese didn’t travel farther, they did. But most produce and domestic animals came from within a day’s journey and most localities had their own distinctive ways of making bread, cheese, and salami based on their own unique, local microflora. These products were for the most part consumed locally.

There were also several different arrangements whereby land was farmed. Wealthy people would own “suburban” villas outright and hire a farmer/steward as well as farmhands on a permanent or seasonal basis. In classical times, slaves were also common, although there were usually just a handful on each estate. Large numbers such as we might imagine on a plantation were unusual. But practically anyone running an urban household would also own land as the most stable form of investment. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance this land was often farmed by the system of mezzadria, which is something like sharecropping. A farmer would occupy and work the land and would keep 50 percent of the produce. The other 50 percent would be sent to the owner for his own household use or to sell within the city. As you can see, the owner therefore would take an active interest in the success of the farm, often investing in improvements and/or fertilizer or drainage projects, or testing new plants and animals. This explains the prevalence of farming manuals, written for people who needed to learn how to farm in order to maximize yields and profits. If the farm failed to flourish, the owner lost his investment.
Incidentally, the system also existed in Southern France, and was called metayage; similar systems elsewhere in Southern Europe were also used. In Italy it lasted well into the twentieth century, until officially outlawed in 1982 when all holdings were legally transformed into rental properties. There are historical reasons why it ceased to work—having largely to do with industry, cities growing too big, and agriculture itself becoming mechanized and bigger—but a closer look at the historical use of the mezzadria system will reveal some of its merits. It should be noted that the heyday of the system was in the wake of the bubonic plague, after 1348, when labor was at a premium and landowners offered good deals to farmers to keep them on the land. The model does not work as well with overpopulation in the countryside, when landholdings tend to be divided up into tiny parcels, which is why it did not work in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

I am certainly not suggesting a revival of the system, or of classical villas manned by slaves! But there is something about the very close connection between countryside and city that deserves notice, something about the active interest of individuals living in the city for the welfare of the countryside, both an aesthetic and commercial interest, that we have largely lost. In all the authors discussed here, there is a sense of pride in ownership and care, which 98 percent of our current population can only experience by having their own garden or allotment—an undertaking that is almost never a commercial venture. Gardening is usually a hobby, restricted mostly to vegetables and fruit. That is to say, I think the possibility of material profit makes a person think very differently about the land. It also provides incentive to care about the farmer, in a way that an absentee landlord taking feudal dues or rents would not.

Modern consumers rarely if ever experience such a direct connection, mostly because food passes through the hands of so many middlemen. We know practically nothing about where
food comes from. You might argue that Community Supported Agriculture, with the box of produce delivered to your door, approaches the connection I’m talking about, but since people can join or leave anytime and they don’t own the farm or even visit (they just pay a fee), the direct investment is missing. Moreover, as with the farmer at the market, if the venture fails, people can get produce elsewhere.

Cato the Elder, even though he was not describing the *mezzadria* system, in many ways describes a similar arrangement. Without doubt, this kind of aesthetic appreciation for agriculture has its roots in the classical authors, not just Cato but others such as Virgil, Varro, Columella, and Palladius. For the Romans, getting your hands dirty, so to speak, was not in any way demeaning, in fact quite the opposite. Virgil talks about planting trees with his own hands, and wrote a long poem, the *Georgics*, about rural life. Nor were these just aristocrats playing around with gardening; farming was a commercial venture for them.

Cato the Elder is best known as the statesman who would get up onto the rostrum in the Senate and bang on it, proclaiming, “*Carthago delenda est!*” (“Carthage must be destroyed!”) regardless of the topic at hand. He is also the author of the earliest surviving prose work in Latin, *De Re Agricultura*. To future generations he would be associated with the stern self-sufficient values of the Republican period, when Romans used to go off fighting in one season and then return to their farms to plow or harvest, before Rome went soft with exotic eastern luxuries. This was imagined to be a time when Romans had simple tastes, still feared the gods, and lived on small subsistence farms.

In point of fact, this description takes his work out of context. Cato was writing about farming as an investment, for men who might have just come into an inheritance, or were perhaps retired from the military and earning a pension (after ten years for equestrians, twenty years for infantry)—so someone perhaps
around thirty or thirty-five years old. The text was written for anyone looking for a sound investment in land, which meant direct, if absentee, management. This was at a time when the early empire was expanding, cities were growing or being founded, and there was a lot of money to be made in trade, but especially in agriculture, thanks to great demand for food. Cato focuses on high priced goods that ship well, especially wine and oil. But the book gives directions for much more than that, especially fruits and vegetables for market gardening. Cato is adamant that you have to buy land on a major river or road system, so clearly this is food to be sold in cities. He recommends 150 acres for an olive orchard, 62 acres for a vineyard.

Importantly, these were not huge latifundia (plantations) growing hundreds of acres of wheat. There were not large teams of slaves. In fact, he says a good olive farm would have only thirteen slaves, six just to deal with livestock—three to drive oxen, one to tend the donkey, a swineherd, and a shepherd. The sheep grazed among the olive trees. A vineyard would need sixteen slaves for more varied tasks—like cutting willow staves for trellises or baskets. There would also be farmers, as well as slaves, who grew food to consume on site and fodder for the draught animals. But all the heavy work was contracted labor, essentially migrants brought in seasonally who worked for wages.

Overseeing the whole operation, there would have been one family, a foreman and his wife in charge of everything, following the directions given by the owner, who was usually absentee. That is, the owner stayed in the city and the foreman or steward sent the produce and processed food back to him in the city, where he used some in his household and sold the rest to merchants. This would be not just wine and oil, but vegetables and fruit, grains, cured meat and cheese—anything produced on the farm. It was different from the mezzadria system because the foreman was paid, rather than taking some of the produce, but note the
close connection between the city and the countryside. Most importantly, the owner needed to know at all times what was going on. He was ultimately making the decisions and ideally visiting the farm as often as possible. If something went wrong he lost money, so he had to know in intimate detail the workings of the farm, the soil quality, everything. Note how different this was from a completely absentee landlord who collected rents and had little interest in what crops were grown or the technologies applied.

Cato’s book is also extraordinarily detailed about how to build the farmhouses, presses, and other equipment; when to plant; and what kind of soil is best for which crops. Cato clearly knew how to farm from direct experience. Wine was made right on site and he explains how to correct its faults. There is even a culinary section where he offers recipes for sacrificial cakes, including *globi*, which are essentially fried donuts soaked in honey and rolled in poppy seeds, and *encytum*, which is a kind of funnel cake. The most interesting is called *placenta*, which is a flat cake made with layers of oiled dough, fresh cheese, and honey—sort of a sweet lasagna, without the tomatoes. Self-sufficiency was among the most cherished values among Roman agronomists, so it would not be unthinkable to have every ingredient coming from the farm, or being sourced locally.

In any case, Cato’s operation provides an example of one form of agriculture that is heavily diversified, involved not only in growing but processing foodstuffs, and which directly links the countryside to the city, without middlemen or go-betweens, without the disjuncture of essential knowledge about how the food is grown, and, significantly, with a financial incentive to maintain the best practices which will make a profit. These are the crucial elements connecting city dwellers with the countryside, and from which we might learn some valuable lessons.

Imagine an arrangement today, something comparable to Cato’s farm but practical for modern urbanites. Obviously there
are not many people who can afford to buy hundred-acre plots of land, nor many who have the time or expertise to manage an operation like this. But consider if a group of people collectively invested in a farm, both land and equipment, and owned it jointly much like a stock company, so investors could sell their portion if they wanted to. These owners would collectively hire a farmer to live there and manage the property rent-free, but they would decide what should be grown. They would plant vegetables or have animals reared for their own personal use. The farmer would get to keep half the produce for his use. Anything left over could be sold, invested back into the farm for operating costs, upkeep, etc. On the one hand this would open opportunities for small family farms and all the burden of debt would not be on the head of the farmer. Nor would the farmer need to borrow from banks and have his debt repayment subject to the fluctuations of food prices on the open market. More importantly, it would connect people living in cities directly to the land, not as consumers, but as owners taking a personal stake in the property—in whose self-interest it would be to use the best practices. Sustainability would be requisite, not merely a marketing ploy. Ultimately, this would be both a moneymaking venture and a way to feed the investors’ and farmer’s families.

Today there are legal arrangements similar to this in land trusts, which historically have been used to hide ownership, though increasingly are used for conservation efforts. They could also be used for active farming ventures, wherein a cohort of investors allowed a resident farmer to use the land without the burden of rent or lease, and the product of the land could be shared in kind or sold directly to the community by the farmer. Cooperative arrangements would allow the owners to take part in routine tasks simply for pleasure. This would also be quite different from community gardens, wherein people are given their own little patches, but frequently drop out or leave the work to be done by others. With the cooperative model, the profit motive provides
incentive to grow fresh produce, but also value-added processed foods like cheese, cured meat, preserves, and pickles—something you almost never see in community farms today due to general loss of knowledge about how to process food, as well as complex food safety regulations that favor industrial processing.

There are other possible models drawn from the past. Let us move forward to the fourteenth century and Pietro de’ Crescenzi. Pietro was not a nobleman, but a successful lawyer working at the University of Bologna. Apparently he had traveled a lot, and observed farming practices wherever he went. When he retired he decided to move to a villa outside the city walls. This was the Villa Olmo, near Rubizzano, about ten miles from Bologna, which is still farmland. There he started farming and writing a book on agriculture, based in part on classical sources, but also with much new material drawn from practical experience. His book Opus Ruralium Commodorum (Work on the Benefits of Rural Life) circulated in manuscript for two centuries and was then among the first books ever printed, in 1471, and was immediately translated into Italian, French, and German. It became one of the most influential books on agriculture ever written.

Crescenzi’s basic attitude toward farming bears scrutiny. He did not move to the country to retire and live in leisure. He considered it a good, safe investment for an urbanite and something ennobling. In the prologue, he says among all the things that can be acquired (i.e. material goods) nothing is better than agriculture (i.e. cultivated land). Nothing is more abundant (profitable), nothing sweeter, and nothing more worthy of a free man. It is a kind of appreciation for farming that had not been seen since classical times, and certainly not from a scholar. This attitude, incidentally, should be contrasted with the standard position of feudal nobility, which was essentially as absentee landlords, letting peasants do whatever they liked with the land—mostly subsistence farming, living from hand to mouth. Crescenzi’s operation was much more closely tied to the markets inside the city, and not surprisingly,
he mostly discusses intensive crops like grapes, olives, fruits, and vegetables—items that can be processed and sold.

Moreover, he did not merely plant gardens and enjoy them for their own sake. This was meant to be a profitable venture; hence he invested in a wide range of improvements. Crescenzi was particularly interested in what we would call soil conservation—building canals and gullies, or leveling terraces on hills to prevent runoff. He also explained the logic of leaving stubble through the summer to prevent wind from blowing away topsoil. He reintroduced crop rotation systems, green manure, and fertilizers that would build up soil quality. He is especially lucid about lupines, which serve as cattle fodder, and as we know today, put nitrogen back into the soil. They serve the same function as alfalfa, both being legumes. The stalks of the plant can also be plowed back into the soil after harvesting, serving as green manure. Crescenzi also advocated composting and soil improvements. For marshy land he introduced rice cultivation, a completely new crop in Italy at the time, introduced from the East and through Muslim Spain.

I think Crescenzi’s direct aesthetic descendants are those urbanites today who leave their jobs to work a farm, perhaps using organic methods, experimenting with new crops and irrigation techniques. He was forward thinking in the same way as the modern back-to-the-land movement. In this respect, I think he provides another model for how cities can be linked to the countryside; that is, directly—by enterprising individuals who want to cultivate land themselves in new ways, for profit. Interestingly, Crescenzi is also health conscious; he describes the medicinal virtues of both wild and sown plants. He even offers some basic recipes for products like verjuice (the juice of unripe grapes) and vinegar, both means of preserving grape juice as condiments.

Most significantly, there is an aesthetic appreciation for farming, much like you find in Barbara Kingsolver or Wendell Berry. These are educated city people taking a direct interest in farming their
own land, learning about the soil qualities and the best crops to grow, and doing it as a personal source of food and income, not merely for entertainment. The profit incentive makes this quite different from a hobby farm. Of course, there are some modern urbanites who start their own operations, have to make a profit, and certainly bring a deep appreciation for rural life. This may be the future of farming, or at least we will see scattered farms like this amidst the factory farms. But there can certainly be more, and not merely among the few who opt for a complete lifestyle overhaul, but for those of us who want to keep our day jobs and also want more than a handshake at the farmer’s market, a box dropped at the doorstep, or the occasional agritourism vacation.

The last example is Vincenzo Tanara, also from Bologna, who in 1644 wrote *L’economica del cittadino in Villa* (The Economy or Management of the City Dweller in the Villa). Like Crescenzi’s work, it is specifically written for city people connected to the countryside. Tanara however was a nobleman, a Marchese, who had inherited some land and was given more for his military prowess. But unlike his fellow nobles, his book is all about how to turn the best profit by direct cultivation and processing everything yourself to maximize returns, which is why the book is filled with recipes, too—ones he had definitely made himself and shared. Tanara is a kind of do-it-yourself enthusiast about everything that can be made on his villa.

For example, immediately after discussing water quality he goes directly into a recipe for making beer, drawn from his own experience. He describes soaking the barley for twenty-four hours and preparing the leavening. When the barley begins to germinate and swell, it is malted, broken up, mixed with hot water (just hot enough to put one’s hand in). Then hops are added. He describes the equipment and terminology, different additives people used. The instructions are similar to any beer-making recipe you would find today, although he was starting entirely with raw
ingredients. There are also extraordinarily detailed bread-making instructions, all the way from calculating the price of wheat per pound, to milling, bolting, making and keeping the leavening, baking in an oven, and various types of bread. There are also bread recipes including a soup called *lova* made with broth and grated *Parmigiano*, garnished with marrow, testicles, little livers, and cock’s combs (the squishy red things on roosters’ heads)—or with chicken or turkey and slices of cheese to make a *capirotata*—all sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon. Tanara had very Baroque tastes, hence the use of exotic garnishes, including musk and ambergris. He was not entirely self-sufficient; there were certainly luxuries like spices that he purchased, but nearly everything else came directly from his own farm.

Tanara seems to have really enjoyed the connection between growing the ingredients and transforming them into the best products possible; it was all about superior quality and taste for him, and that comes from knowing how to make everything yourself. When he is done discussing a procedure, there are usually a few paragraphs in praise of bread or wine, or whatever food he is creating. Not only is there detailed discussion of how to make wine, but of how to tend the vines and trellis them, and when to harvest. He also covers other products created from grapes, like verjuice, made from unripe grapes in July, and *sapa*, which is a sweetener made of grape must boiled down to a third of its volume. There are directions on how to make vinegar and various grape sauces such as *sapori*, something like a grape jelly, but served with meat. There is a *salsa verde* made from the sour vine tendrils. His is a mostly self-sufficient household that uses every available ingredient to some useful purpose. Tanara’s work is among the very few that take you all the way from growing the food to preserving it, cooking it, and serving it.

The diversification of this farm is very impressive. Anything and everything that can be raised or grown is found here, so you not
only have vines and bees, but cows for dairy products, chickens, pig sties, a dovecote, herbs for seasoning, a vegetable garden, fruit trees, and medicine. The way all these activities fit together Tanara calls the economy of the household, and he uses the term in every sense, meaning being frugal, avoiding stinginess or avarice, but also generous with your bounty. As well, every part of the farm contributes to something else. The manure from animals is used as fertilizer. The pigs feed on vegetable waste and the entire operation works as a unified system without external inputs. It functions as a whole economy, so to speak. But it is also connected to the city, because the extra produce of the entire operation is sold there.

Economy here also means not wasting anything. There is a section on bovine butchery where Tanara describes which parts are good for broth, which should be roasted or stewed, and the prized status of brains, fat, marrow, and spleen. Everything gets used in one way or another. And anything left after goes into meatballs. He says, “Between the economist and the cook, there is little discord over meatballs, which are also for the most part cooked in a pot, the cook calls meatballs the queen of dishes, because with these he can satisfy every taste, using a diversity of ingredients, equally the economist, who gets a great piece of meat with what is removed from the bones, nerves, skin, etc.” And then he describes how these extra parts are mixed with ricotta, grated Parmigiano, parsley, garlic, raisins, spices, eggs, salt, bread soaked in broth, a little verjuice, all cut up very finely or pounded in a mortar, and lightly fried. Then he prefers cooking them in a covered pot in the oven overnight or on hot coals to make the meatballs as tender as possible. In any case, he is using every part of the animal economically and in the interest of taste.

Tanara’s true passion, however, is pork; in this section he describes 110 different foods to make from pork, using every imaginable part, from head to tail and every single bit in between. Nothing goes to waste. He starts anatomically with the eyes and snout, which are good simmered and cured in salt; sliced and
topped with oil, vinegar, pepper, and coriander; and served as a salad. One can imagine the slices of snout looking like buttons on a plate. Every piece has uses—the fat and feet in gelatin; the blood in sausages and pies; the skin, tripe and nerves in soup; everything else goes into sausages and salami. Or, he suggests, prepare pork as the poor do, taking the heart, skin, eyes, snout, kidneys, and fat, and pounding everything together with salt, pepper, and fennel, then stuffing everything into a stomach and letting it dry. Tanara next, in good comedic form, describes the pig’s last will and testament. His bristles he leaves to painters to make little brushes; half his skin goes to sculptors to make stucco, the other half to make soap; his fat is proffered to make candles for people to read by; his bones are left to comedians (presumably for slapsticks); his nails to gardeners to grow carrots; and all other parts—lardo, prosciutto, ribs, belly, salami, mortadella, sausages—to *il carissimo Economio villeggiante* (our most dear rural economical householder).9

About cheese making at his villa, Tanara definitely speaks from personal experience and I think exemplifies the model of engaged landowner-artisan. He starts with consideration of the milk, positing that cow’s milk is best because the heavy part, the viscous part, and the watery part are all in equal measure. Cow’s milk is especially good in the spring when the animals are feeding on a variety of herbs whose medicinal virtues are transmitted directly into the cheese. By comparison, sheep’s milk has too little whey and goat’s milk too little butter, or fat, so it is not as good for health. But in terms of taste, he admits, people say just the opposite. A common saying ran, *Si lac dulce sapit subito cur putret? Aquosum est.* (If milk tastes sweet, why does it spoil quickly? Because it’s watery.) Furthermore, *Quod praestat? Capra post, ovis inde, bovis.* (Which is best? First goat, then sheep, then cow.)10

Tanara has definitely made cheese with his own hands as well. He says it is best to break up the curds with one’s hands into small pieces, place them in a vessel, then lift up the solid parts with
both hands and press gently, so the watery serum drips down. Next, place it in a *forma* (mold) of wood. If unsalted, this makes *lattarolo*; if half-salted, a cheese called *tenero*; if fat and buttery, it’s *ravaglioso* in Rome but *tomino* in Bologna. If then aged, it becomes especially useful for people like voyagers and warriors, because it is extremely nourishing—whence comes *Si caseum habere, non desideratam obsonium*. (If you’ve had cheese, you don’t need anything else to go with bread.) Such aged cheese is harmful for the leisurely, students, and convalescents (because it is difficult to digest); nonetheless, everything is more tasty when such cheese is grated on top.

Tanara clearly prefers the taste criteria over that of health, and continues to praise aged cheese: “*Quest’è una delle tre cose, che mondo vecchissime sono buone, l’oglio il caccio, & il consiglio.*” (“This is one of three things that are better the older they are: oil, cheese, and advice.”) His personal favorites appear to be cheeses from Lodi, which weigh up to 400 pounds. But *marzolino* made in the Tuscan hills is also very fine, and he even makes a concession to the Apennine hills south of Parma. Tanara is also explicit about the many ways to preserve cheese: it can be smoked, soaked in brine, or rubbed with fat and dusted with rice flour. But he really waxes rhapsodic when he talks about ways to serve cheese. He says *Parmigiano* and *Lodegiana* are to be cut in the thinnest slices, placed in a dish, and drizzled with oil and the juice of oranges or lemon, then placed over a fire until a crust is formed. This is then scraped directly onto bread. *Tomino* can be cooked on a spit. But the apotheosis of cheese is in fillings for ravioli, anolini, or tortelli, with aromatic flavorings such as pistachios, pine nuts, raisins, jujubes, candied citrus peel, cherries, gooseberries, pea puree, or cock’s combs and testicles. Better yet, truffles and grated prosciutto. These sound a little strange, but they are precisely the ingredients called for in Bartolomeo Stefani’s *L’arte di ben cucinare* (The Art of Fine Cooking). Stefani worked for the Gonzaga in
Mantua but he was Bolognese and a contemporary of Tanara. I would not be surprised if the nobleman had eaten these dishes prepared by the chef himself.

The following recipe, Stefani’s *Torta di Formaggio Fresco*, will give an excellent idea of the aesthetic of the era. It is the epitome of Baroque cuisine.

Take three pounds of cheese and pound in a mortar, making sure it’s fat enough, and add a pound and a half of rich ricotta, a pound of pine nuts that have been soaked in rose water, and pound everything together. Add a pound of cream, 10 egg yolks, half ounce of cinnamon and 6 ounces of sugar, mix everything well, make a fine pastry leaf, and a pan of the right size buttered, and place on the leaf, then the composition and cook it in an oven . . . It’s served hot with sugar on top. 11

Tanara is no less enthusiastic about gardening. He says a villa without a garden is like a body without a soul. It provides the salad greens, aromatics, medicinal herbs, fruits, vegetables, and flowers for pleasure. At one point he describes planting beans, letting them run over a pergola, or on a cane frame. 12 When they are still young in the pod, he says to put them in a salad with honeyed vinegar and pepper—or parboil and flour them, then fry and serve with a garlic sauce. Young, freshly shelled beans are fried in a pan with garlic and onions, parsley, mint, and *sapa*. Or once they’re mature and dry, put the beans into a soup for Lent. There is a kind of excitement and delight over growing and preparing food in Tanara’s writing that’s infectious. He makes you want to grow and process your own food.

The most important characteristics of all three agronomists is that they are discussing a relatively small-scale and diversified farm rather than one that is specialized or monoculture; one that serves a nearby city, that is operated as an investment, and that supports a family and a variety of workers. Even though the land
is held differently in each case, it is owned by someone whose primary profession is not farming. It seems obvious that the lesson to be drawn from all three cases is that people should not be fundamentally ignorant of where food comes from. Two percent of the population should not be growing sustenance for the rest, and there should be more formal ways of getting people involved in food production and processing, beyond backyard gardening or buying from local farmers.

The farming cooperative would be the closest modern equivalent of these historic examples. This would be a farm where one comes and works on the farm for a set length of time and takes home produce equal to the share of labor put in. This idea occurred to me recently as I was helping a friend with a manual wine pressing—using a big, wood-slatted press with a huge screw and crossbar on top. Four or five men and one woman worked one long morning to press about ten barrels of wine, and we each took home a case of a previous batch. Any one of us could have gone and bought a case of good local wine for maybe $150. For five hours of labor, thirty dollars an hour is actually very good pay. But no one even thought about time or money, because money was not involved at any stage. Yet in one morning I learned how to press grapes with technology no different than was used a thousand years ago, and it was remarkably enjoyable work and bore no resemblance whatsoever to industrial wine production. I cannot honestly say I would feel the same way baling hay or cleaning chicken coops, but I would certainly give it a try if I got to take home a few chickens. That is, the exchange of labor for payment in kind seems so far from our modern agronomic sensibilities, that it should be explored as a systematic option.

There are, of course, agritourism sites that work in comparable ways, but I am thinking of this as a year-round commitment to a farm near where you live, rather than on vacation in Tuscany. You would agree to work a few hours a week on a farm, and you take home a proportion of whatever you do. Obviously there would
need to be practical adjustments—heavy farm machinery is not something most people can operate—but perhaps such machinery is not necessary when producing on diversified farms where there are many small tasks that are artisanal processes rather than huge, industrial-scale operations.

Here is another example: Just south of where I live there are miles and miles of almond orchards. I brought a group of students to one orchard during harvest season, and it was very frightening. They have a tiny truck that grabs the tree and shakes it violently so all the almonds fall off. (I was told it’s why they pronounce them “ah-monds,” because the machine shakes the “l” out of them.) There’s a different truck that scoops everything into windrows, and yet another that collects them. Then a huge machine the size of a house removes the dirt and sticks; we were told it costs several hundred thousand dollars a year to operate, just in electricity. Another machine dehusks, shells, and pasteurizes the almonds to remove possible salmonella, E. coli, or other pathogens that might have been in the dirt. It occurred to everyone in the class that you could just pick the almonds and put them in a bag, which is exactly how it used to be done (with migrant labor, admittedly). The machines are clearly the only way to do this efficiently now, because of the enormous scale of the operation and the fact that they are supplying a world market. Notice how the nature of this business and its sheer size dictate mechanical measures that have almost completely removed humans from the picture, even introducing extraordinary processing such as pasteurization or sterilization with propylene oxide. Perhaps almonds are not the best example, because they can’t be grown everywhere, but much produce can be. Does it make sense to grow lettuce thousands of miles away on huge, perhaps even organic, farms when it can be grown and tended locally by people who live nearby and are willing to work a few hours for a big box of produce every week? I certainly wouldn’t mind picking almonds for a few hours during harvest season.
Again, what I am principally interested in is the connection between city dwellers and rural farms as the only fundamental way to instill aesthetic appreciation for the land.

I can understand objections that insist we can only feed the world’s population with industrial agriculture. Handfuls of city people owning or working on local farms are not going to meet current, let alone future, demands. Agriculture must be big, specialized, monoculture to provide for the entire globe. So, at one level I agree it is silly to be looking at medieval models when we have a substantially larger population to feed on the same amount of land.

On the other hand, we will eventually reach (in fact, are rapidly approaching) a point in time when the majority of people not only know nothing about where their food comes from, but won’t care anymore, and will stop subsidizing farms with tax dollars. Farming will simply cease to be profitable—as it already has in many places. Eventually, it may be outsourced like many other jobs. I believe the only way to reverse this trend is to get more people directly involved in some way, with financial or material incentives, sparking exactly the kind of appreciation for agriculture and food processing that we saw in Cato, Crescenzi, and Tanara.

Or we could even go one step further and follow Sir Thomas More. In his *Utopia* (1516), each city is surrounded by manors, where all citizens take turns living for two years at a time to work the farm. Each manor holds forty men and women and each year twenty are rotated off; the newcomers are trained by those who have been there a year. If a nation can arrange compulsory military service, why not compulsory agricultural service? In Utopia, the children are trained in agriculture at school, and regularly taken to the countryside, so everyone is skilled by the time they get there. More is explicit about why this is done: so everyone knows where food comes from, so everyone appreciates the labor that goes into producing food and values it, and so everyone knows what good food is.¹³
You might argue that today some people certainly know how to buy food that tastes good and is good for us, but something has gone terribly wrong when the majority of food is sold highly processed and prepackaged, miles away from where it was grown, often bearing little resemblance to what the farm produced. That will be the topic of the next chapter, but for the moment consider what Cato, Crescenzi, and Tanara plainly understood: knowing firsthand how food is cultivated and processed makes you appreciate it, makes you value quality over mere abundance and low cost. I think we should think less about maximizing yields at any cost—human and environmental—and start thinking about the aesthetic value of the farm and its importance to us not only for leisure, but for spiritual and economic nourishment. Only then will people be willing to pay more for food and think more conscientiously about everyone getting a fair share.
Grow Food. Cook Food. Share Food is a practical food history lesson, an editorial on our use of packaged convenience foods, and a call to arms—of the kitchen variety. Mixing food writing and history, and adding a dash of cookbook, author and scholar Ken Albala shares the story of what happened when he started taking food history seriously and embarked on a mission to grow, cook, and share food in the ways that people did in the past.

Albala considers what the traditions we have lost have to offer us today: a serious appreciation for the generative power of the earth, the great pleasures of cooking food, and the joy of sharing food with family, friends, and even strangers. In his compelling book, obscure seventeenth-century Italian farmer-nobles, Roman statesmen, and quirky cheesemakers from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries offer lessons about our relationship with the food we eat.

A rare form of historical activism, Grow Food, Cook Food, Share Food is written for anyone who likes to eat, loves to cook, and knows how to throw a great dinner party.

Ken Albala is Professor of History at the University of the Pacific and author or editor of sixteen books, including Eating Right in the Renaissance, The Banquet, and Beans: A History (2008 IACP Jane Grigson Award). Albala edited the Food Cultures Around the World series, the 4-volume Food Cultures of the World Encyclopedia, and is now series editor of Rowman and Littlefield Studies in Food and Gastronomy, for which he wrote Three World Cuisines: Italian, Chinese, Mexican (Gourmand World Cookbook Awards “Best Foreign Cuisine Book in the World”). Albala has also until recently co-edited the journal Food Culture and Society and has co-authored two cookbooks: The Lost Art of Real Cooking and The Lost Arts of Hearth and Home. He lives in Stockton, California.

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