

“My Organic Coming-of-Age”
by Lisa M. Hamilton

from “The Complete Organic Pregnancy” by Deirdre Dolan and Alexandra Zissu (Harper Collins, 2006)

It’s no secret that I’m a fussy eater. When friends invite me for dinner, they’ll call ahead with the proposed menu so I can tell them what I will and won’t eat. When my husband shops for groceries, he does so in fear. He unpacks them cautiously (often after I’ve left the room), knowing that despite his careful studying, at least one item is likely to break some fine-print rule.

The pickiness began when I was a child. From ages three to five I would drink nothing but Ocean Spray cranberry apple juice; then one day, for reasons unknown even to me, I declared Ocean Spray cranberry apple juice undrinkable, and never touched it again. But the first time I made a food choice for reasons other than personal taste, I was thirteen. At a friend’s house I watched “Faces of Death,” first in the series of documentaries (banned in many countries), which were comprised of footage showing real deaths of all kinds. The slaughterhouse scene did it for me. The next day, I became a vegetarian.

Shortly thereafter my conscience began to nag. Why had I forsaken only meat, when *Diet for a New America* and other such books made clear the violence done to dairy cows and laying hens? I soon gave up eggs, but for my high school cafeteria’s insensitivity to such considerations I could only bide my time until graduation, when I would cross also cheese, milk, and all their derivatives off my list.

My best friend and I did it together, and as such spent the entire summer after high school excitedly experimenting with almond milk, soy cheese, and ice cream made from rice. When we drove cross-country to begin college, it took only a few truck stop meals for us to realize the trip would mean a diet of baked potatoes and/or French fries. Even this did not dampen our optimism. With visions of a guidebook for road-tripping vegans, we took exacting notes about which establishments carried precious items like dairy-free margarine and actual green salad. Diligent researchers that we were, when

halfway through the trip we learned that whey is a common ingredient in bread, we thereafter asked each waitress if we could read the ingredients on the side of her kitchen's bread bag.

By my second year of college, my commitment remained robust but my optimism had given way to the often grim gastronomy of such a diet. When I traveled to Germany to visit a friend for Christmas, I packed four sticks of vegan-sanctioned margarine and carried them everywhere in my handbag. At each restaurant table I would slip a log into my lap, slice it behind the veil of a tablecloth, and slip a pat onto my plate without a waiter's ever noticing. It didn't exactly save my meals of otherwise tasteless, dry starches, but at least it lubricated them.

Back home, I had conquered the challenge of a vegan diet. I cooked nearly all my own meals, and had specialties like lasagna with ricotta made from tofu and a chocolate chip cookie recipe based in maple syrup and (of course) margarine. I even mastered a chocolate cake that, in the absence of eggs, rose from the combination of baking soda and vinegar. Being a vegan had become easy, at least when I stayed home.

Then I met Jim McGinn.

Jim was a farmer of the new, organic variety, who had gone back to school to study literature and environmental science while getting his vegetable farm up and running. When I threw a potluck one night and served as the centerpiece my tofu-ricotta lasagna, he asked me if I had ever thought about where its tomatoes and red peppers came from in the middle of winter.

I knew Safeway was not the answer, so I stayed silent as Jim enlightened me as to why one (namely he) should not buy warm-weather fruits during cold-weather seasons; why one might choose things theretofore unknown to me—kale, chard, rutabagas—grown locally, rather than buy food imported from Mexico and Chile.

He was right. It was solid logic, even if it was tough to swallow. After we talked, my lasagna's bright colors seemed garish against the winter night. While I was not drawn to the dull looking kale-barley concoction that Jim had contributed, shortly thereafter, I became a local-, organic-, seasonal-eating vegan. My conscience wouldn't have it any other way.

Summers were good. Before that first winter broke I grew vegetable seedlings in my window, and on the first of spring I planted an enormous garden. All season long I was bathed in radiant, homegrown vegetables. I shopped at the farmers market religiously, even made a pilgrimage to a fruit grower who sold me cases of peaches and nectarines, which I judiciously preserved.

Then came winter. Without the foresight to grow a winter garden, I was left to eat a nearly all-white diet of cold-storage carbohydrates—potatoes, carrots, wheat flour. By February, I weighed 30 pounds more than I do now and longed for spring just so I could eat some roughage. When Jim’s farming partner heard about this in March, he brought me a bag of Swiss chard. I nearly cried with gratitude.

Fast forward ten years to this winter, to my New Year’s Eve dinner party. The meal consisted of a winter salad, artichokes, and a bread panade, but also short ribs, crab cakes, and homemade chili aioli. Butter was everywhere. Margarine, on the other hand, was absent—it has been for years.

The way I choose my food now is no less intentional—or political—than in college, but I use a different set of considerations. Where my choices used to be a protest or boycott of things I opposed, today they are instead votes in favor of the things I believe in.

The shift has come from connecting my food choices to the larger world in which they exist. After studying community development and farming in college, I became a writer who focuses on sustainable agriculture. I believe that organic and other alternative methods of growing food are not simply a matter of giving up pesticides; they are part of a larger movement to reconnect us with the sources of our food and create a bond that transcends mere supermarket shopping.

My turning point came when I moved to Hawaii, just after college. The local, seasonal diet was no problem, with papaya and bananas growing outside my window and tomatoes ripe year-round. But during dinner with my boyfriend one evening, I realized that something else had shifted.

I was eating tofu. The soybeans from which it was made had been grown in Iowa, roughly 4,000 miles away, by someone I didn’t know. They had been trucked to California, processed by others I didn’t know, put in a plastic container, shipped over

2,300 ocean miles and landed in the local grocery store where I had bought it, then brought it home and seasoned it with another soy concoction of anonymous origins.

My beau was eating an ahi steak. The fish from which it was cut had been caught the day before, by a man who lived down the road from us. He had caught the fish maybe a mile offshore in the ocean visible from our porch, then brought it back, sold it to the man who owns the little fish store on the highway—ten miles from the harbor and four miles from us—who cut it up on the table behind the counter, and sold a piece to my boyfriend.

Here were two things I believed in deeply, suddenly opposed to one another: I could eat tofu and boycott death, or I could eat ahi and support a local food system. How to make sense of that?

The shift was more gradual than in the past. My diet went from being a set of yes and no questions to a scale that balanced many issues at once. Ultimately I chose to eat the fish instead of the tofu, but still I did not return to eating meat or dairy products. Then I moved to coastal California, where ahi and bananas are as foreign as tofu is to Hawaii, but green pastures and milk cows are common. Cheese made its way to my plate, as did eggs and the occasional chicken—all from farms that were part of my community. Beef was off the list until years later when I visited Wyoming to interview a rancher named Tony Malmberg. He was boldly striking out on his own, slowly building a market for his organic beef among his neighbors so he could leave the world of international meatpacking conglomerates. I had my first hamburger in fifteen years.

My intention here is not to convert vegetarians to eating local flesh. My point is that everything we eat comes with consequences, and eating in a truly conscious way requires a person to acknowledge that. Yes, a hamburger means that an animal has died. But dairy cows, in order to produce milk, are forever being impregnated; the resulting calves are either raised for slaughter or they replace other mothers, who go on to become ground beef. Even vegetables and fruit have blood on their hands: According to the Pesticide Action Network, each year 672 million birds are exposed to agricultural pesticides, and an estimate ten percent (or 67 million) die as a result. Massive accidental

pesticide spills from the vegetables and fruit fields of California's Central Valley have killed fish in surrounding rivers even 1,000,000 at a time.

And that's just death. Factor in our food choices' ramifications for the environment, the economy, and people, including farm workers, family farmers, the meat cutters made famous in "Fast Food Nation"—not to mention our own fragile bodies dealing with pesticide residues—and it's enough to make you stop eating altogether. What choice isn't poisoned?

For me knowing the facts doesn't act as an appetite suppressant. In fact, buying, cooking, and eating food is the greatest joy in my life. I go to the farmers market the way others go to church: When I go there I connect to something meaningful and exciting. It's a weekly ritual, where I see old friends and meet new people. I get information and perspectives that change my view of the world, and walk away nearly every time feeling rejuvenated and hopeful. I go there not to boycott the grim, modern food system and its dire consequences, but as a vote in favor of an alternative: namely food that is healthy for the land, the people who grow it, and me.

The diet that results is not an -ism, it's a series of considerations. I choose my vegetables and fruits to be grown as close as possible to where I am. Because I live in California, that usually means within seventy-five miles, year-round. When traveling I apply that standard as well. I seek out restaurants that value sustainable agriculture and track down each new city's farmers market. When I end up in a truck stop I still choose potatoes over tomatoes in winter, knowing full well that the choice matters only in principle.

I don't cut corners with animal products, however, eating them only when I know the person who raised the animals and trust his or her methods to be humane. Even then, I eat meat infrequently and cheese only slightly more often; I'm still sensitive to the killing involved, and like to treat its products with reverence. Pork is still crossed off the list; I simply like pigs too much.

But these are my personal priorities. To another person I wouldn't recommend these guidelines so much as the thinking behind them. If you don't like something about the food industry, don't support it. But perhaps more importantly, do support something you do believe in, so that the alternative can grow. A woman I once interviewed told me

that when she was pregnant, she was eating not just for herself and her baby, but for her grandchildren. The choices we make now not only shield us from the hazards of the present, they pave the path for a future that's safer for our children.