1

FIRST FORAYS

CLOSE TO HOME

In 2006, when I began my odyssey across the landscape of California's organic farms, I was nearly sixty-five years old and beginning to feel that I had a finite amount of time on earth. I was living in Santa Rosa in an old barn that had been converted into a small house with electricity, plumbing, and windows. It sat on a road dotted with barns filled with melons, hay, wool, and animals. The fall semester at the college where I taught writing was drawing to a close. I had time, energy, and curiosity. I wanted to get out and explore. Before it was too late, before life passed me by. I wanted to be in touch with the earth again. I wanted to regain something I felt I had lost, and to work alongside men and women who were cultivating the earth. I wanted to eat as though for the first time, with a sense of newness.

What I had lost was not a mystery to me. I had lost the world of my childhood in the 1940s and 1950s, when Long Island was

agricultural and I had played in barns and gone to school with the sons and daughters of farmers with names like Romanowsky and Schobel that I have not forgotten. I lost that rural life when suburbia rose up around me. My own father, too, had lost the rural environment of his youth. He had grown up in the 1920s and 1930s, living on a farm. Then, as a lawyer in real estate after the war, he helped to pave the way for tract houses and highways, shopping centers and unending development. He had helped to transform the rural world he knew and loved. When he retired, he moved to California in search of land to farm, hoping to regain his old life. He and my mother became pioneers on a remote plot of land with redwoods, two streams, and rich soil. But suburbia grew around them once again, and in watching the disappearance of their farming community I experienced the loss of a kind of childhood innocence. To those of my generation and that of my parents, the fundamental social and cultural shift from agrarian to suburban life happened not once, but twice. By contrast, the political upheavals of the 1960s felt less dislocating. The coming of suburbia altered the landscape beyond recognition, and I experienced a sense of profound displacement.

I began my quest for the old rural life by going to nearby farms in Sonoma that were on my own road, those that advertised themselves and that I could find without the aid of a map. I went to farms owned by friends, or friends of friends, and there I immediately noticed new directions in agriculture. In the 1970s, when I first arrived in California, farms were often sadly inaccessible, and I had only rarely been able to satisfy my curiosity about crops and barns. Back then all the signs read "Keep Out" and "No Trespassing." Barbed-wire fences and

The author takes field notes at the end of a year when he also planted crops, cultivated, weeded, and harvested side by side with farmworkers, most of them from Zacatecas, Mexico.

locked gates sent the same message. "Trespassers Will Be Shot" deterred even outlaws in a county known for such outlaws as Joaquin Murrieta, the legendary nineteenth-century folk hero who robbed from the rich and became a symbol of opposition to Anglo rule. Even farmers I knew, such as my parents' close friend Benedict Sobler—a veteran apple grower who taught me the art of pruning trees—were often reluctant to let outsiders onto their property.

In the 1970s Benedict owned a beautiful old barn that I coveted, in which he stored his Gravenstein apples, a variety that was once the pride of Sebastopol. The barn also served as a garage for his beloved blue Mercedes-Benz. Soon after I arrived in Sonoma I went to work pruning his apple trees so that sunlight and air

might penetrate to their innermost boughs, and now they looked beautiful. And with a Husquarna chainsaw I cut down his old, diseased cherry trees, which were entwined with poison oak, and carted the wood away to split, burn, and heat my house. In contrast to Benedict's farm, there were others that I avoided out of fears for my health and safety. Across the street from my parents' acres, for instance, there was the farm of a man whose face I rarely saw. Several times each year he used to cover himself from head to toe in protective gear and drive his tractor around his farm, spewing chemicals on the trees and the ground and into the air. Rachel Carson would have been appalled. Afterward he posted a sign with a skull and crossbones that read "Danger. Keep Out." Of course I kept out! Neither he nor anyone else seemed to consider the fact that the wind blew those toxic chemicals across Morelli Lane and into the fruit trees my father had planted, which neither he nor I wanted to be sprayed. We didn't want the chemicals on us, either.

That cranky apple farmer, with whom I exchanged heated words on the telephone, felt that he had the right to spray whatever and whenever he chose to, neighbors be damned, and he felt no compunction about chopping down all the stately redwood trees on land he owned. That was the attitude of many old farmers—it was their property, and they could do anything they wanted with and to it. This attitude is slowly changing, thanks to the work of environmentalists, whose hard-fought victories benefit everyone. The county of Sonoma still insists in official proclamations—mailed with annual tax bills—that citizens have the "Right to Farm," and that citizens who live near farms must expect to "be subject to inconvenience or discomfort arising from agricultural operations." But farmers no longer

have the right to spray toxic chemicals on crops and into the air, and citizens are protected from exposure to poisons such as DDT.

MIMI GOES LOCAL

After moving away from the family farm in 2004, I needed to find another place where I could feel close to the earth. I knew I would be welcome at Windrush Farm. Mimi Luebbermann, a farmer in Chellano Valley and the sister of my dear friend and colleague J. J. Wilson, invited me to visit anytime. She is a good example of the new farmers who are far more transparent than were the farmers of old. As often as farm operations allow, she opens her Windrush Farm to the public. Every summer, swarms of kids arrive to learn what it means to be a farmer and discover the smell of barns and pastures. She has also hosted events for adults. I attended one such event, when Mimi made dozens of delicious pizzas in her outdoor brick oven and Molly Katzen, the author of *The Moosewood Cookbook,* told stories about her legendary hippie restaurant in upstate New York and her own kitchen in Berkeley. I did not notice a gate at the entrance to the long, shaded driveway that led to the farmhouse, or any barriers to the barns, sheds, and pasture. "Welcome" was the watchword, generosity the style.

Mimi had come from Oakland, where she raised rabbits and chickens and grew vegetables. For years she wanted more open space, more land, and friendly neighbors who were farmers, too, to whom she could turn for wisdom about crops and animals. In 1995 she made her big move from an urban to a

rural existence, and the change ignited her creativity. In the last decade or so she has written how-to-books with titles such as *Pay Dirt: How to Raise and Sell Herbs and Produce for Serious Cash,* which offer "simple secrets" for farmers and gardeners on how to make money and find happiness by growing orchids, herbs, heirloom tomatoes, cactus, daffodils, quince, and kumquats. In these books, which I heard about as she wrote them, she provides valuable information that is not always accessible but all the more important to anyone who wants to farm successfully. How much "serious cash" Mimi makes from her books and her farm I do not know, and I did not feel it would have been polite to ask. After all, she was from Virginia and had Southern manners, and I did not wish to encroach on her privacy. I could observe, though, that Mimi keeps her farm going with a combination of old ways and reinvented new ones. In addition to selling eggs, rabbits, lamb, and wool at farmers' markets, she gives classes in the skills she has taught herself and learned from neighboring ranchers. She's always on the go—up at sunrise most days—and everyone who knows her comments on her seemingly inexhaustible energy. One of her sons calls her "a whirlwind Mom." Her vehicles are usually old, often battered, and rarely attractive, but they get her and her goods where they need to go, which is to say that she's practical and efficient and doesn't care about mere appearances.

Mimi was the first person I got to know who talked vigorously—years before it became popular to do so—about the importance of buying local produce and supporting local farmers. She was a long way ahead of the curve. Even some of her own family laughed at her ideas and thought she was silly and

provincial. They pointed out that almost year-round you could get attractive fruits, vegetables, and meat from Argentina, Mexico, New Zealand, and elsewhere. It took her family and friends—and me, too—a while to understand that local produce is likely to be safer and fresher and to have more nutrients than produce grown and shipped from far away. Only after outbreaks of contaminated meats, tomatoes, spinach, and other fruits and vegetables have many shoppers learned to search out produce grown by responsible farms close to home.

The author I found most helpful on the vast, complex idea "the local" was Lucy Lippard. In her groundbreaking *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society,* she wrote about land, landscapes, art, and the balance between urban and rural, public spaces and private ones. There wasn't a single major area of contemporary American life that she didn't touch on, and her provocative book helped me when I went to farms like Mimi's. Lippard insists that it's important to remember that each individual has a *point of view.* Indeed, I learned that everyone on a farm—from the owner to the Mexican fieldworker, tractor driver, and truck driver—sees that farm in slightly different ways depending on a variety of factors, including age, ethnicity, gender, and class. Moreover, before you can even see a farm you have to believe in it. Otherwise it will remain invisible to you. This is why tourists from urban places who are unaccustomed to farms often do not see them or notice their beauty. If you associate carrots, peas, and potatoes with frozen packages in a supermarket you may not be prepared to see them actually growing in a field.

Understandably, as she wrote the book at a time *before* there was a general understanding and appreciation of "the local,"

Lippard sometimes sounds defensive, as when she notes, "Local does not have to mean isolated, self-indulgent, or inbred." Clearly everything and everywhere is local, whether it's New York, Calcutta, Dublin, Shanghai, or Sonoma. Although some places are dismissed as being peripheral or provincial and rarely became world capitals or global centers, no place can escape its own locus. I resonated to Lippard's observation that "understanding the local history, economics, and politics is a complex, fascinating, and contradictory business everywhere." Certainly my part of California seems to me to be as rich, complex, and contradictory as any place I have ever known. Sonoma has farms and vineyards, a long coastline along the Pacific, majestic mountains and fertile valleys, Indian tribes, settlers, outlaws, writers, movie producers, and gourmet restaurants in the Michelin guide.

What is produced in this specific locality—wine, cheese, wool, and olive oil—is sent around the world, and workers and tourists come here from afar. It is connected to the whole world and an integral part of it. I remember my exhilaration when in the midst of my farm odyssey I met the men who belong to the international circuit of sheep shearers. Mike Donovan, who was born and raised in New Zealand, traveled to California and from there to Utah, Idaho, and Wyoming to shear sheep, and then he'd go on to Spain, Scotland, and Germany. He was paid $2.65 a head, and he could shear nearly 250 sheep in a day. "Wherever there are sheep I go," Donovan told me one afternoon, when he took a break from shearing sheep on a farm close to my own home. "Last year I sheared more than fifty thousand sheep."

From Mike and Mimi I learned to respect physical labor and to pay attention to the tasks at hand and the tools in my hands. On days I did not teach at the college I worked at Mimi's Win-

drush Farm, which is in Marin, just over the border from Sonoma. I did the simplest of chores. For a couple of months, on cool afternoons in autumn, I dismantled the raised beds just behind the farmhouse: after that I carted countless wheelbarrow loads of soil to another corner on the property. I wasn't paid a cent—that was agreed—but Mimi always provided thick homemade soups that were meals in themselves, steaming hot after simmering on a back burner of the old-fashioned stove all day long. Sitting in her warm kitchen, I also tasted the cheeses she experimented with from milk from her own cow. You can't get more local than that.

When I asked about her farming neighbors, she introduced me to Mike and Sally Gales. They had retired after long professional careers and now grow apples and raise beef for fun (and some profit) at Chileno Valley Ranch, which had been in Sally's family ever since 1862. "We bring in money," Mike explained in the stately living room of their renovated farmhouse. "But I wouldn't say that ranching is profitable." Sally added, "We must be crazy to do this. We're grandparents, and we do all the work ourselves, including all the sales and marketing, and we sell every single apple we grow. It has been sad to see ranchers taking out apple trees, but we're putting them in. There's nothing as beautiful as an apple tree in bloom, and we've derived immense pleasure from our orchard."

I met their animals, who were obviously well treated in the pasture, and Sally explained that they were "harvested," not slaughtered. After Mike sent me home with a package of ground beef, from which I made delicious, juicy burgers, I got to thinking that he and Sally were probably right: grass-fed cows, raised in a largely stress-free environment by ranchers who love them,

make for tastier beef than the assembly-line variety from animals that have been abused and exposed to disease and contamination. "I have a couple of animals that should have gone to market a long time ago," Mike told me. "But I have an attachment to them. I have one cow that is invaluable. She'll follow me anywhere, and if she moves, all the other cows will move with her. They're not as dumb as you think." Tongue in cheek, he added, "Some are smarter than me."

WALKING INTO THE PAINTING

A young photographer named Paige Green lived in a converted barn on Mimi's farm together with Mimi's youngest son, Arann, a singer and songwriter, who helps his mother during the day and performs at night in clubs and cafés with his band, the Bluebellies. Arann's repertoire includes humorous songs about farms and farming; one song in particular, about milking cows, is a favorite with audiences. I first saw Paige's dramatic black-and-white photos of old Marin farmers when she exhibited them in a barn on Mimi's property that serves as art gallery and auditorium. Right away I recognized that Paige knows how to bring out the character and personality of her subjects; their deeply furrowed faces seemed to mirror the furrows in their fields. I was so taken with her work that I decided to invite her to accompany me on my farm odyssey and take photos of the places I would visit. Then I would have permanent images of them and wouldn't have to rely on memory.

Odd as it may sound—it seems odd to me now—I wanted my journey to provide an aesthetic experience. Alice Walker entitled

a book of her poetry *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful,* borrowing the expression from Lame Deer, a Sioux Indian writer. I, too, feel that landscape is beautified by horses, and especially by farms and farmers. During my drives to Sonoma State University, where I teach, the landscape never failed to move me to awe and wonder. I was inspired by the sight of farmers on their tractors, plowing the land; I assumed they had to be in a meditative state, and I envied them. The look of freshly furrowed, dark, rich soil was beautiful to my eyes, and I enjoyed the dozen or so barns that line Petaluma Hill Road, including two painted bright red that looked as new as the day they were built. One farm struck me as a particularly beautiful tableau. I first became aware of it in the summer, when I stopped at a farm stand near the side of the road and bought juicy red tomatoes and colorful squashes from a large person who seemed part boy, part grown man. From the road, the farm looked like a canvas painted in vibrant color by a French landscape artist of the nineteenth century—say, Camille Corot, whose work I had admired at the Louvre in Paris and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This farm, called Valley End, stretches along Petaluma Hill Road between my barn and the university.

I passed it every day on my way to and from my office and classrooms, and I enjoyed gazing at the fields and at the unknown people moving slowly in those fields. Valley End looked picture perfect. From a distance, I could not tell for certain whether the workers—they were little more than stick figures that moved now and again—were men or women, old or young. From the evidence of the brightly colored scarves, hats, and sweaters that some of them wore, I suspected that both men and women labored together. And for a time, not knowing

suited me better than knowing. I was content to gaze at the scene from a distance, as though standing in a museum before a framed work of art by Monsieur Corot, who I wished had set up his easel on Petaluma Hill Road and painted the scene before me.

For weeks Paige and I talked about getting together to work on a book of farm photos, and one Saturday we finally met early in the morning to start our project. On the side of the road, with the traffic roaring by, I asked Paige to take photos. She insisted that we get permission first. I didn't like the idea. I'd had too many unpleasant interactions with surly old farmers. I didn't want another one, but I agreed to Paige's suggestion. She was right. So, in the fog and cold, we headed toward the farmhouse in the distance, and toward a big, sprawling oak tree and the usual assortment of farm vehicles—various trucks and tractors, big and small, old and new. I felt as if I had stepped into the painting, as if I were part of it now. I could imagine myself growing smaller and smaller as I moved from foreground to background, and as I approached the farmhouse, it grew ever larger, and the hills that had been in the far distance crept up as well, filling more and more of the canvas. Once we had reached the house, we felt a little uncomfortable; up close the farm that now surrounded us on all sides didn't look as beautiful as it had looked from a distance. The yard clearly needed a gardener; the spent flowers along the walkway needed clipping; and there was debris outside the shed that should have been taken to the dump. A sticker on the bumper of the newest-looking vehicle—a white Chevy SUV—read "Support Organic Farmers"; another one read "CCOF—California Certified Organic Farmer." Clearly, whoever owned and operated the farm had

In California, certified organic farming took off at the start of the twenty-first century, but it has been in existence since the 1970s. Farmers advertise their commitment not to use harmful pesticides and herbicides, as in this bumper sticker from California Certified Organic Farmers.

gone to the trouble of paying a California state agency for the certification and was willing to allow inspectors on to the property to test the soil and assess the operations. Clearly, too, the owner wasn't using chemical herbicides and pesticides.

I knocked on the door, and Paige and I waited in the fog under the overcast sky. After what felt like a long time, someone opened the door a crack. It was the large young man from the farm stand. He had short hair and was wearing glasses, a white T-shirt, white socks, and no shoes, and he asked what we wanted. "To take pictures and talk," I said. "Just a minute. I'll ask my mom," he replied. The door closed, and we waited. I was sure we'd be turned away, but the door opened again, wider than before, and we were invited inside and motioned into the living room, where we sat and waited some more. Finally, Sharon Grossi appeared, wearing baggy sweatshirt and sweatpants.

Aside from Mimi, who had one foot in the pasture and one at her writing desk, Sharon was the first real full-time female farmer I'd met, and I was surprised by her informality and colloquial speech. Women on farms have often been the farmers' wives, sisters, and daughters. They have played essential parts; sometimes they were even more indispensable than their husbands, brothers, and fathers. They worked hard, took chances, and broke new ground with new crops while men were cautious. Traditionally, however, the farmer has been thought of as a man. The mass media has popularized that view in movies such as *The Real Dirt on Farmer John* and novels such as Jim Harrison's *Farmer.* Say the word "farmer" and people tend to imagine a man in overalls riding on a tractor. But that is quickly changing; it had already changed at Valley End. Here now was a woman on a farm who had a leading role and no

husband. She was strong and outspoken and wasn't about to be pushed around by anyone. With encouragement from me, and under the influence of Paige's genuine smile and natural graciousness, Sharon talked about herself, her son, Clint—the part man, part boy in white socks—and Valley End Farm. Sharon displayed a self-deprecating sense of humor, and she had a way of exaggerating to make a point. It was always blazing hot or freezing cold. Market prices for beans or peas were always outrageously low. Moreover, in her view everything could go wrong disastrously. "I plow ahead," she said, putting her head down and plowing ahead with words. "I went through a divorce, raised kids on my own, borrowed money, dug a well, installed a septic system. Friends joked that I'd gone to the 'funny farm,' and sometimes I thought maybe I had. I can tell you I've been through hell a couple of times, but I'm still here. I'm a survivor."

She had named the farm, she said, for the obvious reason: the valley ended here. East of her property, behind it, lay rolling hills, too steep to farm and without the rich soil of the flat bottomland. West of it—clear across the county—lay the rugged coast and the Pacific Ocean, source of the fog and the cool temperatures that provide natural air conditioning and mitigate the effects of the hot sun that beats down on the land mercilessly in summer, baking it sometimes as hard as rock.

The more Sharon talked about her seventy-acre farm—it is the largest certified organic farm in Sonoma County—the more I felt that the name "Valley End" was metaphorical, that it seemed to symbolize the end of a way of life. This rich valley is one of many, each with its own distinctive microclimate, that have, for more than a century, made Sonoma suitable for growing crops

almost all year around. But how much longer can this kind of farming go on?

That question was certainly on Sharon's mind, and it was what had prompted Ed Grossi, her handsome ex-husband—he lived just down the road—to give up growing vegetables to raise rare trees and exotic shrubs to sell to the multimillion-dollar estates in the hills. According to Sharon and other farmers I met, he said that he made more money in a month as a landscape gardener than he used to earn in a whole year as a truck farmer. Sharon knew that she could do as well if she were to turn to landscaping, but she wasn't ready to abandon Valley End. Keeping the farm meant living a life on the edge, where she never knew what the future might bring. But she seemed to relish that state. Life on the edge apparently motivated her, and she told me that she was continually coming up with new ideas for crops to grow and ways to market them. She told me that if she could figure out a way to sell her produce to the seven thousand or so students, professors, and staff at the university across the road, most of her financial problems would be solved. "I'm freaked," she told Paige and me on that day we met her. "Everyone says they love the farmer. Everyone says they love agriculture. But everyone, it seems, wants to move here and live here, and that means more houses, more people, diminishing water, and less farmland. I want to go on living and farming here, but I'm not sure how I'm going to do it."

I could see what she meant. Directly across the road from her farm there lay a large open area where a developer wanted to build more than a thousand houses. Not far away the county had embarked on a massive project to restore Hinebaugh Creek, which meandered through the valley. That meant that men on

huge machines were scooping out dirt, making big mounds of earth, and radically altering the contours of the land—all in the name of preserving the land. On the face of it, the county seemed to be destroying the environment in the name of saving it. If there was a method to their madness, it wasn't apparent. Only later, after the rainy season had arrived, did I understand. The men on the dozers had carved out a dozen or so shallow ponds. They had created a wetland. Soon egrets gathered there, and they were pleasing to see. So were the ponds. The landscape came to life. Environmentalists and men on big machines had saved an endangered ecosystem.

Down the road from Valley End, Sonoma State University had built an intricate complex of buildings to the tune of one hundred million dollars. Named the Green Music Center, the complex was to house the Santa Rosa Symphony, an upscale restaurant, and state-of-the-art classrooms for music majors studying syncopation, hip-hop, and George and Ira Gershwin's legacy to American culture. It was hard to argue against the civic contributions of the Green Music Center, but Sharon wondered how the increased traffic and pollution would affect her farm. And how would all those toilets, flushing human waste products all day long, affect the ground water she used to irrigate her crops?

With so much earth in upheaval all around her, Sharon wasn't putting all her eggs in a single basket, to borrow a farm metaphor. By the time I met her she had already bought a spectacular ranch in the fertile Capay Valley in Yolo County, near Sacramento, about two hours by car from Valley End, and she was growing vegetables there, too. In Capay, she had riparian rights, which meant that she could pump as much water as she

wanted from Cache Creek, which runs along the back of the farm. Cache Creek flows rapidly, even in the dry season, and provides seemingly unlimited amounts of water—more than she could use even if she were to run the pump twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Farmers the world over would envy her for that water supply.

Whole Foods Market, as part of its program to rely less on distant suppliers and generate more produce from local farmers, had agreed to lend Sharon fifty thousand dollars, which she spent on an elaborate underground irrigation system that provides water to every corner of the Capay Valley farm. She wasn't using chemical fertilizers and pesticides there, either, but because the previous owner had, she would have to wait for two years before she could sell that produce as organic. In the meantime, she could sell her Capay Valley produce under the "conventional" rubric. The price per pound for conventionally grown produce is about half the price for organic, she told me, but on the Capay Valley land she could grow twice what she produced at Valley End, so she would make the same amount of money in the two places. Or so the figures showed on paper. But Sharon can find the dark lining to any cloud, and she found one here, too. "Organic is mainstream now," she said. "It's not a niche product anymore, and the change is driving the price way down. If the trend continues it might put small and medium-sized growers, like me, out of business! Or else I'll have to reinvent the wheel."

Warren Weber had nearly lost his farm in the mid-1990s, and he had been forced to reinvent himself and his whole operation. In 1996–1997 Grimmway Farms, the giant corporation, began to grow and sell organic produce, and prices went down dramatically. Weber simply could not compete. He had to scale back his

operations, and when Grimmway came to him for certified organic farmland, he leased his fields to them. For a time he wasn't sure if he'd survive. It was only by a radical shift in marketing and sales that he stayed in business: today 75 percent of his produce goes to restaurants in the San Francisco Bay Area.

With so many uncertainties, and so many risks involved, it is a wonder that Sharon continues to farm. Of course, it is what she knows best. Raised by her mother and father on a California ranch, she came of age mending fences, milking cows, and pulling heifers out of ditches. "Dad worked me like a man," she told Paige and me. "I did boy stuff all through my teen years." After high school she attended California Polytechnic State University, studied agriculture, and received a certificate to teach home economics. This training gave foundation to her skills. She knows what to tell her friends and customers about nutritious foods and how to cook them.

When she and Ed Grossi were married, she ran the business end of the farm. She had a head for figures and kept the books. She also raised their two children. Renee, her daughter, ended up not wanting to have much to do with farming, but Clint became her right-hand man; he learned to sell produce at their roadside stand, delivered it, and kept in touch by cell phone with the stores they supplied. Clint and his mother make a good team.

Still, I could not stop wondering why Sharon stuck to farming. Did she perhaps want to show her ex-husband that she could succeed without him? She also seemed to want to prove that she could make it in a man's world. "Some distributors seem to think that women are dumb, and that they can cheat me," she said. "I have to stay on my toes." But perhaps, I speculated, she may also have wanted to leave the farm intact to Clint

and, as a former home-economics teacher, teach Renee a lesson or two about the value of having a home and running a successful business from your home.

Ed Grossi wasn't growing vegetables for sale, but he was enjoying his work as a gardener and landscaper. He told me he worked seventy-five hours a week, and that his father at ninety-five had just started to slow down. On a tour of his property he showed me the rare raspberries he grows—they were bright and shiny as gold—and an even rarer deciduous redwood tree, thought to be extinct, that he had nurtured from a cutting taken from an ancient grove in China. Ed was stoked about growing things, anything from such ordinary produce as pumpkins to his prized Asian pears. And although he wasn't selling produce anymore, he still grows enough of it to feed himself, his wife (he had remarried), and the workers at his nursery and their families. He was making effective use of his land. He was generous and good-hearted, and while he didn't give his stamp of approval to agribusiness, he didn't launch into tirades against it as some organic farmers did.

"After World War II, manufacturers had to find a market for all those chemicals they'd developed for war, so they sold them to farmers instead," he explained. Once he started to talk about this and related topics, there was no stopping him. He had the gift of gab. "DDT can work wonders, but it has downsides, as most of us know from Rachel Carson," he said. "In hindsight we can see the damage from reliance on all those chemicals and on technology. We probably also lost a lot in terms of old-fashioned farmer know-how. Have we caused irreparable harm to the earth and ourselves? Maybe we have. But now we are going back to the future. We're developing alternatives. On my farm we don't use

pesticides or herbicides—not in the garden, the nursery, or the vineyards where we grow Sauvignon Blanc grapes. We have cut back on the use of machinery, and we use much less fuel than we used to. Everything is labor intensive around here. All in all, I'd say that we do a better job of farming and protecting the environment, here in California, than almost anyone does anywhere else in the world."

Where Sharon sees obstacles and problems, Ed tends to see opportunities and challenges. He likes to philosophize, too, and offer words of wisdom based on his experiences. "I must be getting old," he said, smiling broadly. "I have homilies I trot out. What I learned from my dad was hard work and that if you take care of the business, the business will take care of you. Be frugal. That's essential. Farming is wonderful because you can walk to work. On the other hand, it's a very long walk to get away from it." As though to make his point, he gazed off into the distance at the cars on the road.

Having farmed for decades, Ed finds that homilies about it come easily to mind. In fact, I've noticed that human beings, after thousands of years of planting and harvesting, seem to find it difficult, if not impossible, to talk about farming without homilies and clichés. In the fields, the literal can be elusive, and it's hard to coin new, fresh language to express the ways of ancient agriculture. "If you want to understand metaphor, go to a farm," someone told me. It's true. Metaphors lurk everywhere on farms, and students of literature would indeed benefit from visiting them.

Farming is literally a tough row to hoe. You have to cultivate from the ground up. You reap what you sow, and of course it pays off to separate the wheat from the chaff. Nearly everything

about farming has a metaphorical as well as a literal meaning, and the very farm itself could be a metaphor. That's part of its charm. Moreover, the word farm can be used both as a noun and as a verb, which suggests the versatility of the practice. So it makes sense that Ed Grossi wasn't "farmed out," to borrow an expression I often heard. Neither was Sharon, and if circumstances dictated, she very well might reinvent the wheel, as she had suggested she might do if she had to.

When Paige and I first stumbled into her farmhouse that cold, foggy autumn day, she gave voice to dire predictions, but at the same time she was upbeat. Nothing could stop her. The previous summer had been a financial success, and she'd received accolades from San Francisco's wholesale produce distributors, most of them men eager to make good deals and put money in the bank. At Valley End, Sharon had grown four different kinds of beautiful beans—yellow, green, purple, and French filet; the last-named had become popular with cutting-edge chefs in the city. As a result, she'd been named "The Bean Queen." It was a title she was eager to retain. Perhaps she was also eager to garner new accolades. Certainly Sharon Grossi was driven to succeed, and I knew she'd triumph over adversity.

Her ability to make a life in farming depends heavily on her seasonal field laborers, who are paid by the hour, minimum wage, a paycheck every two weeks. Sharon's Mexican fieldworkers were not speedy, but they worked steadily. Whether the job was planting, weeding, or fixing the irrigation system that got clogged with adobe and twigs, they got the job done. Leno, the foreman of the crew, came from Oaxaca—"They have big troubles there now," he mentioned, and I could tell that he was informed about the latest social upheavals in Mexico. He

had been in the United States for seventeen years. He and his wife, Malu, had worked on farms since childhood. Leno spoke excellent English. He was smart and also stubborn and did not like to be told what to do or how to do it, which sometimes landed him in trouble. His wife, Malu, seemed to be of the earth itself. She was no more than five feet tall. Her skin was as brown as the earth, and she was about as round as a globe. She might have served as a model of the earth mother, and she assumed a maternal role with me. Married in a Catholic church in a small village in Oaxaca, Malu and Leno carried on Mexican traditions. On their own they grew chili peppers from seeds brought from home, ate rice, beans, and tortillas, and worked on cutting red meat, sugar, and fats from their diet because it was "malo"—bad for Leno's diabetes. They were as well-informed about health as any middle-class couples in the suburban neighborhood across the street, but they had no health plans and little money to spend on health care. Malu told me that she did not have papers, and I suspected that Leno might not have any either. But neither of them seemed worried about the law. They didn't look nervously over their shoulders. They had bank accounts in the United States—all the Mexican workers at Valley End did—and they were hopeful about their ability to make a comfortable life for themselves.

OUTSIDERS IN EL NORTE

Over the past century, the plight of migrant Mexican farm laborers in California has been documented, photographed, studied, and analyzed as thoroughly as that of any other group of

workers in the Americas. "What about the farmworkers?" people ask, even if they have never actually known a real farmworker. "Who are they?" "Why do they come here, and what do they want?" These are fair questions. Some of the answers to these questions are available in popular movies such as *El Norte, A Day Without a Mexican,* and *Under the Same Moon.* Steven Street's monumental and moving *Beasts of the Field: A Narrative History of California Farm Workers, 1769–1913* covers the subject magnificently. TV documentaries that expose atrocious living and working conditions provoke shock, outrage, and condemnation. Yet worker exploitation and oppression has often remained largely unchanged for decades, especially in California's great Central Valley. Refugees from the so-called underdeveloped world who live and labor in the shadow of immense wealth and power, farmworkers are indispensable to the political economy of two nations. Again and again they have been pushed back and forth across borders and forced to work in mechanized agriculture and toxic environments. Perhaps this will sound melodramatic and even grotesque, but they strike me as living skeletons haunting the American Dream. Jorge Posada, the Mexican artist who saw skeletons everywhere, would certainly view them this way and depict skeletons holding hoes and planting crops. Indeed, farmwork has exposed migrants to deadly poisons.

That's the big picture. Now, what about the lives Mexican farmworkers lead today? Could we perhaps learn something about the subject by looking at one life? I think so. Let me, therefore, introduce you to Uriel, who was born in the 1960s in the village of Chamacuaro, in the state of Guanajuato, and who now lives in Santa Rosa, California, in a multiracial working-class

neighborhood. His house looks like every other house on the street, though the Obama sign on the front lawn makes it stand out. It's the only sign in the whole neighborhood. Uriel's story is dramatic and reflects much beyond the arc of his own immediate experience.

I've known Uriel and his wife, Molly, a native-born Californian, for more than a decade. I attended their wedding, and I'm an unofficial uncle to their daughter, Maya, who is bilingual and perhaps a sign of things to come in our multicultural future. Uriel and Molly exemplify the ways in which the Anglo and Latino worlds have come together to create something new and exciting. But the two worlds continue to be deeply divided. I've attended celebrations, for example, where Latinos, at once proud and subservient, praised their Anglo bosses, after which the same bosses, sometimes paternalistic but usually genuinely caring, praised the Latinos. And then the Anglos and the Latinos sit at opposite ends of the fiesta without any further contact. Speeches are one thing, behavior another. I've also been to fiestas with Uriel where one group spoke English, the other Spanish, and no one from either group reached out to the other.

It takes real effort to bridge the gulf between the two cultures, and I've worked at it for decades in the United States and Mexico. I've watched Uriel work as a mason and a tile setter, and I've seen him make woodcuts of César Chávez, one of which hangs on the wall above my computer. He taught me to make salsa and use words like *tejolate* and *molcajete*. Uriel is a good storyteller, too. I especially like his story about the time he tried to walk across the border on a crowded street by pretending to be a paperboy but gave himself away by forgetting to collect the money owed him. On another occasion, he and an ex-girlfriend

pretended to be *cachondos,* two people lusting for each other. The police wouldn't notice them, they thought, if they were kissing passionately. But they weren't good enough at faking lust, and two California police officers sent them back across the border. Uriel made it across by climbing a chain-link fence that separated Mexico from the United States.

I've heard Uriel talk about his life: poverty and unemployment; hunger and loneliness; deadly rattlesnakes in vineyards where he picked grapes. But was he complaining? Maybe he was simply describing what he had experienced. In fact, Mexicans—and especially farmworkers who are illegal—rarely complain, and it can be a fault. They collude with the system that exploits them. Uriel is unique. He expresses himself and complains loudly. What I find most vivid are his accounts of his own feelings, which can be as significant and revealing as actual facts. "From the moment I arrived in El Norte, I felt like an outsider," he told me. "I still feel that way. For years, I lived in fear of arrest and deportation. I knew that everything about me gave me away—the way I walked and talked, the clothes I wore, the expression on my face." More than anyone else I know, Uriel helped me to understand that Mexicans often feel—and are made to feel, too—like aliens in the United States. They are the proverbial strangers in a strange land.

One warm spring afternoon I sat with him behind the house that he didn't yet own. Possibly he never would own it, for his mortgage payment is $2,200 a month, and he hadn't had a decent paying job in months. But he wasn't panicking. As always he seemed cool and self-confident; having come this far in life, he wasn't about to accept a return to poverty and homelessness, especially with another child on the way. "I feel as if I've struggled

my whole life," he said. "I'm struggling right now. The reason I came here—the reason every single one of us has come to El Norte—is because we have to come here to survive. We don't want to starve to death. It's all about work, work, work. Before I came here I was naive. I thought you could pick up mounds of money with a shovel on a street. I was rudely awakened. I jumped from job to job, and from trade to trade, to get out of the hole I was in. For years I had no steady job or work, no home, no car, no support system, and no legal status. In the eyes of America I was a nobody. Almost everyone I know has been in the same place."

Uriel saw a lot of injustices, and he also saw that Mexicans often seemed to contribute to perpetuating the inequality between them and the Anglo establishment. They live and work largely outside the American dream, but at the same time they are living advertisements for that dream. It is ingrained in them not to dwell on their exploitation, alienation, and homesickness but instead to be positive and upbeat. "People in my village would always talk about the wonders of El Norte," Uriel said. "They came home and boasted about the car, the TV, and the cell phone they bought. I never heard anyone say, 'I'm killing myself in the fields' or 'I'm dying every day I'm at work in California.' This was after I'd been in the United States. I had gone back to my village to visit. I would ask, 'What about the time you were cut and bleeding from the knife you were using to harvest grapes? What about the fact that the bank owns the car you drove?' "

Uriel came to the United States for the first time in the late 1970s and became an American citizen in 1996. While he has made something of himself here and adapted well, he doesn't

want to end his days here, where time and money seem to drive everyone. He wants to go back to Chamacuaro in Guanajuato, where, as he put it, "I never have to wear a watch or use a cell phone. I can sit and look at the church on the hill, visit with my mother, and drink a beer without having to rush off." That Sunday, when we spoke in his backyard, I heard the longing in his voice. But of course he won't be going home for a while. He has to find work and pay his mortgage or be out on the street. The closest we could get to Mexico that day was a taqueria, that ubiquitous Mexican institution that can be found from Texas to Maine, California to New York. I like to think that Uriel finds solace in eating genuine Mexican food at El Patio, just a few minutes from his Santa Rosa home, but perhaps it only makes the distance from Chamacuaro feel all the greater. Eating our tacos at a table surrounded by murals of traditional Mexican scenes, Uriel remembered that as a teenager he was hungry, alone, and without a car. "I had to go miles on foot to a fast food restaurant to eat, then walk back to the apartment in the darkness," he said. "That was a lonely time."

ADDICTED TO THE RURAL LIFESTYLE

Before I left Valley End on that first visit, I told Sharon Grossi that I would like to see her fields again. "You're always welcome here," she had responded warmly. But I also wanted to explore other farms. And I soon recognized that no two farms are identical, no two farmers the same, and, indeed, that farmers take on the personalities of their farms. In the way a farm is laid out and run, you can see a reflection of the farmer's personality, and,

conversely, just by looking at a farmer you can get a pretty good idea of the kind of farm he or she might have. There were farmers as messy in person as their fields, and others as neat and orderly as the furrows they plowed.

Sadly I had to continue my odyssey without Paige, who was headed for London to study photography. Before she left she sent me her digital color pictures of Valley End. While I knew that they would inspire me and frame everything else I saw, I also felt that I had lost a companion and natural-born artist. In a way I knew I would have to develop eyes of my own and see more deeply and precisely than before. Later, when I returned to Valley End and walked the fields with Sharon, I realized that as owner and farmer she did not see them as I now did. For her the farm was not an aesthetic experience. When she looked at the crops she saw profit, loss, and the hard work that had to be done. "This cabbage need to be weeded," she'd say. "And look at this fennel that's bolted, and bugs have gotten into the bok choy. Boy oh boy, it doesn't look pretty. This whole field is a wreck."

The next farm I visited belonged to Joseph Minocchi, who hailed from Canton, Ohio, and was raised in a blue-collar Italian family. Joseph had carved out several small plots of land—White Crane Spring Farm, he called his enterprise—in a steep and forbidding canyon in a remote corner of Sonoma County. Joseph stood at the opposite end of the agricultural spectrum from Sharon. On his farm he grows tulips and twenty or so ingredients for his salad mix, which he sells for thirty-eight dollars a pound at the upscale Saturday farmers' market at the Ferry Building in San Francisco. My youngest brother, Adam, who had met him there, connected us. Joseph also ships his salad mix to exclusive restaurants in Napa, Las Vegas, and

Berkeley. "Alice Waters loves my watercress," he said, thus adding himself to the impressive list of farmers who grow, or claim to grow, for Alice Waters's Berkeley restaurant Chez Panisse. Waters is of course generally acknowledged as *the* Bay Area chef who has single-handedly persuaded large segments of the Bay Area to eat fresh local organic fruits and vegetables. Nearly every Northern California farmer wants to sell to her and be a part of her network of suppliers.

If I had to describe Joseph Minocci, I'd call him the quintessential hermit herbalist. I'd say he is a wise businessman, too, and dedicated to his craft. "I'm way beyond organic," he explained. "I use no machines or machinery of any kind, and no chemicals. I'm biodynamic. I've learned almost everything I know about farming from Rudolf Steiner." The name sounded familiar, but I wasn't sure where to place it. "I believe in double digging," Joseph went on. "This farm is a self-contained organism. Nothing comes from outside. The water is from a pure spring, and White Crane Springs Farm takes its nourishment from the forest that surrounds it." And then, rather ominously, he added, "They're destroying the forest," which I took to mean that he believes that his self-contained, forest-fed farm—which seemed almost as much a thing of the wild as the wild itself—might not survive. The only part of the wild that he tries to keep out are the feral pigs, for they would dig up the earth with their tusks if left to themselves. So, reluctantly, he had built a fence. Something wild always has to be kept out—or kept at bay—if human beings are to farm, I reflected, as I listened to the sound of the wind in the trees and felt the cold knife of winter in my bones. The farmer with a fence, whether made of stone or wood, goes back thousands of years.

The day I met him, Joseph surprised me by giving me a list of what I took to be all of the ingredients for his salad mix: arugula, beet tops, burnet, chickweed, curly cress, frisée, red Russian and Toscano kale, mallow, mâche, minutina, mizuna, parsley, orache, sorrel, spinach, Swiss chard, trefoil, watercress, and miner's lettuce, or purslane. Of course, I didn't know the proportions that he used. Some of the names I heard for the first time that winter afternoon when the ground was covered in frost and the temperature hovered just above freezing. Kale I knew. And Swiss chard, too. But orache and burnet? Where would I find them? Someone else might use the same ingredients as Joseph, but the mix would never taste exactly the same. The forest *terroir* would give all the ingredients a unique quality.

The sun did not shine on Joseph's house, or on his garden, all that December day near the start of winter. The steep hills kept of the light, and, with the solstice coming, there wasn't much sun at all in the sky anywhere in Sonoma that day. Still, Joseph was happy. He enjoyed telling stories about his Italian grandfather, who had made ricotta cheese from goat's milk, and about the happy faces of the men and women who buy his salad mix in San Francisco. The greens that he grows, and those he gathers from the forest floor, are medicinal, he explained. They make those who eat them healthier human beings. And before I returned to civilization, he handed me a pound of his "wild and herbal" mix.

Shortly before Christmas, as part of my odyssey, I attended a panel in Santa Rosa on the subject of farming. The event was moderated by David Katz, a longtime environmentalist, organic farmer, and political activist. A new farm bill was taking shape in Washington, D.C., and local farmers and organizations were hoping that it would cut the hefty federal subsidies to a

small group of wealthy farmers across America who grow soy beans, wheat, and corn and instead promote small organic farming and public education about organic produce. The panel was meant to bring local attention to national issues and inform the public about local farmers and their plight. There were entertaining and informative talks. Stan Denner, an eighty-six-year-old fourth-generation Sonoma County farmer, told stories about Luther Burbank, whom he had met as a seven-year-old boy. Burbank was a patron saint of the place, and someone was bound to bring him up; it made sense that that someone was Denner, the oldest person in the room.

Burbank had arrived in California in 1875; by that time the state already had a reputation in the country and Europe for grapes, dairy, and fruit. General Mariano Vallejo, the early nineteenth-century lord of Alta California, had made a fortune growing and selling crops. So had others. It's no wonder that when the young Luther set foot in Sonoma, he regarded it as a cornucopia. Just days after unpacking his bags, he wrote to his mother back East, "I firmly believe from what I have seen that this is the *chosen* spot of *all* the Earth so far as *Nature* is concerned." He asked her not to repeat his comments "to *anybody* outside the house," because he was afraid that "if it is generally known what a place this is all the scuffs would come here, get drunk, and curse the whole country." Burbank built a greenhouse and started a nursery; before long the "wizard," as he came to be known, had developed a spineless cactus, a white blackberry, and the russet potato that decades later, McDonalds chose for its French fries.

I could also see that Stan Denner likes to wear Burbank's mantle and boast about his knowledge of agriculture. Wearing

a cowboy hat and boots, he explained that his farm was now fourteen feet higher than when he was a boy, and that in his lifetime the mountains had grown lower and the valleys higher. He seemed to be spinning legends for our amusement, as well as boasting about his own expertise. "Hops were once a big crop, then prunes, pears, and now grapes," Stan said. "When there's a crop that pays well, farmers will jump on it. You have to make a crop pay or you won't be a farmer."

Winemaker Lou Preston told the audience that he was "a dreamer, not a farmer," and he complained that not enough people were growing food. Rick Kay, a former Peace Corps volunteer who had worked in Panama, now sat in an office much of the time as an employee for the resource conservation district. "I'm a wanna-be farmer," he proclaimed, and proceeded to give the audience a brief introduction to California's resources. Some of his information clearly made the audience feel good, but he also brought people down to earth with sobering facts: "California is the ninth largest economy in the world, and California provides the country with much of its food," he reminded them. "But all across the U.S.A. we lose two acres of farmland every two minutes." Someone at the back of the room noted that the price of land in Sonoma County made farming prohibitively expensive, and that if you wanted to farm you almost had to have inherited land from parents, or marry into a farming family.

Kevin McEnnis, another panelist, offered his experiences on this topic. He couldn't afford to buy land, and hadn't married into a farming family. He could, however, afford to lease land from the city of Santa Rosa. The arrangement worked well for him, as it does for other young men like himself who aim to become "master farmers." Later that week I met with McEnnis at

Quetzal, his ten-acre farm, and walked across the fields where he grows certified organic tomatoes. He dry-farms them, which means growing them all summer without water, and he cultivates all kinds of peppers—poblano, jalapeño, Round of Hungary, Italia, and gypsy—for restaurants in Berkeley, including Chez Panisse. "At farmers' markets in Sonoma County, Quetzal is usually taken for granted," Kevin said. "In Berkeley, my partner Keith and I are regarded as great green giants. To get any respect, we've had to transport our produce away from here."

The son of college professors, and a graduate of the University of California at Santa Cruz, Kevin had worked with a human rights organization that repatriated Guatemalans who were forced to leave their own land to settle in Mexico during the civil war of the 1980s. He watched peasants burn the forest so that they might plant crops, and he urged less destructive methods for clearing land and making it suitable for agriculture. He also concluded that, although overtly political goals like peace and justice are admirable, people if they are to survive need above all to be able to grow their own food. They would also need to learn to respect the environment, and so he turned from repatriation to education about land and food and to "ecological agriculture," which he practiced and taught to students at New College in Santa Rosa.

In 2004 Keith Ables had taken over the marketing end of the business because Kevin had burned out and was in danger of going bankrupt. Now the two men share responsibilities, and their partnership makes Quetzal economically as well as environmentally sustainable. Standing in an open field on a winter day, Keith offered a helpful definition of the word "sustainable"

that I had begun to hear everywhere. "Sustainable means that you farm and farm and farm, and because you grow cover crops and don't deplete the soil, the land will be as good or better a hundred years later." Kevin and Keith are young and have a kind of seductive male energy. They exude cool. From the start I thought of them as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, but unlike the movie outlaws played by Paul Newman and Robert Redford, they aren't self-destructive, and they know how to survive.

"It's all about relationships," Kevin said, standing in the shed where he houses a new New Holland tractor, his pride and joy. "Relationships with consumers, with the state bureaucracy that certifies us organic, and with the soil itself." He took off his gloves and hat and scratched his head. "Farming is a weird profession to be in," he said. "People tend to have stereotypes. If you tell folks you're a farmer, they expect you to be wearing overalls and have a pitchfork. When you don't, they look at you in a funny way. It's a challenge to get out of the box."

He and Keith had broken the mold, and of course farmers come in all shapes and sizes. They wear all kinds of hats, and they certainly don't look like the dour couple in Grant Wood's 1930 painting *American Gothic,* in which the man holds a pitchfork and the woman looks like the original Puritan. Most of the young farmers I met are, like Kevin, college graduates. They are diligent students and serious readers. Some are also college teachers, and their farms are schools where students can learn the science and the economics of agriculture.

What about money? Was Quetzal financially stable? "Of course we have cash flow problems," Kevin said. "We borrow tens of thousands of dollars a year in much the same way that

American farmers have always borrowed money in the spring, but we make money, and we pay back our loans after harvest. I'd say we're a success story. Consumers like the way our tomatoes and our peppers taste and look. We're selling beauty as well as flavor, and that beauty helps to make Quetzal a profitable business."

If there is one farmer in Sonoma County who has solved the cash-flow problem, it is Scott Mathiesen of Laguna Farm on the outskirts of Sebastopol, the town that once thrived on the Gravenstein apple and that reinvented itself when Gravensteins couldn't compete with apples from Washington State and elsewhere. But don't write off the Gravenstein. Even as I write this, the Russian River Convivium of the Slow Food movement is rallying to resurrect the apple that made Sebastopol famous, and Alice Waters has joined the campaign. Mathiesen inherited the land from his parents, who had, in turn, inherited it from Scott's dairy farmer grandparents. Over the years, Mathiesen has built up a large, loyal group of sustainers who rely on him for their produce, and he also sells to Whole Foods in Sebastopol, a mile or so away, which means he doesn't have to haul his produce long distances.

After graduating from Sacramento State University with a degree in environmental studies, Scott wanted to work as a park ranger, but he soon decided that working for the government wasn't for him. To this day he doesn't care much for government, which is a partial explanation for the fact that Laguna Farm is not certified organic. Mathiesen insists that "local is more important than organic"—a point of view I heard from others, too. To me that seems like an unfortunate dichotomy. Why not both? Couldn't one have local *and* organic?

Scott is intensely political in a New Age way. He has spiritual values that inform his farming practices. He has adopted seminal ideas from Wendell Berry, the Kentucky-born environmentalist, sage of rural life and living, and author of dozens of books, including *The Unsettling of America* (1981), *Standing on Earth* (1991), and *Late Harvest* (1996), as well as novels and stories. Berry argued famously for the importance of putting culture back in agriculture, and for that idea alone I admire him. Scott also aims to connect culture and agriculture. He attends regional conferences and gives workshops right at Laguna on the subject of "sustainable living" and "nature awareness." In fact, Laguna feeds the community a rich feast of ideas along with kale, turnips, cabbage, and mushrooms, and in doing so Scott helps give people a sense of connectedness to the land.

The slogan on the button that Scott wore on the winter day we met read "Inner peace is world peace," and as I learned, it is peace he craves as much as the adrenaline rush that farming can provide. "I'm addicted to this lifestyle," he said. "But I don't want the farm to run me. I want to run the farm." And he runs the farm with a lot of help from his wife, his coworkers, and the community. More than four hundred citizens paid to belong to his CSA. The acronym usually stands for Community Supported Agriculture, and there are hundreds if not thousands, of CSAs all over the country. But Scott likes to describe his CSA as Community *Shared* Agriculture. The concept is more than one hundred years old, perhaps even older. Food-buying cooperatives have existed ever since the early days of the Industrial Revolution, when skilled factory workers banded together to buy basic necessities and thereby survived. In 1844 in Rochdale, England, for example, a group of workers who would become famous in history for

their foresight and solidarity formed a food cooperative. They rented a building, bought butter, sugar, flour, and oatmeal, and divided them among subscribers who had paid one pound sterling to join. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, hippies and radicals reinvented that idea and banded together to buy brown rice and vegetables at wholesale prices. Sometimes in the rebellious spirit of that era they called their groups "food conspiracies." Indeed, they were conspiring to undermine the stranglehold that giant food corporations—like the generic-sounding General Foods—have on society. The Park Slope Food Coop in Brooklyn, New York, carries on the illustrious tradition of the Rockdale Workers. Founded in 1973, it has 13,900 members, and it is the largest member-owned and -operated food coop in the United States.

At Laguna farm, the money from subscribers at the start of each year gives Scott almost all the cash he needs for equipment, seeds, and workers' pay. In return, the subscribers receive weekly allotments of fresh fruits and vegetables. What impressed me most about Laguna wasn't Scott himself, or the farm, which was no work of art or thing of beauty in my eyes, but rather the subscribers. These people were eloquent on the subject of vegetables, and committed to local, organic, and sustainable farming. Martha, who was raised on a farm in the Midwest and now makes her home in Sebastopol, told me, "We're blown away by these carrots. They taste the way carrots taste in your wildest imagination." Barbara, who came from Chicago, said, "We need to have farms like this one, close to home. This is the way we need to go in the future." Michael Traugot, a student of agriculture at the University of California at Davis, said, "I like the fact that the produce here is not flown in or trucked from far away. I also buy here to help prevent urban sprawl." Irmgard, born and

raised in Germany, articulated the feelings of a great many of the others when she told me, "It's a political statement to buy from a local farm. It's definitely a western Sonoma County attitude, and I like to think it's spreading."

DOES CALIFORNIA LEAD THE WAY?

Soon after I visited Laguna, the *Economist* magazine published an article—reprinted in *The Santa Rosa Press Democrat,* the local daily newspaper—entitled "Voting with Your Trolley," which made fun of trendy consumers in England and elsewhere. The article ridiculed the claim that organic and local foods were better for people than conventionally grown produce, and it lampooned the notion that one could "change the world just by buying certain foods." It concluded with a sermon: "Conventional political activity may not be as enjoyable as shopping, but it is far more likely to make a difference." The members of Scott Mathiesen's CSA didn't agree with the *Economist.* To them, the purse had power, and they were prepared to use it. By shopping at Laguna and buying fresh local organic produce, they felt that they were making a political statement that would be heard by corporations. They also told me that they thought their actions as consumers would encourage farmers to grow more organic produce and that that would encourage more farms.

Many citizens of Sebastopol and its environs like to think that the concepts of local and organic food and farming originated in Sonoma County, much as many Californians liked to think that all good things American—including protection of the environment and concern for the quality of air and water—began in

California. These notions do not sit well with me, perhaps because I'm not a native Californian, and perhaps, too, because I admire forward-looking thinkers, like Wendell Berry, who lived and worked in other parts of the country. Granted, California is exceptional in many ways. Carey McWilliams pointed this out in *California: The Great Exception* (1949), though, oddly, he didn't discuss Hollywood and the film industry, which gave the state much of its distinctive character and personality. The rise of Silicon Valley in the 1980s also made California exceptional, and for decades now anyone who lives in the East and shops for vegetables in the winter might think that California is an eternal cornucopia, a place that is not subject to rules about seasons and crops. Remember that Allen Ginsberg, that quintessential New Yorker, was so stunned by the produce that was available in Berkeley when he arrived in the mid-1950s that he was inspired to describe his near-orgiastic shopping experience in "A Supermarket in California" (1955). Avocados seemed miraculous. They still do to many New Yorkers who visit the West Coast.

From my perspective, however, California isn't the only place that has given birth to forward-looking ideas and values. It is simply one of many. Community-supported agriculture began in the East. The fathers of organic farming in America were also from the East. New York was the first city in the United States to ban trans fats, though California was the first state to do so. I was delighted, I must say, that when I asked Joan Didion, the California-born writer who understands this place as well as any contemporary American writer, whether California is the locomotive or the caboose of the train, she paused, reflected, and then concluded that it was not ahead of all other places. "When my husband and I lived in L.A. in the mid-

1960s, people would say that cults started in California, and that they'd spread to the rest of the country," she said. "I didn't think that was true then and I still don't think so. I don't think that California leads the way. I used to think that if you wanted to know the future of America go to New Orleans or to Miami, and I did go there. But I don't know anymore where to go today to see the future of America, and so I don't know what to write next."

Of course, there has almost always been a cult of health food in California, and plenty of health food aficionados. Writers such as George Orwell and Saul Bellow made fun of California's vegetarians and its "fruits and nuts." But health food fanatics also exist elsewhere. My own parents farmed organically before they came to California, and they ate healthy food on Long Island about fifty miles east of Manhattan. My father adopted the gospel of organic farming as preached by Robert Rodale, who insisted in *How to Grow Vegetables and Fruits by the Organic Method* (1961) and *The Basic Book of Organic Gardening* (1971) that growing organically was almost child's play. Moreover, Rodale viewed organic as revolutionary. He believed it would take Americans "away from the centric super-industrial state toward a simpler, one-to-one relationship with the earth itself." Rodale's ideas fed utopian dreams of the sort that my father pursued all his life, even while working as a lawyer.

My mom's well-worn bible was Adelle Davis's *Let's Eat Right to Keep Fit,* which appeared in 1954, just as I was entering my teen years. As a result, that's when I began to be fed—in accordance with Davis's ideas about nutrition and health—wheat germ, molasses, oatmeal, eggs, and vitamins. I of course preferred hamburgers, fries, and cherry Cokes—everything Davis

proscribed. After Davis died in 1974 at the age of seventy, my mother vowed to carry on her work, and in California she taught cooking classes á la Davis to students of the Nonesuch School in Sebastopol. A dozen or so teenagers used to gather in her kitchen to learn to cook with brown rice, tofu, sprouts, and yogurt, as well as with the fresh produce my father grew. "First feed the face, then talk right and wrong," my mom always said. Once her students were well fed, she'd shock them with tales about the greed of the American food industry and the horrors of bleached flour and processed food. Much of what she said she'd learned from Davis. At the start of the twenty-first century, I heard the same ideas all over again from writers who seemed to think they had originated them.

My parents showed me by their own example that to become a Californian wasn't as difficult as it might have seemed. They did it effortlessly: growing and smoking marijuana; making their own peach brandy; doing yoga; getting massages. Like their friends and neighbors, they worked hard and played hard. They also taught me not to use California as a yardstick to measure the rest of the world, and not to forget that California was sometimes a cocoon.

To get a sense of what was happening on farms elsewhere and see whether California was an exception, I made it a point to talk long distance to two friends from college: Liz Henderson in upstate New York; and Allen Young in western Massachusetts. Both of them have farmed since the 1970s. They confirmed my assumption that what was happening in California was also happening in their communities.

Allen Young grows almost all his own vegetables in a big garden, and he has written about farms in his part of the world

in a book entitled *Make Hay While the Sun Shines* (2007). He loves to eat straight out of his garden in the summer, and he's just as happy in the middle of winter, when he removes the snow and straw protecting his carrots from freezing. Fresh carrots in February are heavenly, and he raves about them when he e-mails or telephones me.

In New York and Massachusetts, Liz Henderson has for decades played a big part in the organic food movement and the movement for social justice in agriculture, and she wrote about her experiences in *Sharing the Harvest: A Guide to Community-Supported Agriculture* (2007). Liz had always been a radical. I knew her from New York when I attended Columbia and she attended Barnard. We loved the theater, and we both took part in the protest movements of the 1960s. Liz studied Russian literature—and spoke perfect Russian—and she might have had a career in academia. But rural life called to her. When I talk to her now, she rails about the social and economic injustices of private property, and praises communities that support farms and farms that support communities.

To gain an objective perspective about the differences between West Coast and East Coast agriculture, I also compared notes with Dan Kaplan, the manager of Brookfield Farm in Amherst, Massachusetts, where he grows crops on thirty acres and supplies food to four hundred shareholders, three-quarters of whom come to the farm to pick up their produce. The produce for the remaining shareholders goes to Boston. Dan farmed in California soon after he graduated from Tufts University in 1987, and he also worked on farms in England, Germany, France, Switzerland, and Austria. As he knows, there is a long history of organic farming on small farms in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania that goes

back to colonial days. As Dan sees it, the differences between European and American agriculture outweigh the differences between California and, say, Massachusetts.

"Probably because they have much less space, Europeans have a different sense of land use than we do," Dan said. "Like us, they have a capitalist economy, but it's tempered by social controls. There isn't the same kind of urban sprawl in Europe, either. They have many more small-scale farms than we have here in the East, and farm animals are everywhere." Like the young California farmers I know, Dan has a sense of idealism and social responsibility and a commitment to sustainability, which he defines as the "ability to last over a long period of time." He also appreciates local markets. "Of course local is relative," he said. And with a certain wry sense of humor, he added, "I'm local for *me*. New England is local, but New York feels far away, and Maine is out of the picture."

Organic and local are clearly ideas whose time has come, but it's clear, too, that these ideas belong to no one particular region. On a trip to New York, I discovered the lively, boisterous farmers' market in Union Square that has been there for decades. I met farmers from New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania who seemed to be as pioneering as farmers in California. I came away thinking that in California we were not *better* at farming than Americans elsewhere. We have our own particular rows to hoe, our own agricultural and cultural problems. By paying attention to our own piece of the earth, our water and sky, we may well discover paths for others to adopt, but humility would serve us better than swaggering and boastfulness.

After six months of exploration I felt that I had seen and heard all there was to see and hear, and that I had come to the

end of my farm odyssey. I'd been to Valley End, White Crane Springs, Quetzal, and Laguna. I'd learned about CSAs and sustainability, and I'd listened to debates about the pros and cons of organic and local, big and small farms. Indeed, I did not know what else there might be to learn about farming. I made ready to fly to England to visit two old friends—Doris Lessing, who would win the Nobel Prize for Literature just a few months later, and Susan Seifert, the head teacher at a school in London. Then, just as I was packing my bags, my friend and colleague Noelle Oxenhander, who wrote beautifully about parents and children in *The Eros of Parenthood* (2001), called and said that if I was writing about farming, I *had* to visit Oak Hill Farm in Glen Ellen. And with that, my life took an unexpected and dramatic turn.