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# The Ethics of Eating



Is food a moral issue?



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Introduction

# Questioning Dinner

By Kelli B. Trujillo

**D***iets. Overeating. Body image. Weight.* If you trusted the headlines in the grocery store checkout line, you'd think that these were the only food-related issues of importance to women. But especially in recent years, there's been a growing interest in an entirely different set of words: *Natural. Organic. Local. Vegetarian. Hormone-free. Seasonal.*

Thanks to movies like *Super Size Me* and books like *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *Fast Food Nation*, and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, there's been greater attention paid in our culture to questions related to food—and they're more about ethics and health than developing an ideal figure. They're questions like . . .

*Is the food I've just purchased as healthy as I assume it is? Or are there hidden dangers—like chemicals, hormones, or antibiotics inside?*

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*Should it matter to me how my food was grown and who grew it?*

*How did the animals that this meat or these eggs came from live? What did they eat? How were they treated?*

*Did the farming practices that produced this food hurt the surrounding environment? Were the workers who produced it paid adequately?*

*How much fuel was used and pollution produced to get fresh veggies to my plate in the middle of winter?*

And perhaps the biggest question for us is: *Do any of the above questions really matter?*

After all, these aren't really *spiritual* issues.

But I believe that, for the Christian, these questions *should* matter. As good stewards of the wonderful gift of creation given to us by God, we should be concerned about practices that damage and degrade it. As those who share in God's deep and enduring love for all of humankind, it should matter to us whether or not our cheap grocery prices are built upon injustices toward the poor. And if we believe that our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), we certainly should strive to take good care of it.

But if you're like me, one glance at some of the questions I've mentioned above can immediately bring about feelings of guilt, confusion, and frustration. After all, these matters are complicated. We must balance many issues when we make choices about food: our wallet, our family's tastes, our own cultural and familial food background, as well as the geography in which we live. (After all, it's easier to eat locally and seasonally in California than in, say, North Dakota in December!)

In the following pages, you'll explore several of these questions. You'll begin by hearing how three different Christian women have responded to these questions. In "Dining Dilemmas," Cindy Crosby lays out some of the ethical issues related to food production that she read about in the book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*; she describes her response of continuing

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to eat a relatively mainstream diet, but with greater attention to matters of food production and organic farming. In "Why I Became a Vegetarian," L. L. Barkat explains the spiritual and practical reasons behind her decision to leave behind her meat and potatoes diet. And in "Food, Culture, and True Communion," Joy-Elizabeth Lawrence describes her commitment to eating locally and seasonally, but emphasizes that it's of secondary importance compared to her desire for fellowship with those with other eating habits.

Next, you'll find two articles that examine some of the ethical problems tied to industrial food production. In "Eating Locally," you'll find a primer on local family farming vs. industrial farming from farmer Ragan Sutterfield. In "Creature Discomforts," you'll hear author Matthew Scully's Christian rationale for his decision to be a vegetarian and to speak out about animal cruelty.

Finally, in "A Full Plate of Ideas," you'll hear from writer Joy-Elizabeth Lawrence again as she provides you with guidance and insight into the various ways you can respond to all of this information. For some of you, the response to these issues will simply be to think about them more; for others, the response might be more radical, such as exploring vegetarianism, trying out an organic diet, or making a commitment to eat more locally and seasonally.

The reality is that in our modern world our eating choices will almost inevitably be laced with contradiction as we balance the real need for convenience and affordability with a desire to honor God through our food choices. Most of these ethical questions about food just lead to more and more questions! But nevertheless they are questions worth asking as we seek to enjoy and appreciate the very good gift of food that God has given to us.

Grace,

*Kelli B. Trujillo*

Managing Editor, TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN downloads



## Leader's Guide

# Using "The Ethics of Eating" for a group study

"The Ethics of Eating" can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.
2. Consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material.
3. Alternately, you might consider reading the article and ideas aloud together.
4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.
5. When working through the Reflect questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
6. End the session in prayer.



# Dining Dilemmas

How shall we then eat?

*By Cindy Crosby*

**T** rue confessions: I love McDonald's French fries. They're a guilty pleasure. I also enjoy shopping at Whole Foods, the organic grocery chain in my neighborhood. I feel virtuous loading my cart with brown eggs laid by happy chickens in comfortable nests, or eating beef from free-range cows. When I pull a can of Amy's Organic Soup from the shelves I envision Amy and her grandma in an 18th-century restored farmhouse kitchen chopping tomatoes and adjusting spices.

Whole Foods makes a large dent in my pocketbook that I rationalize by saying I'm supporting family farms and putting my money where my mouth is about agricultural reform and organics. Very righteous of me, I'm sure. But true culinary sainthood arrives when I make a pot of chili with the heirloom tomatoes frozen from my garden last summer, or pull a few green spring onions for a dinner salad. I've even been known to fry up some

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"dandelion fritters" from our yard, in which the yellow flowers are a star attraction. (We're on shaky terms with some of our suburban neighbors.) This, I think, is eating at its best—fresh, local, and organic.

When I began reading *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* by Michael Pollan, I realized I had some rethinking to do. In this doorstopper of a book, Pollan, a longtime contributing writer to *The New York Times Magazine* and now a professor of journalism at University of California in Berkley, traces the path of four meals through their various systems: organic food, alternative food, industrial food (such as fast food), and food we forage for ourselves. Each system exploration results in a meal: cheap fast-food take-out from McDonalds eaten in the car; a pricey repast from Whole Foods consumed at the dinner table; a grilled chicken and a chocolate soufflé made from sustainable farm animals and local ingredients; and a meal he foraged and hunted and ate with some help from friends, right down to mushrooms and wild pig.

In *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan tackles some daunting questions. What ethics are involved in our food choices? What impact do they have on the environment? And who or what are we subsidizing with our food choices? This is not *Fast Food Nation*; Pollan tends to be more thoughtful than reactive, and he takes things far beyond the golden arches and having it your way. In his first section, devoted to convenience food, he traces much of the cheap food America eats (and the plight of American agriculture) to the super-abundance and government subsidizing of corn. His research is startling. Corn has found its way into a large percentage of the foods we eat: canned fruit, mayonnaise, vitamins, and cake mixes just for starters, raising a myriad of questions. How could a McDonald's chicken nugget be composed of 38 ingredients, 13 derived from corn? What does it mean to eat beef, chicken, or even salmon largely raised on corn?

Pollan shows that corn-fed animals and fish don't have the same nutritional value as grass-fed animals; farmed salmon, for example, do not have the same omega-3 levels as their wild counterparts. By changing the diet of the animals we raise, we are changing ourselves. And it only takes a look at the soaring obesity rates to realize it is not for the better.

But the two portions of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* that I found most engaging explored the organic food industry (an oxymoron in itself) and sustainable

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farming. In the segment on sustainable agriculture (which he comes closest to idealizing of any of the four food systems), Pollan lauds a small Christian operation called Polyface Farms in Virginia as a model of what agriculture can aspire to. By using a more holistic, humane approach to land use and consuming locally and seasonally (rather than globally), sustainable farming seems to solve many of the problems created by industrial agriculture. Good reading, although many will wonder if it's viable on a large scale. To function on an ongoing basis, this sort of agriculture requires a heart-and-mind change on the part of the *consumer*. No small thing.

When Pollan examines the organic grocery business—"Big Organic"—he had me from the first page. What does organic *really* mean? If I'm justifying my budget-busting trips to Whole Foods in the name of God, small-farming, and sustainable agriculture, I don't want to be hoodwinked.

Pollan traces the organic foods movement back to the writings of Sir Albert Howard, whose 1940 *Testament* informed Rodale's magazine *Organic Gardening and Farming* and the writings of Wendell Berry (who is quoted liberally through Pollan's book). Howard had the arresting idea that we need to treat "the whole problem of health in soil, plant, animal and man as one great subject." With this in mind, Pollan takes a deeper look at where the food from places such as Whole Foods *now* comes from. He also looks at such oddities as "organic microwavable TV dinners" and the article by nutritionist Joan Dye Gussow, "Can an Organic Twinkie Be Certified?" (The answer is yes.) This is journalism at its best.

Then Pollan, a master wordsmith, takes on the genre he calls Supermarket Pastoral, "a most seductive literary form, beguiling enough to survive in the face of a great many discomfiting facts." Why so? "I suspect ... it gratifies some of our deepest, oldest longings, not merely for safe food, but for a connection to the earth and to the handful of domesticated creatures we've long depended on. Whole Foods understands all this better than we do." What about dairy farms where cows have "access to pasture"? What exactly is "pasture," and what is "access"? What is a "free-range chicken"? (The term, Pollan shows through a fascinating trip through a poultry house, is largely a joke, an empty conceit.)

Petroleum is another problem. What about the ethics of trucking "organically grown asparagus from Argentina" to America's suburbs in January? What

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are the economics of fuel and the cost to the people of Argentina, whose land is feeding Americans? The food industry, Pollan points out, burns nearly a fifth of all the petroleum consumed in the United States. And most "organic farming" is done on organic industrial farms, a contradiction in terms that Pollan explores at length in the fields of California. "Is there anything wrong with this picture? I'm not sure, frankly," Pollan concludes. What he finds is "a much greener machine, but a machine, nonetheless."

I won't feel nearly so virtuous the next time I shop at Whole Foods.

So what do we do with this information? How shall we then eat? If I'm honest, I'll confess that I probably won't give up my occasional bag of McDonald's French fries, and I'll still cruise the aisles at Whole Foods, albeit less sentimentally. How do I redeem this?

Perhaps, as Pollan writes, the best way to fight industrial eating is to recall people to the superior pleasure of traditional foods enjoyed communally. Then, our eating contributes to the survival of landscapes and species and traditional foods that would otherwise succumb to the "one world, one taste" fast-food ideal. Having a diversified food economy where consumers have access to thriving alternative food sources, he concludes, allows us to withstand shocks to the system: outbreaks of mad-cow disease, petroleum running out, pesticides that quit working.

It's possible to live with contradictions in how we eat, Pollan believes, but important that we face up to our compromises. For me, this means planting a little more garden to offset my occasional golden arches French fry consumption; thinking more seriously about taking out that local farm share at the cooperative down the road; and inviting friends over for "slow" dinners and conversation more often. In a fallen world, we take baby steps on the journey back to wholeness.

*Cindy Crosby is the author of three books, including *By Willoway Brook: Exploring the Landscape of Prayer (Paraclete)*, and editor/compiler of the upcoming *Ancient Christian Devotional (InterVarsity Press)*. This article was first published online at [www.ChristianityToday.com](http://www.ChristianityToday.com) in June 2006.*

## Reflect

- *Before diving into the complicated issues, take a moment to reflect on your own eating habits. How would you describe your normal diet? What are your favorite types of food? What are your "guilty pleasures" when it comes to food?*
- *This article introduces many of the problems related to our modern, industrialized food system. But before focusing on the problems, take a moment to reflect on the goodness of food. **Read Genesis 1:11–13, 28–31; 2:8–9, 15–17; and 9:3.** How do these passages inform your understanding of food and its purpose? What did God provide? Why?*
- *In her article, Crosby highlights some of the problems with food production from Omnivore's Dilemma that really stood out to her. Does the state of our current food industry bother you? Why or why not? If so, which issues or problems concern you the most?*



# Why I Became a Vegetarian

My choice is a matter of health—and faith.

By L.L. Barkat

I grew up on meat and potatoes. And for a long time, I kept that tradition—quite literally—at my own table. Every evening I'd serve my husband hamburgers, chicken, pork chops, or steak ... and potatoes. My idea of gourmet cooking was to add some rice or mix in a little salt. Sometimes I even used butter.

Then, abruptly, the tradition ended. My father-in-law suffered a heart attack; and, shaken with fear, I modified my menu. No more hamburgers or steak. I now served chicken, potatoes, salad, and no butter.

Soon after starting this new meal plan, however, I became pregnant. And with great gumption, my doctor asked me to eat green things. I rose to the challenge. "You mean salad?" I asked.

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"I mean broccoli or spinach," my doctor replied.

"Broccoli?" I whimpered. "Do I have to?" It seemed a little beyond my kitchen skills—and my taste. But love for my unborn child eventually changed my plate's contents: chicken, potatoes, salad ... and broccoli.

I thought I was good for life.

#### A Fork in the Road

Then in my early 30s, life changed. A dear friend, 15 years my senior, unexpectedly became a vegetarian. She'd struggled with severe allergies and chronic fatigue, researched her treatment options and finally decided vegetarianism could help. I was doubtful about her choice and still pleased with my own eating approach. Secretly, I wondered, *Why would anyone add more broccoli to her diet?*

But over the course of three years, my friend's health improved dramatically. She lost ten pounds. Her skin rivaled mine in youthful vigor. She no longer fell asleep in her chair during a conversation at 8 P.M.

I began to get curious. Soon, my friend and I started discussing a vegetable-based diet.

Intrigued by her claims that eating veggies is good for people and God's creation, I decided to do some research. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Being Vegetarian* seemed to fit my level of nutritional knowledge. So I opened the book to some encouraging information: "Vegetarians have lower rates of cancer, coronary artery disease, diabetes, [and] high blood pressure." And in a world of toxic overload, the next statement was good news: "[Plant] fiber can bind with environmental contaminants and help them pass out of the body." I also learned vegetables protect against free radicals, bothersome molecules that speed the aging process and impair the immune system.

Then I discovered some disturbing information. Cruel slaughterhouse practices can cause extreme suffering for the animals. This knowledge brought new meaning to Proverbs 12:10: "A righteous man regards the life of his animals" (NKJV). I also found out animal agriculture is a major contributor to pollution of rivers and lakes. And producing a pound of beef

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can require 390 gallons of water, while growing a pound of wheat may take only 25 gallons. Since water shortages are closely tied to world hunger, I wondered if choices made with my fork could be a form of stewardship and ministry.

#### Does God Care What I Eat?

Suddenly, I realized God may have been up to something when he created the world and said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant ... and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food" (Genesis 1:29). I also remembered God originally created a world where no creature hurt—or ate—another. And he promised that in his future kingdom, "the lion shall eat straw like the ox," and "they shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain" (Isaiah 11:7 and 9, NKJV). Just as "the earth is satisfied by the fruit of [God's] work" (Psalm 104:13), I mused, perhaps the fruit of my work in the kitchen should satisfy the earth, too.

Still, I didn't want to be the kind of legalist the apostle Paul referenced in Romans 14:2: "Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables" (NRSV). I knew God gave the animals into Noah's power after the flood, perhaps for him to eat in a vegetation-impooverished landscape. Later, God provided quail for the Israelites in the desert. Then Jesus came to earth and undoubtedly ate Passover lamb with friends and family. He also cooked his disciples a fish breakfast, part of the regional and cultural cuisine.

I understood both meat *and* vegetables were part of everything God gave his children for life. He asked only for good stewardship of his gracious gifts: body, earth, and spirit. For some people, fulfilling this command meant picking up meat with their forks. But for me, by the end of my research, I knew caring for God's creation meant doing the unthinkable.

I had to betray my meat-and-potatoes roots and become a crunchy granola woman.

#### Our Kitchen Conundrum

Altering my dietary lifestyle was difficult, but certain benefits eased the transition and have improved my family's lives. Our tasty vegetable cuisine has kept my blood pressure at a youthful level and contributed

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to better overall health. And my husband gratefully acknowledges his low cholesterol, despite a family heritage of high cholesterol and heart disease.

He still sometimes misses meat, but he loves coming home to the wonderful new aromas and tastes of our kitchen. Through my search for interesting meatless recipes, I've become a more versatile cook. Our diet change opened up a whole world of ethnic cooking, from Indian and Greek to Moroccan and Turkish food.

Yet I've been careful to keep meals simple. At first, I was tempted to make elaborate recipes from gourmet vegetarian cooking magazines. Soon, however, I developed a monthly meal plan of easy-prep recipes to satisfy my family's tastes and nutritional needs. My family members love potatoes or lentils, and enjoy the variety of red bean night, chickpea night, or egg night. And I'm relieved to avoid the persistent question: "What should I make for dinner?"

Eating out has proved more challenging—and humorous. I often face misunderstandings about what a vegetarian actually eats. Recently, at a retreat center, the chef served me a gourmet heap of broccoli over a pile of rice. (Maybe he thought I was pregnant?) The next evening, he skewered three mushrooms and four pieces of pepper, microwaved them until slightly shriveled, and, yes, placed them on a bed of rice. (Maybe he thought I was dieting?) That incident ended in a laugh, but other experiences haven't been so simple.

### Meaty Discussions

Since becoming a vegetarian ten years ago, I've faced social discomfort similar to that accompanying a religious conversion. Friends and family have made jokes and subtly questioned my sanity. People have felt judged because of my lifestyle, and offered explications of meat's nutritional wonders.

Early on, I didn't respond well to pressures about my choice. One night, at a restaurant, my father asked, "Why don't you order this savory chicken dish?" He knew about my vegetarianism, but I explained myself anyhow. "I'm a vegetarian, Dad." He wasn't fazed. "How about this tender pork dish?" Again, I said no. "Well," he responded, "don't you ever eat just a

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*little* chicken, or maybe *some* pork?" Losing patience, I said, "Don't you ever smoke just a *little* cigarette?"

I apologized a few days later for my lack of graciousness. My comment had shown little accommodation of his perspective based on 1 Timothy 4:4: "For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected." Yet I *did* understand that perspective from my years of meat eating. And I didn't even necessarily recommend my vegetarian lifestyle for other people. So I was pained to think I expressed a practice unable to make space for other approaches.

Indeed, because of my initial strictness about vegetarianism, friends hesitated to have my family to dinner. What could they cook to satisfy me? Today, when someone invites us over and asks what to prepare, I say, "Make whatever you would for your family" or "We love vegetables and beans."

As with faith, a fine line separates damaging compromise and needless offense. So I'm careful to communicate I'm a vegetarian because I believe "'all things are lawful' ... but not all things are beneficial" for my body and the current state of the world (1 Corinthians 10:23, NRSV). And instead of always focusing on my own lifestyle choice, I'm daily learning to extend, receive, and appreciate grace.

*L.L. Barkat, the author of Stone Crossings: Finding Grace in Hard and Hidden Places (IVP) and a speaker for WTW Ministry, lives in New York. Visit her blogs [Seedlings in Stone](#) and [Green Inventions Central](#). This article was first published in the July/August 2008 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

## Reflect

- *L.L. Barkat asked herself—and asks us—a very important question: "Does God care what I eat?" What's your initial reaction to this question? In light of other matters in our lives, how important do you think our food choices are to God? Why?*

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### Why I Became a Vegetarian

- *Some people think vegetarianism is weird or that it's only a choice made by extremists. Others are very comfortable with vegetarianism and have vegetarian friends (or are vegetarian themselves). What's your general impression of vegetarianism? What about Christian vegetarianism?*
- *Barkat describes her food "conversion" humorously, saying "I understood both meat and vegetables were part of everything God gave his children for life. He asked only for good stewardship of his gracious gifts: body, earth, and spirit. For some people, fulfilling this command meant picking up meat with their forks. But for me, by the end of my research, I knew caring for God's creation meant doing the unthinkable. I had to betray my meat-and-potatoes roots and become a crunchy granola woman." What do you think about Barkat's response to her sense of conviction? Would you ever consider a similar response? Why or why not?*



# Food, Culture, and True Communion

Why I lock up my localvore.

By Joy-Elizabeth Lawrence

Sometimes I am reticent to invite people over for dinner. I wish I weren't, but I am. This is why: I am tired of people talking about their personal food preferences. Any given day, I can easily list off several friends or acquaintances who are following some sort of individualized diet—weight loss or not. There's the standard vegetarians, vegans, all types of intolerances, simple likes and dislikes, and now, the winner of the Oxford University Press Word of the Year 2007, "Localvore." Localvores are people who eat only food produced within a hundred-mile radius of their home. The funny thing is that I'm kind of a localvore. My husband and I own a share in a CSA (community supported agriculture) farm, own another share of a dairy herd, and purchase meat from local farmers. But when I go out, I keep my localvore locked in my house.

Why? Because I love communion.

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In my church, we take communion every Sunday, standing in a circle, passing the bread and the cup to one another, saying, "Christ's body, broken for you," and "Christ's blood, shed for you." I love communion. I love that we share ubiquitous foodstuffs, bread and wine. It's nothing fancy—caviar, say, or imported limoncello.

In the New Testament, communion was utterly counter-cultural because Jews and Gentiles would sit and eat together. And they would eat the *same* food. These shared meals became quite controversial, too, as the early church navigated issues of eating food sacrificed to idols and whether or not Gentiles should become circumcised.

But communion, or a sort of communion at least, depending on your tradition's theology, can happen at more places than just church. Anytime we share a meal with others is communing. We commune with our brothers and sisters in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

And as important as I believe food is—and I believe it's very important and very socially and spiritually significant—I believe relationships with others are more important. I believe God has called us first to love others. Our preferences or ideals—even those made with sound Christian ethics or concern for environmental and physical health—should take a distant second to the first. Why? Because relationships matter and truly sharing a meal means sharing a meal—not just sitting together picking at individual plates of food, but passing a dish, and enjoying the same fruits of creation.

I lock my localvore in the house because I am not, really, a localvore. I am a Christian. My identity in Christ far exceeds my ideas and ideals about food. So I challenge you to eat well and healthfully, but moreover, to show that you love others more than you love your ideas about food. Start by receiving any type of hospitality with open arms and an open mouth, if applicable.

*Joy-Elizabeth Lawrence is a freelance writer who's addressed issues of theology and food in a variety of publications, including **Eat Well: A Food Road Map**. You can read more of her thoughts on food and theology at <http://joyelizabethlawrence.wordpress.com>. This article was first published in March 2008 on [www.GiftedforLeadership.com](http://www.GiftedforLeadership.com).*

## Reflect

- *Putting restrictions on our eating habits, be it local eating, vegetarianism, or a low-carb diet, can inevitably lead to uncomfortable situations when we're eating with others. Have you ever been in a situation in which you were unable to eat food that was served to you? Or have you ever made accommodations for another's dietary restrictions? What was positive or negative about those experiences?*
- *Because of the strict kosher laws kept by Jews who then became Christians and the much less restrictive diet of Gentiles who became Christians (which sometimes included consuming meat that had been sacrificed to idols), the Early Church faced a serious food conundrum. Take a few minutes to read and reflect on these two important passages dealing with the conflict between food choices and communion: **Romans 14:1–23** and **1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1**. What principles from these passages stand out to you most?*
- *Lawrence challenges us "to show that you love others more than you love your ideas about food." What could this look like in your life, practically speaking?*



# Eating Locally

The new organic.

By Ragan Sutterfield

A few years ago, *Gourmet* magazine editor and veteran food writer Ruth Reichel asked the question—local or organic? "Eating organically is a wonderful thing," she wrote, "but once you start calculating the real cost of food, you begin to think about the expense of flying it halfway around the world. What price do we pay in fuel, in government subsidies, in loss of flavor? Perhaps most importantly, what does it cost our community when we support people in other places at the expense of our neighbors?" These are questions widely asked today in the sustainable food movement, whose slogan has become: "local is the new organic." In many ways this is what organic was always supposed to mean. Organic was farming for the small scale, seeking to supply local markets with food that was grown with regard for the land. Organic meant food that one could check up on. And the small number of people who were committed to organics did check up on it—they built relationships with farmers, and together the farmers and customers built co-ops. The goal was to create an agriculture that would work at nature's pace and be financially viable. In most of these regards organic farming was successful. Farmers were turning profits and customers were getting fresh produce that they didn't have to worry about.

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But a good thing is hard to keep, especially when profits are to be had. Organic moved from being the domain of small farmers to a value-added label in the product portfolios of Fortune 500 companies.

The first step in transition came with the growing demand for organics. In the 1960s and '70s, "organic" was a label one could only find in health food stores or co-ops. But in 1971 Alice Waters opened Chez Panisse in Berkley—an eatery that served only fresh and seasonal ingredients that were grown without synthetic chemicals. Chez Panisse was the first restaurant to put organic on its menu. As the restaurant grew in fame and Alice Waters and her disciples energetically promoted organic food, "organic" began to be synonymous not only with health and quality but also with chic, and the newly rising Bohemian Bourgeois class was there to patronize the places that would serve it.

Around the same time that organic was becoming the food of yuppies, there were two major scares involving food contaminated with agricultural chemicals. People didn't want to eat poison-coated vegetables, but that is exactly how they began to view what they could buy in the grocery store, so many began to demand a change.

This new demand attracted attention from conventional farmers, who saw their prices going down. But while they wanted the profits of organics, they were not always willing to go along with the philosophy. As Julie Guthman writes in her book *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California*, "Although some new entrants were beginning to question agribusiness as usual, growers' decisions to convert did not turn on a newly found critique of agricultural industrialization for the most part."

The impact of international trade on American farmers was a second force that pushed industrial farmers toward organics. Under NAFTA, imports of high-margin vegetables and fruits from Mexico began to erode the profits of California farms. Farmers had to find a way to add value to their products to survive, and organics became the answer for many.

A third factor came into play with the passage of the Food Quality Protection Act in 1996. In its first action under the law, the EPA banned the use of two chemicals widely used in the fruit and vegetable industry.

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Afraid that other chemicals would follow, many farmers turned to organics for alternative methods of pest management.

In a relatively short time organic farming had taken a dramatic shift, from back-to-the-land hippies of Northern California to the thousand-acre farmers of the Salina valley. Both were technically organic according to the certifying agencies, but the fundamental vision behind organic farming had changed. "Organic" was no longer an ethic—it was a set of regulated practices and a niche market.

This shift left many of the original organic farmers reeling. They could not compete with thousand-acre farms. A small-scale organic vegetable grower told me about the day that he sent a crate of bell peppers to his distributor. "These are the best bell peppers we have ever seen," the distributor told him, "but California is producing organic bell peppers for less than half the price we paid you last year." My friend took the check and started selling his vegetables directly at the local farmers market. "It's the only way for small farms to survive," my friend said.

In 2003, Nicola Smith and her photographer husband Geoff Hansen spent a year with Jennifer Megyesi and Kyle Jones on Fat Rooster Farm in Vermont. They wrote a book about their experience called *Harvest: A Year in the Life of an Organic Farm*. Like many farms of its size, Fat Rooster Farm was diverse, with a mix of livestock, vegetables, and herbs—just the sort of variety that attracts customers at the local farmers market. When visiting this kind of farm, Smith admits, it is difficult to keep from "lapsing into the kind of phony, amber-waves-of-grain lyricism that could only be written by someone who doesn't have to do it for a living." But, she goes on, "there is an attachment to the land, an attachment to the animals on the land . . . the satisfaction of providing the food that people eat and the gratification of self-sustenance, despite all the attendant financial anxiety and familial strain farming can produce."

It is this understanding of both the rewards and difficulties involved in farming that makes *Harvest* the best book I have seen on the real work of a small farm. It shows the marital stress that comes from thin margins and the joy of selling something that one raised from its beginning, neither glossing over the trials nor missing the deep satisfactions of this way of life.

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It is through this close look that we can answer all who ask why the family farm should survive. We see in this work a kind of development of character that is essential to our moral life as a people. After reading *Harvest* we can see why Hector St. John de Crevecoeur could write in 1782, with pardonable hyperbole, that the small farm has "established all our rights; on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens."

The work of a small farm creates a certain kind of person—a person who must learn to put the interests of animals and plants above his own hunger and tiredness. Small farms are places where rare skills are preserved in this age of instant obsolescence. "Sustainable farms are to today's headlong rush towards destruction what the monasteries were to the Dark Ages," as Gene Logsdon has written—"places to preserve human skills and crafts until some semblance of common sense and common purpose returns to the public mind."

It was this belief in the character of small farms that led to organic agriculture in the first place. But as Kroger and Jewel and even Wal-Mart are beginning to give organics a primary place on their shelves, we must be aware that they do so because the small farms that started the movement have been co-opted. If we want to hold on to small farms, if we want to preserve them as refuges of decent work and character, then we must find a new paradigm beyond organic. We must care more about whether our food was grown on a small local farm than if it was grown "organically." And with this new priority we can hope, with Ruth Reichel, that the "era of eating locally is very much upon us."

*Ragan Sutterfield is a farmer and writer in Arkansas ([www.ragansutterfield.com](http://www.ragansutterfield.com)). A full version of this article appeared in the September/October 2006 issue of BOOKS & CULTURE.*

## Reflect

- *What experiences have you had with farms? Did you visit them as a child or grow up in a rural area? Have you driven by family farms or large-scale industrial farms? Is the produce aisle of the grocery store the closest you've ever been to a farm? Reflect on these experiences and how they've influenced your impression of food and how it's produced.*
- *Do you agree with Sutterfield (who is a farmer himself) that it's important for the family farm to survive in our country? Why or why not?*
- *What avenues of local eating do you know of in your area? Are there farmers markets? Food co-ops or CSA programs? Do you grow your own veggies in a backyard garden? Do these avenues of getting food interest you? Why or why not?*



# Creature Discomforts

A conservative Christian makes the case for animal mercy.

*Interview of Matthew Scully by Karen Beattie*

**T**he plight of animals might not seem like a pressing issue during a time of terrorism, war, and famine. And it's not typically an issue that's on the radar screen of many Christians. But author Matthew Scully thinks it should be. In his book *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (St. Martin's Press), Scully explores several forms of animal cruelty from a Christian perspective: factory farming, canned hunting, whaling, and animal experimentation. He not only exposes these practices for what they are, but also offers solid arguments for showing mercy toward animals.

Scully, a vegetarian, Christian, and conservative, served as senior speechwriter for President Bush. When freelance writer Karen Beattie spoke to Scully on the eve of war with Iraq, world events had not distracted him from animal suffering.

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#### ***Why do you think the issue of animal cruelty has been overlooked by many Christians?***

Christians tend to think of it as a modern, secular cause that's antithetical to their own, more traditional beliefs. But it's not. In my book, I try to remind readers of the very venerable and beautiful tradition in Christianity that calls upon us to respect animals as fellow creatures, and to view them as a part of creation, bearing the mark of their maker.

Another reason is the belief that people who care about animals tend to do so at the expense of their concern for human beings. I think that's an entirely false choice. For instance, you can avoid eating meat, or you can give your business to small, more humane farms without affecting your treatment of other people.

#### ***Do you think most people are unaware of what goes on in factory farms or science labs?***

I think the average adult is vaguely aware of the horrors of the modern factory farms, but they don't want to concern themselves with it because it's inconvenient to do so.

There are people who are leading very good and upstanding lives who just don't think very much about animal welfare. But at a certain point, people have to answer for their failure to think seriously about these matters.

#### ***What is the meaning of "dominion"?***

There is one strain of thought that seems to view dominion as power and license—as a pretext for doing pretty much whatever we please, with a complete disregard for animals as living creatures. This view bears more resemblance to economic theory than it does to Christian thought.

And then you have another view, which is more in the spirit of Francis of Assisi and other saints known for their solicitude for animals. I try to appeal to this other sensibility in Christianity that cares about animals and learns to love them as a part of creation.

Many of the problems we face today concerning animals are quite new. Technology has suddenly given us this tremendous power over animals. And we have to be all the more mindful of how we use this power.

#### ***Where do you differ with Peter Singer, who implies animals and humans are morally equivalent?***

The most crucial difference is that Peter Singer has written in defense of abortion and infanticide, which is a bad enough thing all by itself, but is also deeply inconsistent with a compassionate and merciful ethic toward animals. By the terms of Singer's utilitarian theories, no creature, human or animal, has any intrinsic value or moral claim, and so you end up with all the familiar problems of moral relativism.

At the same time, I ask my readers to consider a few of their own inconsistencies. Many people shower attention upon their pets, and yet have no compassion for animals of comparable intelligence and sensitivity consigned to the miseries of the factory farm or laboratory. Others speak grandly about the unique moral dignity of human beings, but then use that to justify the low and amoral things done at the expense of animals.

Throughout *Dominion*, I try to move the debate away from the world of academic theory, where "liberation" thinkers have taken it, and back to the language of duty, love, mercy, and compassion for the weak.

#### ***What is the difference between having mercy and respect for animals, and believing animals should have the same rights as humans?***

The whole logic of Christianity is one of the higher serving the lower and the strong protecting the weak. Rights and entitlements don't have much to do with it. And so the Christian attitude toward animals is to grant them our compassion and mercy exactly because they are so helpless and vulnerable before human power.

Cruelty to animals is best understood not as a violation of rights, but as an abuse of human power and a betrayal of trust. Corporate hog farmers are a perfect example of people who have lost all regard for animals. They treat these creatures like machines instead of as living creatures made by God.

#### ***Do you believe Christians should become vegetarians?***

Some people will feel called to become vegetarians. I think that's a very good moral choice. But most people will likely make a compromise by going out of their way and paying the extra money for organic meat from small farms. If you're going to buy meat, you want to make sure it comes from

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animals raised with some modicum of kindness and mercy. And that's what I hope most people will do.

### ***Do you ever struggle with despair when you think about the enormity of these issues?***

There's a certain understandable instinct to insulate yourself from it. But Christians especially are called to open their hearts and to confront these things, and to do what they can. When you do that, in a sense you have succeeded.

Even though the problem still remains, you're becoming the kind of person you aspire to be, and you're making good of your own life through your compassion.

What I try to do in *Dominion* is to offer a more hopeful message. People have to remember, it's not just a moral problem, it's also a moral opportunity. When people are kind to animals, and not complicit in cruelty, their own lives are better and fuller.

*This article was first published in the August 2003 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY. July 2003.*

## Reflect

- *Do you think Christians should even be concerned about how animals are treated, especially if they are livestock destined for slaughter?*
- *Now consider the above question again, but this time play devil's advocate—how would you explain or defend the opposing viewpoint?*
- *Read **Genesis 1:26–28** in a few translations. (You can easily do so on [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)). Humanity's relationship with the animals God created is described differently in various translations, including "have dominion over" (KJV and ESV), "rule" (NIV), "be responsible for" (MSG), and "reign over" (NLT). What are the nuances of these different interpretations? What do you think God's intention was for the way humans were to be the stewards over the animals?*

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- *What's your response to Matthew Scully's arguments? How do your own eating choices reflect your values in this area? Are there any changes you may want to make in your eating patterns? Why or why not?*



# A Full Plate of Ideas

Ways you can respond to these  
challenging food issues.

By Joy-Elizabeth Lawrence

In her classic essay "Feeding the Fussy," food writer and novelist Laurie Colwin noted how difficult it is to put together a dinner party. She recommends sending out a questionnaire to your invitees written as follows: "We're having a dinner party . . . We're having the so-and-so's and we'd love you to come. Do you have any food phobias you would like to discuss? Have you recently discovered that you have any food allergies? Has your new naturopath doctor put you on any kind of diet we should know about in planning this meal? Have you recently taken up a new religion or gone back to your old one that has caused a change in your diet?"

Colwin wrote this paragraph over 20 years ago—way before *loalvore* was a word, back when vegetarianism was still associated with hippie communes. Not anymore. Perhaps today, her questionnaire would

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also include: "Are there any foods you do not eat for ethical reasons? What's more important to you—avoiding any animal suffering or avoiding interstate food transportation? Do you want me to purify the fluoride out of the city water for you?" In her essay, Colwin notes, "If you are wondering why you bought a home computer, you might now put it to good use and index your friends."

Ah, the early days of spreadsheets. Ah, the early days of thinking about food from only a perspective of individual health and desired skinniness. But today everyone's telling us how what we eat affects immigration issues, soil conservation, climate change, local economies, public health, etc. And some people get their britches in a bunch about it—maybe in your kitchen, while you stand there, guiltily eating a tube of Pringles.

It is so easy to feel bad, to want to hide the snacks from the vending machine or Wal-Mart or Trader Joe's, especially as a friend sings her praises of her CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farmer and the nutritionally-dense kale she gets from him. But, guilty as you may feel, the consequences of what and how we eat do not go away. Food *is* an ethical issue. Just like the early 1900's when Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle* to expose the way slaughterhouse workers were treated, today many activists and authors are writing about the effects of what we eat and it's not pretty. It's a tangled web.

But you *can* do something—even if that something is considerably smaller than tilling up your front yard and starting a vegetable garden. Below are listed three levels of engagement—for the beginner who has never thought of issues of food ethics before, for someone who has been thinking/acting on issues of food for quite awhile, and for the advanced go-getter. No matter what you choose to do, choose something and act with love toward God's creation and others.

#### For the Newbie:

- Read a book about food ethics from one of the books listed on pages 46 through 49.
- Visit one of the websites or watch one of the films listed on page 50.

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- Commit to stop throwing food away. By using up leftovers, eating the fresh produce you purchase before it goes bad, and monitoring the contents of your refrigerator, you can save money and resources and be a better steward of the gifts God has given you. Check out [www.lovefoodhatewaste.com](http://www.lovefoodhatewaste.com) for more information, or purchase a copy of *The More-With-Less Cookbook* by Doris Janzen Longacre, which is full of creative ways people use leftovers and scraps of food.
- Grow some herbs in pots or in a small plot. An herb garden is an easy way to grow some food yourself and your family.
- Visit your local farmer's market. You'll probably see some vegetables you've never seen before! Ask a farmer how to cook them if you're unsure.

#### For the Middle Grade Ethical Eater

- Read or watch one of the resources listed on page 50 that you're unfamiliar with.
- Look for a CSA in your area or purchase meat from a local farmer. You can often purchase 1/4 to 1 whole lamb, hog, or cow if you're interested in eating locally (and often grass-fed) beef. Check out [www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org) to find a farm near you. For the health benefits of eating grass-fed beef, check out [www.eatwild.com](http://www.eatwild.com).
- Learn what kind of food is grown and produced locally in your region. For instance, I can purchase Michigan-grown sugar, molasses, honey, spelt, and all kinds of fruit and vegetables. I can also purchase locally-made peanut butter, tortillas, and ice cream. A good way to find locally produced food is to visit a small, locally owned grocery store.
- Start a garden. Easy plants to grow include green beans, tomatoes, summer squash or zucchini, and herbs. You can have a garden even if you live in a tight subdivision; some people are even eschewing grass in lieu of vegetable gardens!
- Learn to freeze produce. It's easy to freeze produce in-season for mid-winter when the only seasonal vegetable is potatoes. Instructions are readily available online.

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### For the Kale-lovin', Gardenin', Organic eatin' Foodie:

- Educate a friend about food. A good way to start is to take a friend to the farmer's market (or give her some produce from your garden) and show or tell her how to prepare it—a little at a time. Start with a bunch of Swiss chard or beets, for example.
- Learn new (or old) ways to preserve produce. A great resource is *Preserving Food without Freezing or Canning: Traditional Techniques Using Salt, Oil, Sugar, Alcohol, Vinegar, Drying, Cold Storage and Lactic Fermentation* (Chelsea Green, 1999).
- Till your front and back yard and make a vegetable garden out of all (or most) of your property! Search You Tube for "suburban gardening" for a *Wall Street Journal* clip about people who have done this.
- Host a food film viewing (from the list on page 50). Serve "new" vegetables for your guests to try and have a discussion about our attitudes toward food after the film is over.

*This article by Joy-Elizabeth Lawrence was created for this download.*

*To join Joy-Elizabeth in conversation about food, go to <http://joyelizabethylawrence.wordpress.com>.*

## Reflect

- *What's one specific way these articles have challenged your own perspective on food?*
- *Many responses to the ethical issues tied up in food production were presented in this download, from vegetarianism to local eating to a pretty mainstream diet. Which point of view do you most relate to? Which perspectives did you find persuasive? Why?*
- *In her article, Joy-Elizabeth provides a variety of ways readers can apply Christian principles to their consumption of food. Which of Joy-Elizabeth's ideas most stand out to you? What might you want to try?*

### Additional Resources

Want to dig deeper into this topic? Check out these resources.

#### **BOOKS:**

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**Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy**  
by Matthew Scully

**Eat Well: A Food Roadmap**  
from various contributors

**Food for Life: The Spirituality and Ethics of Eating**  
by L. Shannon Jung

**Hunger and Happiness: Feeding the Hungry, Nourishing Our Souls**  
by L. Shannon Jung

**Sharing Food: Christian Practices for Enjoyment**  
by L. Shannon Jung

**The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection**  
by Robert Farrar Capon

**Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life**  
by Barbara Kingsolver

**Fast Food Nation**  
by Eric Schlosser

**The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals**  
by Michael Pollan

#### **BIBLE STUDY:**

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**"What Are We Eating?"**  
from **ChristianBibleStudies.com**

#### **WEBSITES:**

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[www.localharvest.com](http://www.localharvest.com)

[www.eatwild.com](http://www.eatwild.com)

[www.all-creatures.org/cva/honoring.htm](http://www.all-creatures.org/cva/honoring.htm)

#### **FILMS:**

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*Asparagus! Stalking the American Life*  
(<http://www.asparagusthemovie.com/>)

*Food Inc.* ([www.foodincmovie.com](http://www.foodincmovie.com))

*Super Size Me* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0390521/>)

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