

# THE NEW YORKER

ANNALS OF AGRICULTURE

## NEW YORK LOCAL

*Eating the fruits of the five boroughs.*

by Adam Gopnik

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David Graves is the originator and keeper of rooftop beehives all over the city. Photograph by Josef Astor.

*Correction appended.*

**T**welve-thirty on a beautiful summer day, and the chicken committee of the City Chicken Project is meeting at the Garden of Happiness, in the Crotona neighborhood of the Bronx. The chicken committee is devoted to the proliferation of egg-laying chickens in the outer boroughs, giving hens to people and having them raise the birds in community gardens and eat and even sell the eggs (“passing on the gift,” as this is called in the project), and thereby gain experience of chicken, eggs, and community—or fowl, food, and fellowship, as one of the more alliterative-minded organizers has said. It is the pet program of Just Food, a small organization that is administered by a startlingly young-looking woman named Jacquie Berger, who is silently monitoring the proceedings.

The Garden of Happiness is a sunny community garden with vegetable plots, a chicken coop, a corrugated-tin shed, and a few chairs beneath a grape arbor, where the chicken committee is meeting. The chicken committee is a lot more committee than chicken, its deliberations filled with references to “existing chicken situations” and “pursuit of newer egg opportunities,” and the slightly skeptical neighborhood people have to be gently won over by the carefully beaming professionals. They provide the nudging, let’s-get-back-on-track counsel that chicken-caring community organizers have to give potentially disorganized community chicken-carers.

“It’s, like, a long questionnaire, you know?” one of the neighborhood people says, about a form to be handed out to

potential chicken-carers.

“Well, don’t you think that someone who isn’t prepared to fill out a few questions isn’t—don’t you have to question their commitment to caring for a chicken over the winter?”

“Yeah, I guess so. But it’s a long thing. All these questions.”

The Garden of Happiness has the semi-magical ability, common to any place in the city with trees and plants and animals, to secede from its environment and become what most of the world is, a bit out in the country somewhere. A hen in the coop starts clucking. A scruffy pit bull in a neighboring yard begins to growl and then bark. Undiscouraged, the hen goes on clucking, and a second hen joins her. Together they drown out the dog. The sun shines down through the arbor on the chicken committee, and the animal sounds drown out its complicated pleadings.

I had come to the Garden of Happiness not only to see a New York City chicken committee in operation but also to get myself a chicken. This was why, a few moments later, I was trying to arrange, privately, for a hit on a fowl. Getting a chicken that has been raised and slaughtered in New York City is harder than it might seem, laws and bylaws entangling the transaction: I wanted to eat a chicken that had been raised in the city, and insiders who cannot be named said that, though the City Chickens are raised strictly for their eggs, in private a poultry whacking could be arranged, for a price. I had been set up with a chicken keeper I’ll call Freddie.

“Looks like you’ve got, you know, chickens,” I said, sidling up to him in what I imagined to be the best Washington Square marijuana-buying manner, as we stared at his coop.

“Yeah.” Long pause.

Euphemism, I saw, would get you only so far in the poultry-whacking game. “I was wondering if maybe, on Friday or Saturday, you could get me a chicken,” I said. “You know. The kind that people can eat.” I tried to give the words a Soprano-like significance.

“Yeah, I understand,” Freddie said, not making eye contact. Another long silence.

“So.” I took a deep breath. “So, uh, you think there’ll be a chicken?”

After another pause, he said, with exactly the kind of ominous serenity you want in a hit man, “Why not? Come on Saturday. You be there. There’ll be a chicken.”

I felt unreasonably pleased with myself; the chicken was going to be hit, and I would pay for the action.

I was arranging to kill a Bronx chicken as part of a project that I had begun a month or so before—to spend a week eating only food grown or raised within the five boroughs of New York City. “Localism” (or “locavore” eating, as it’s sometimes called) is, as many people now know, a movement that has rules, Web pages, and books devoted to it. Its central idea is that one should try to eat only things grown within a narrow “foodshed” around one’s own home, and in the past year localism has been the subject of a couple of folksy, how-we-did-it books, records of how their authors nailed down their diet to the local goods: “Plenty,” by Alisa Smith and J. B. Mackinnon, which recounts the authors’ yearlong experience of eating only from a foodshed around their Vancouver home, and “Animal, Vegetable, Miracle,” by Barbara Kingsolver, which tells of a similar dogmatic diet, undertaken for a year around Kingsolver’s house in southwest Virginia.

The point of localism is to encourage sustainable agriculture by eating things that nearby friends and farmers grow or raise and that don’t have to be shipped halfway around the world, guzzling fossil fuel, to get to your table. The rules generally involve eating within a radius of a hundred or sometimes three hundred miles, and are undertaken in places, like Berkeley and the Pacific Northwest, that have a lot of nice produce and plump animals within their circles.

You go local in Berkeley, you’re gonna eat. I had been curious to see what might happen if you tried to squeeze food out of what looked mostly like bricks and steel girders and shoes in trees. I wanted to do it partly to see if it could be done (as an episode of what would be called on ESPN “X-treme Localism”), partly as a way of exploring the economics and aesthetics of localism more generally, and partly to see if perhaps the implicit anti-urban prejudices lurking in the localist movement could be leached away by some city-bred purposefulness. If you could eat that way here, you could do it anywhere.

I enlisted Gabrielle Langholtz, of the Greenmarket, a young woman of awe-inspiring purposefulness, and she at once came up with a list of possibilities: vegetables from farms in Staten Island and Brooklyn, honey from rooftops, and eggs seemed plausible, too. It was the other proteins, she noted, that would be the problem, and this had led me to the chicken committee, which led me to Freddie.

**W**e began with honey. David Graves is the originator and keeper of the rooftop beehives of New York City, and he

**V**V tends fifteen hives and colonies around town. His rooftop honey is one of the ornaments of the Greenmarkets, and so he is a walking human-interest story, who trails his newsclips behind him as bees do their sun dance. We were looking at a rooftop vegetable garden, on the eastern fringe of SoHo, that belonged to the film producer Chris Goode and his wife, Lisa. The garden, which stretches across the entire rooftop, just under the watchful gaze of the old clock on the old Police Building (which stopped a couple of months ago, one of its faces at three-forty, the other at four-thirty-five), grows tomatoes and basil and zucchini and squash and green beans and watermelon—enough for a SoHo sect of survivalists. It also hosts one of Dave’s beehives.

“It could be a little strange if the bees swarmed,” Dave admitted. I had asked if his bees ever alarmed anyone. “I mean, that could be a little unnerving to people on a city street. It’s not dangerous at all, but it would look like hell—a bunch of bees swarming around a stoplight.”

Bees, he explained, fly about two to three miles each day in search of nectar and then return to the hive. In New York, they favor the nectar of ginkgo, sumac, linden, a tree called Chinese Scholar, and Japanese knotweed. New York honeybees live for around forty-five days, and their queen for around two or three years. “New York honeybees have the same life span as other honeybees, but they work longer hours,” he said. “You can get between sixty and a hundred and forty pounds of honey per season from one rooftop hive. My record is a hundred and forty, from a hive on the Upper West Side.”

The beehive sits at the center of the roof. Dave opened it, cautiously, and we looked in together.

It was like looking down into a New York office building from above: several thousand bad-tempered co-workers racing around and muttering. Dave tasted the honey. “That’s linden,” he said. It was New York honey: strong, spicy, and extremely sweet. He looked slightly abashed. “I didn’t use to like the taste of it. And it’s definitely not the Berkshires.”

**T**here was a time, not so long ago, when New York City was far more self-sufficient in food. As Marc Linder and Lawrence S. Zacharias document in their fascinating book “Of Cabbages and Kings County,” Brooklyn not only was the breadbasket of the city, well into the late nineteenth century, but also made a quick, successful agricultural right turn, replacing grain with intensive vegetable and fruit cultivation. It was only with the coming of the truck farms in New Jersey and other points west, in the early twentieth century, that New York became almost entirely dependent on imports; in recent years, thirty per cent of our fruits and vegetables have come all the way from California.

New York’s abundance lingers on as rumor and memory, but the city’s ground is intrinsically fertile, and I decided next to get a sense of the natural wealth of New York by eating things that are growing here by accident. “Why don’t you try foraging Central Park with ‘Wildman’ Steve Brill?” Gabrielle suggested. Steve, she explained, could point to everything *sauvage* that there was to eat in the city. I was taken with the idea of using the Park as a kitchen garden, like those country friends who scamper into the yard for fresh-cut basil.

A Sunday or two later, I found myself, with my children, following Steve on one of his encyclopedic tours of New York’s edible nature. The children had been ornery when I announced my local eating plan.

“I’ll eat New York food,” Olivia, my seven-year-old, said. “But pigeons I will not eat. Squirrels I will not eat.”

“Squirrels make a very delicious dish, called Brunswick stew,” I offered. “And pigeons are squab. You see them on the best menus.”

“Anything city-colored, that looks like it could actually live in New York, is being thrown out,” Luke, the twelve-year-old, said. “Gray things. Brown things. We don’t eat anything that blends in with the sidewalk. It needs to stand out from its surroundings.” The strictures seemed daunting but the possibilities fresh.

“Now, this is wood sorrel,” Brill was saying, bending over a little patch of weeds at the edge of the path that led toward the Park entrance at West 107th Street. “These are completely delicious! They taste just like lemonade!”

Everyone knelt down to taste them. A few meditative moments, ready to spit it out. Then: “Hey, this is good! It does taste like lemonade.”

Wildman Steve Brill looked pleased, but unsurprised. He has had the fortitude to eat out of the Park for decades. Mushrooms and black cherries, field garlic and saffras—he can construct entire meals around things he finds growing ferally near West Seventy-second Street. He is known for his Smokey Bear hat, his baggy pants, his Borscht Belt jokes.

“This is lamb’s-quarter,” Steve was saying, clearing a path to what, to the unknowing eye, looked just like the desultory weeds where the softball ends up after the fat kid with glasses you’ve stowed in right field watches it go by. Lamb’s-quarter turned out to be a matte-green plant with arrow-shaped leaves.

“But now you have to be careful,” he went on. “You see this?” He picked through the underbrush and found,

alongside the lamb's-quarter, another, equally agreeable-looking weed. He held it up. "This is white snakeroot," he explained. "White snakeroot is *completely* poisonous. In the early days of the country, cows would eat it and it would get into their milk, creating what's called milk sickness. A fatal disease. Who knows how this changed American history?" No hands went up. "Abraham Lincoln, that's how. Abraham Lincoln's mother died of milk sickness caused by this very root. So you have to be careful to distinguish between lamb's-quarter, which is good, and white snakeroot, which, if you eat it . . ." He paused and then played Chopin's Funeral March on an improvised kazoo made of his lips and his right hand.

The children looked dubiously at the plastic bags they carried, stuffed with purslane and wood sorrel and lamb's-quarter. New York kids, they had learned the logic of safe and shaky blocks, but the logic of poisonous plants alongside wholesome ones was outside their experience.

Wildman Steve Brill went on to show us an almost unbelievable variety of edibles in Central Park: those purslane leaves, the Asiatic dayflower ("tastes like string beans"), poor man's pepper ("tastes like radish"), sassafras ("tastes like root beer—you can actually make root beer out of it!"), field garlic, even a kind of "artist's mushroom," which you can't eat but makes a wonderful sketchbook if scratched on.

"We should ask him what pigeon tastes like," Olivia said. "He looks like a pigeon-eater."

"He'd probably say it tastes like chicken," Luke told her. "That's what they always say."

Finally, it was time for a lunch break, and Steve and his dutiful followers settled down on the rocks and the lawn near the 107th Street entrance to eat what they had gathered plus a few slices of healthy-looking whole-grain bread. Luke stood up. He pointed with the urgency of a shipwrecked sailor spotting a sail. Just visible at the edge of the Park was a sign reading "West Side Deli." The Deli in the Distance! While our wholesome fellow-scavengers were looking elsewhere, we sneaked out of the Park and returned to hide in a small copse, so that the kids could gorge on a turkey hero with mayonnaise and potato chips and Snapple drinks. Then they returned to the group, a smear of orange around the mouth the only sign of their impiety.

**L**ocalism is a movement made of pieties. The cult of seasonality was a taste that evolved into a politics; localism is essentially a politics attempting to create a taste. It is built on the conviction that the industrial economics of food growing and delivery are bad for us and bad for the planet, but it also has an implicit moralistic attitude that prefers small country patches over big urban deserts.

It is possible to have localism without nostalgia, though, and Gabrielle urged me to look into the tilapia-farming program at Brooklyn College. I took the subway out and met with Martin Schreibman, a biologist who has helped pioneer an ambitious project to create an enclosed system of fish farming, which could serve as a model for urban aquaculture in the future. If the ethic of the pure localists is in part reactionary, Schreibman's is scientific-minded, with Lex Luthor-like overtones: he dreams of giant translucent fish tanks surrounding our cities, where we would breed our own dinner in a ring of virtuous water.

"The demand for sustainable protein is *the* demand of this century," Schreibman told me. "Somehow we're going to have to produce enough protein to feed our population, and we'll have to do it in urban locales, because the costs of transportation are going to become prohibitive." He has spent most of his life at Brooklyn College, beginning as a student, in the fifties. He had been interested in problems of endocrinology and had started using fish as genetic models ("Rats are just terrible to work with," he said, a New Yorker's reaction), and then he had become as interested in the problems presented by raising fish as in doing the experiments the fish were being raised for.

"Tilapia is one of the easiest fish to raise," he explained. "It's an ancient, ancient fish—it's the fish eaten at the Last Supper. It's a warm-water fish, and it's not carnivorous, so you don't get the problems of input that you do with, say, salmon." As critics of the aquaculture industry never tire of pointing out, far more fish-mass has to go into feeding a farmed salmon than you get from the salmon itself. "The green revolution presented problems," he said. "Hey, we're still dealing with the *mishgoss* presented by the Industrial Revolution! That doesn't mean we should reverse the Industrial Revolution, since it was a solution to the problems of poverty that preceded it. Does the blue revolution present problems? You bet it does! Does that mean we should give up on it? Of course not." Schreibman has a vision, oft-repeated in his writings, of reviving the dying cities of New York state by making them centers of aquaculture, so that Rochester tilapia would be a "bonded" A.O.C. item, like Bresse chickens, but he has had a frustrating time getting the state government to adopt it.

"Meanwhile, we're getting flooded with Chinese aquaculture, and we have no idea what the fish are fed or what

conditions they're raised in," he said. "This"—he made a gesture taking in the farmed fish—"is going to happen, and it's going to happen quickly. The question is if it's going to happen here, and happen in a way that we can oversee and control."

Schreibman showed me around the Brooklyn College fish farm, which feels, well, very *basement*: high windows and humid air and the whiz-kid sense of somebody's science-fair project percolating downstairs, below the kitchen. There is a Rube Goldbergish series of barrels and pipes, which bring the water into the fish tanks and cycle it back out again into shallow basins, where it gets used to grow plants, which can, in turn, be used to feed the fish—or us. There are even some related projects, where "ornamental" fish, seahorses and clownfish, are being raised. The tilapia swim in dense, dim schools within their barrels—oddly ominous shapes in the green water, the future in fish. Schreibman gave me a few fillets for the urban table.

As time went on, we had Greenmarket herbs growing on our windowsill; knew we could forage in the Park, and so had a source for homemade root beer; were pulling plenty of local honey; owned some tilapia. But we wanted produce from a real farm, too. So, on the Fourth of July, Gabrielle and I and the children went out to the two working farms that we had found within the city limits: Decker Farm, in Staten Island, and the Red Hook Community Farm, in Red Hook, Brooklyn.

Decker, fifteen minutes across the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, is a small place, smelling of damp earth, that is farmed by a handful of Mexican émigrés who work in a pizza parlor nearby. The Mexicans discovered, upon arriving in Staten Island, that they missed farming—missed Mexican things like jalapeños and tomatillos and fresh cilantro. They work their plots on days off, nights, and weekends, and they loaded us down with poblanos and hot and sweet peppers. (The only farm-grown food used at the pizza place is basil.)

The Red Hook Community Farm, just around the corner from the new Fairway, is more socially ambitious. It is an urban farm reclaimed from an old asphalt playground, with soil piled high. It looks like a Bruce McCall drawing of a pastoralized New York, the asphalt playground with a farm just dropped on top, and a twenty-foot-tall chain-link fence running around it. Begun as a kind of reclamation project for young people, it has become a three-acre farm that supplies many of the local epicurean joints with arugula and collard greens. "Twenty teen-agers work here each week for a ten-week session," Ian Marvy, the farm's director, said. "We sell to the community, and we also sell, at a good profit, to the restaurants that have come to Red Hook in the past few years. Farming in Brooklyn reconnects kids to the earth. We bring schoolkids here from all over the city for a day's program. Most of them have no idea that vegetables come out of the ground."

Ian went on, "We try to run the farm organically. Our compost is composed almost entirely of manure from the Bronx Zoo. We use the manure of herbivores, like zebras and elephants."

I looked at him for a moment, wondering if this was an urban-farm poker-faced joke, but he assured me that it wasn't. I asked if we could taste the elephant manure residually in the food.

"Yes, you can," he said. "I mean, we have a dark chlorophyll flavor in all of our vegetables, and I really think that you can taste the concentration of nitrogen. It's a New York taste." I looked at the turnips with new respect. Along with turnips, we collected super-spicy arugula, squash, and green beans, and drove back home.

With the Red Hook and Decker Farm vegetables on hand, I decided to make Saturday dinner the centerpiece of our local-eating moment, featuring one blow-out meal of good things from around the boroughs. But I was more determined than ever to collect that chicken, and, with my restaurateur friend Peter Hoffman, the owner of Savoy and of a new place called Back Forty, and a devotee of localism and seasonalism both, drove up to the Bronx to get it. We pulled up at the meeting spot I had chosen with Freddie, near the coop, and there he was.

"So, you got the chicken?" I said, looking up at the sky in my sunglasses.

"Yeah, I got the chicken. This one." He pointed down at one of his handsome whites. The chickens pecked and clucked.

"Oh," I said. "Well, I was hoping you would, you know, make it ready for us to eat."

For the first time, Freddie turned toward me. "You want me to kill it?" he said. "I don't—I can't kill my chickens! I raise 'em. I love 'em. I thought you wanted it—you said you wanted a chicken." We looked at each other head on. "It's, like, all bloody and all, I don't like to do that," he said, with apology and annoyance mixed. Then a little anger crept in. "I thought you wanted a chicken. To raise! Not to kill!"

I withdrew with what dignity I could, and left, expelled from the Garden of Happiness. Peter and I drove over to Arthur Avenue, where vendors make their own ricotta, and sausage hangs from the ceiling, and started to head home.

Just then, bombing down Third Avenue in the Bronx, we caught sight of the biggest, gaudiest, most alluring slaughterhouse either of us had ever seen. Musa's, it was called, with a broad, wooden front painted rather in the manner of Haitian folk art. Lambs and goats gazed through wooden slats onto the sidewalk, where local children fed and petted them. A giant hand-painted "Lookee! Lookee!" sign pointed to the young animals, and a frieze of paintings above suggested all the kinds of animal you could have killed for your dinner.

We went inside. It wasn't just a slaughterhouse but more like a pagan temple: the small animals awaiting sacrifice, calves and kids and lambs. We picked out a chicken from a coop crowded with whites and browns and reds. It was white-feathered, and protested briefly with a squawk as it was selected, weighed, and disappeared into the back room. The smells of a slaughterhouse—not horrible, really, just deep, a farm smell in the city—filled the air. A few minutes later, a bag came out, with the chicken, still warm, cut up inside. It wasn't, of course, precisely the New York chicken that I had hoped for. It was an upstate chicken, most likely, that had come to town just for the hell of it, but its life cycle—born elsewhere, arrived in hope, lived in cramped quarters, ended its New York existence violently and unexpectedly at the hands of someone with a fatal amount of money—seemed to make its life local enough to qualify. I took it home to cook.

There are powerful arguments against localism: apart from the inevitable statistical tussles about exactly how much fuel is used for how much food, the one word that never occurs in the evocation of the lost world of small cities and nearby farms is "famine." Our peasant ancestors, who lived locally and ate seasonally from the fruit of their own vines and the meat of their own lambs, were hungry all the time. The localist vision of the tiny polis and its surrounding gardens has historically led to bitter conflict, not Arcadian harmony.

It is even perilously easy to construct a Veblenian explanation for the vogue for localism. Where a century ago all upwardly mobile people knew enough, and had enough resources, to get their hands on the most unseasonable foods from the most distant places, in order to distinguish themselves from the peasant past and the laboring masses, their descendants now distinguish themselves by hustling after a peasant diet.

This may be so; but the fact that one can explain everything in social life as a series of status exchanges does not mean that social life is *only* a series of status exchanges. It was cool to be a liberal in 1963, but that did not make liberal attitudes to race foolish. All human values get expressed as social rituals; we place bets on which of the rituals are worth serving.

So I made our local dinner. Gabrielle, her boyfriend, Craig Haney, the Hoffmans, and our family gathered around the table. We had Bronx chicken with Staten Island peppers, sweet and hot, and rooftop basil; tilapia *tajine*; a big pot of green beans; turnip purée, redolent of elephant; super-spicy Brooklyn arugula salad. Aside from the spices and the olive oil—which we allowed ourselves under what is called a "Marco Polo exemption," common to localism—everything in the dinner hailed from, or had at least seen its first or last days, within the city limits of New York. It was M.T.A. localism—short-term localism, a quick sprint, rather than the more dutiful long haul. But it could be done.

If there was something to be learned, it's that the question of locality is one that can be either narrow and parched or broad and humanizing. As usual, the frivolous reason is the better reason, and the better reason looks a bit frivolous. To shorten the food chain is to pull it close, close enough to put a face on one's food and a familiar place on one's plate. To eat something local is to meet someone nearby. We had put the city, from Brooklyn ingenuity and Bronx Zoo manure to a slaughterhouse on 168th Street, on a plate, and eaten it up. The plates had stories, where they normally have only food.

The one thing that puzzled me was why Olivia, normally a major fresser, hadn't eaten any of the chicken dish; it was a touch tough but, still, tasty. She had, instead of eating, done some very professional food pushing around the plate. (Seven-year-olds know that you won't get busted for food-pushing-on-the-plate, only for food-rejecting.) "I did try it," she told me at last, the next day. "The problem was, it tasted just like pigeon." ♦

Correction: Brooklyn was a breadbasket for the city only until the middle of the nineteenth century.

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