

A Terroir-ist's Manifesto for Eating in Place

Know where your food has come from
through knowing those who produced it for you,
from farmer to forager, rancher or fisher
to earthworms building a deeper, richer soil,
to the heirloom vegetable, the nitrogen-fixing legume,
the pollinator, the heritage breed of livestock,
& the sourdough culture rising in your flour.

Know where your food has come from
by the very way it tastes:
its freshness telling you
how far it may have traveled,
the hint of mint in the cheese
suggesting what the goat has eaten,
the terroir of the wine
reminding you of the lime
in the stone you stand upon,
so that you can stand up for the land
that has offered it to you.

Know where your food has come from
by ascertaining the health & wealth
of those who picked & processed it,
by the fertility of the soil that is left
in the patch where it once grew,
by the traces of pesticides
found in the birds & the bees there.
Know whether the bays & shoals
where your shrimp & fish once swam
were left richer or poorer than before
you & your kin ate from them.

Know where your food comes from
by the richness of stories told around the table
recalling all that was harvested nearby
during the years that came before you,
when your predecessors & ancestors,
roamed the same woods & neighborhoods
where you & yours now roam.
Know them by the songs sung to praise them,
by the handmade tools kept to harvest them,

by the rites & feasts held to celebrate them,
by the laughter let loose to show them our affection.

Know where your foods come from
by the patience displayed while putting them up ,
while peeling, skinning, coring or gutting them,
while pit-roasting, poaching or fermenting them,
while canning, salting or smoking them,
while arranging them on a plate for our eyes to behold.
Know where your food comes from
by the slow savoring of each and every morsel,
by letting their fragrances lodge in your memory
reminding you of just exactly where you were the very day
that you became blessed by each of their distinctive flavors.

When you know where your food comes from
you can give something back to those lands & waters,
that rural culture, that migrant harvester,
curer, smoker, poacher, roaster or vinyer.
You can give something back to that soil,
something fecund & fleeting like compost
or something lasting & legal like protection.
We, as humans, have not been given
roots as obvious as those of plants.
The surest way we have to lodge ourselves
within this blessed earth is by knowing
where our food comes from.

Gary Paul Nabhan, January 2007