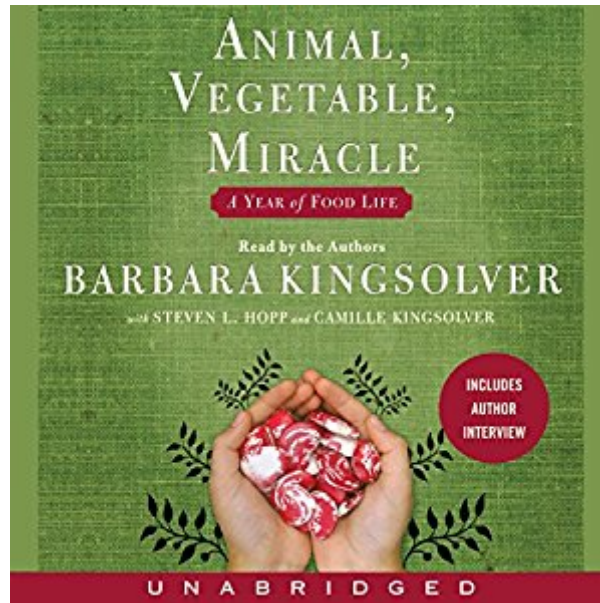


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# Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year Of Food Life



## Synopsis

Hang on for the ride: with characteristic poetry and pluck, Barbara Kingsolver and her family sweep readers along on their journey away from the industrial-food pipeline to a rural life in which they vow to buy only food raised in their own neighborhood, grow it themselves, or learn to live without it. Their good-humored search yields surprising discoveries about turkey sex life and overly zealous zucchini plants, en route to a food culture that's better for the neighborhood and also better on the table. Part memoir, part journalistic investigation, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* makes a passionate case for putting the kitchen back at the center of family life, and diversified farms at the center of the American diet.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Three hundred and sixty-eight pages, no pretty pictures, and it's about food? Yes it is, and it's fascinating. Written by best-selling novelist Barbara Kingsolver, her scientist hubby and teenage daughter, "*Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*" chronicles the true story of the family's adventures as they move to a farm in rural Virginia and vow to eat locally for one year. They grow their own vegetables, raise their own poultry and buy the rest of their food directly from farmers markets and other local sources. There are touching human stories here (the family's 9-year-old learns a secret to raising chickens for food: don't name them!) but the book's purpose is serious food for thought: it argues the economic, social and health benefits of putting local foods at the center of a family diet. As Kingsolver details the family's experience month-by-month, husband Steven adds sidebars on the

problems of industrial agriculture and daughter Camille tosses in some first-person essays ("Growing Up in the Kitchen") and recipes ("Holiday Corn Pudding a Nine-Year-Old Can Make"). And it is all so well written! Kingsolver can veer way off topic -- wandering off into subjects like rural politics, even turkey sex -- and still, somehow, stay right on point. Her husband can say more in two pages than some professors I know can say in 200, and the daughter's writings... well I often couldn't tell who was writing what without checking for the byline. The book looks and feels great, too. The dust jacket has been pressed into the nubby texture of burlap. The pages have ragged edges, which makes them soft on your fingers. Reading this book, drinking my Phosphoric Acid Diet Coke and snacking on some Partially Hydrogenated Palm Kernel Oil Walt Disney World Hungry Heroes Yogurt Pretzels, I suddenly felt like I was a kid again, sitting in my bedroom in 1969 listening to that Joni Mitchell "Woodstock" lyric: "Time to get back to the land, and set my soul free." Now that song is stuck back in my head! Maybe it should have never left.

I work in large-scale, corporate agriculture. Over the years I have worked for chemical companies, seed companies, grower-shippers and allied industries. I have recommended Kingsolver's novel "The Poisonwood Bible" to many of my colleagues. I have also endorsed Pollan's "Omnivore's Dilemma", having bought several copies and distributed them around. I very much enjoyed Kingsolver's "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life". It contained all the wit and humor I would expect from one of this nation's finest novelists. I think this book as well as Pollan's are a bit weak in the plant science area and I think both lack some of the insights into the machinations that really drive some of the food production industries. Then, again their intended audience is not the readers of TAG: Theoretical and the Applied Genetics, it is the populace at large. I very much agree with the sentiment of eating local, of shopping local, and of the slow food movement. It puts money back into the local community, it fosters a sense of community and it improves the quality of our diets. What is local though? Many of the fruits and vegetables eaten during Kingsolver's year of eating locally do not have Virginia as their center of origin. Some purists might cry foul. But, I think the focus needs to be on breaking the transport chain. People need to rediscover what a fresh peach or tomato is supposed to taste like, and their proper season. The bulk of the 'civilized' world buy their food at a chain grocery store dominated by one of the multinational grocery conglomerates. You think you have a choice when you walk into the store? You do not. That choice was made by a buyer probably at some regional DC (distribution center) who purchased the fruit from a packing shed sight unseen, and certainly did not taste it. And, their main concern was not taste, it was making sure the fruit had a minimum level of sugar, since it is picked under ripe, and

that it was firm enough to withstand many hundreds of miles in a truck. It is too bad, because I know the farmers want to produce a high quality product. And, I know the shippers want to ship fruits and vegetables that taste good. But they must bow to the buyers and market forces. In the California cherry industry, about half the fruit is exported each year, but it accounts for well over half the revenue because it is a 'high value' market. By my recent calculations, it takes 7.75 calories of fuel for every calorie of cherries flown from SFO to Tokyo. That is just the flight, it does not include any other production or transportation energy costs. Does that sound like sustainable agriculture? Do you really need those Chilean cherries or that asparagus from Peru in December?

I love Barbara Kingsolver's books and was thrilled to hear she had another on the market. Her family leaves Arizona and moved back to Virginia to spend a year living off what they can grow or buy at the local farmer's market? Good deal! And I certainly did enjoy parts of the book, particularly the actual discussing the dilemmas of eating locally and how the family got around them. Kingsolver is a wonderful writer, and her talk about vegetables, mushrooms and chickens is far more entertaining than it should by rights be. The recipes that are included sound nice and I plan to try some of them. But the rest of the book I found preachy to the point where it became annoying. I get the point: shop locally, shop at the local farmer's market. I get it, I get it. I'll even do it. I don't need all those extra pages pounding it in. And I wasn't so impressed with her defense of the tobacco industry, saying it provided a living for a lot of families. Fair enough, but it's sideways logic -- trucking in the strawberries she objects to provides a living wage for truckers and their families too.

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