

Supermarket Pastoral

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I enjoy shopping at Whole Foods nearly as much as I enjoy browsing a good bookstore, which, come to think of it, is probably no accident. Shopping at Whole Foods is a literary experience, too. That's not to take anything away from the food, which is generally of high quality, much of it "certified organic" or "humanely raised" or "free range." But right there, that's the point. It's the evocative prose as much as anything else that makes this food really special, elevating an egg or chicken breast or a bag of arugula from the realm of ordinary protein and carbohydrates into a much headier experience, one with complex aesthetic, emotional and even political dimensions. Take the "range-fed" sirloin steak I recently eyed in the meat case. According to the brochure on the counter, it was formerly part of a steer that spent its days "living in beautiful places" ranging from "plant-diverse, high-mountain meadows to thick aspen groves and miles of sagebrush-filled flats." Now a steak like that has got to taste better than one from Safeway, where the only accompanying information comes in the form of a number: the price I mean, which you can bet will be considerably less. But I'm evidently not the only shopper willing to pay more for a good story.

With the growth of organics and mounting concerns about the wholesomeness of industrial food, storied food is showing up in supermarkets everywhere these days, but it is Whole Foods that consistently offers the most cutting-edge grocery lit. On a recent visit I filled my shopping cart with eggs "from cage-free vegetarian hens," milk from cows that "live free from unnecessary fear and distress," wild salmon caught by Native Americans in Yakutat, Alaska (population 833) and heirloom tomatoes from Capay Farm (4.99 a pound), "one of the early pioneers in the organic movement." The organic broiler I picked up even had a name: Rosie, who turned out to be a "sustainably farmed" "free-range chicken" from Petaluma Poultry, a company whose "farming methods strive to create harmonious relationships in nature, sustaining the health of all creatures and the natural world." Okay, not the most mellifluous or even meaningful sentence, but at least their heart's in the right place.

In several corners of the store I was actually forced to choose between subtly competing stories. For example, some of the organic milk in the milk case was “ultrapasteurized,” an extra processing step that was presented as a boon to the consumer, since it extends shelf life. But then another, more local dairy boasted about the fact they had said no to ultrapasteurization, implying that their product was fresher, less processed, and therefore more organic. This was the dairy that talked about cows living free from distress, something I was beginning to feel a bit of myself at this point.

This particular dairy’s label had a lot to say about the bovine lifestyle: its Holsteins are provided with “an appropriate environment, including shelter and a comfortable resting area. . . sufficient space, proper facilities and the company of their own kind.” All this sounded pretty great until I read the story of another dairy selling raw milk – completely unprocessed – whose “cows graze green pastures all year long.” Which made me wonder whether the first dairy’s idea of an appropriate environment for a cow included, as I had simply presumed, a pasture. All of a sudden the absence from their story of that word seemed weirdly conspicuous. As the literary critics would say, the writer seemed to be eliding the whole notion of cows and grass. Indeed, the longer I shopped in Whole Foods, the more I thought that this is a place where the skills of a literary critic might come in handy – those, and perhaps also a journalist’s.

Wordy labels, point-of-purchase brochures, and certification schemes are suppose to make an obscure and complicated food chain more legible to the consumer. In the industrial food economy, virtually the only information that travels along the food chain linking producer and consumer is price. Just look at the typical newspaper ad for a supermarket. The sole quality on display here is actually a quantity: tomatoes \$0.69 a pound; ground chuck \$1.09 a pound; eggs \$.99 a dozen – special this week. Is there any other category of products sold on such a reductive basis? The bare-bones information travels in both directions, of course, and farmers who get the message that consumers care only about price will themselves care only about yield. This is how a cheap food economy reinforces itself.

One of the key innovations of organic food was to allow some more information to pass along the food chain between the producer and the consumer – an implicit snatch of narrative with the number. A certified organic label tells a little story about how a particular food was produced, giving the consumer a way to send a message back to the farmer that she values tomatoes produced without harmful pesticides or prefers to feed her children milk from cows that haven’t

been injected with growth hormones. The word “organic” has proved to be one of the most powerful words in the supermarket: Without any help from government, farmers and consumers working together in this way have built an \$11 billion industry that is now the fastest growing sector of the food economy.

Yet the organic label itself – like every other such label in the supermarket – is really just an imperfect substitute for direct observation of how a food is produced, a concession to the reality that most people in an industrial society haven’t the time or the inclination to follow their food back to the farm, a farm which today is apt to be, on average, fifteen hundred miles away. So to bridge that space we rely on certifiers and label writers and, to a considerable extent, our imagination of what the farms that are producing our food really look like. The organic label may conjure an image of simpler agriculture, but its very existence is an industrial artifact. The question is, what about the farms themselves? How well do they match the stories told about them?

Taken as a whole, the story on offer in Whole Foods is a pastoral narrative, in which farm animals live much as they did in the books we read as children, and our fruits and vegetables grow in well-composted soils on small farms much like Joel Salatin’s. “Organic” on the label conjures up a rich narrative, even if it is the consumer who fills in most of the details, supplying a hero (American Family Farmer), the villain (Agribusinessman), and the literary genre, which I’ve come to think of as Supermarket Pastoral. By now we may know better than to believe this too simple story, but not much better, and the grocery store poets do everything they can to encourage us in our willing suspension of belief.

Supermarket Pastoral is a most seductive literary form, beguiling enough to survive in the face of a great many discomfiting facts. I suspect it’s because 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 this better than we do. One of the company’s marketing consultants explained to me that the Whole Foods shopper feels that by buying organic he is “engaging in authentic experiences” and imaginatively enacting a “return to a utopian past with the positive aspects of modernity intact.” This sounds a lot like Virgilian pastoral, which also tried to have it both ways. In *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx writes that Virgil’s shepherd Tityrus, no primitive, “Enjoys the best of both worlds – the sophisticated order of art and the simple spontaneity of nature.” In keeping with the pastoral

tradition, Whole Foods offers what Marx terms “a landscape of reconciliation” between the realms of nature and culture, a place where, as the marketing consultant put it, “people will come together through organic food to get back to the origin of things” – perhaps by sitting down to enjoy one of the microwaveable organic TV dinners (four words I never expected to see conjoined) stacked in the frozen food case. How’s that for having it both ways?

Of course the trickiest contradiction Whole Foods attempts to reconcile is the one between the industrialization of the organic food industry of which it is a part and the pastoral ideals on which the industry has been built. The organic movement, as it was once called, has come a remarkably long way in the last thirty years, to the point where it looks considerably less like a movement than a big business. Lining the walls above the sumptuously stocked produce section in my Whole Foods are full-color photographs of local organic farmers accompanied by blocks of text setting forth their farming philosophies. A handful of these farms – Capay is one example – still sell their produce to Whole Foods, but most are long gone from the produce bins, if not yet the walls. That’s because Whole Foods in recent years has adopted the grocery industry’s standard regional distribution system, which makes supporting small farms impractical. Tremendous warehouses buy produce for dozens of stores at a time, which forces them to deal exclusively with tremendous farms. So while the posters still depict family farmers and their philosophers, the produce on sale below them comes primarily from the two big corporate organic growers in California, Earthbound Farm and Grimmway Farms, which together dominate the market for organic fresh produce in America. Earthbound alone grows 80% of the organic lettuce sold in America.

As I tossed a plastic box of Earthbound prewashed spring salad mix into my Whole Foods cart, I realized I was venturing deep into the belly of the industrial beast Joel Salatin had called “the organic empire.” (Speaking of my salad mix, another small, beyond organic farmer, a friend of Joel’s, had told me he “wouldn’t us the stuff to make compost” – the organic purist’s stock insult.) But I’m not prepared to accept the premise that industrial organic is necessarily a bad thing, not if the goal is to reform a half-trillion-dollar food system based on chain supermarkets and the consumer’s expectations that food be convenient and cheap.

And yet to the extent that the organic movement was conceived as a critique of industrial values, surely there comes a point when the process of industrialization will cost organic its soul

(to use a word still uttered by organic types without irony), when Supermarket Pastoral becomes more fiction than fact: another lie told by marketers.

The question is, has that point been reached? Just how well does Supermarket Pastoral hold up under close reading and journalistic scrutiny?