



**Bringing It to the Table
On Farming and Food**

By Wendell Berry
Introduction by Michael Pollan
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Reviewed by Sarah Stai

Land Stewardship Project members need no introduction to Wendell Berry—the prolific author has become something of a prophet in sustainable agriculture. His latest book, *Bringing It to the Table*, might well be called “The Best of Berry.” This collection of previously published writings offers new readers a handy introduction to Berry’s influential work while giving long-time Berry fans a go-to compendium of key contributions.

Michael Pollan, who is becoming a legendary food and farming writer himself, introduces the book. Pollan relates the humbling experience of reviewing Berry’s writings, having realized how few of his own insights are as original as he would like to think. He characterizes Berry’s style as “at once perfectly obvious and completely arresting,” tempting readers onward with this preview: “To read these essays is to feel that way over and over again, to be somehow stopped in your tracks by the plainly self-evident.”

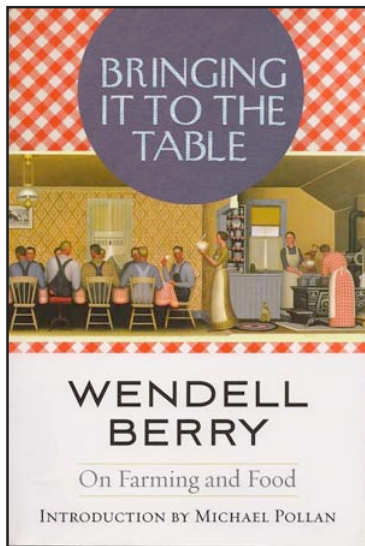
With the book divided into three parts, *Bringing It to the Table* is really a boxed set of Berry’s “greatest hits.” Part I consists of nine essays, published between 1971 and 2004, that outline Berry’s overarching theme: industrial agriculture lacks an appropriate context; the context for sustainable agriculture is nature; and modeling agriculture after natural systems leads inevitably to local adaptation.

“Nature as Measure,” the first essay in Part I, lays the foundation for Berry’s core belief that agriculture needs to emulate nature. Nature’s standards include productivity, but also require that the land be used well and that people are willing and able to use it well. Subsequent essays elaborate on how productivity is tied to “the nature of a place,” how energy sources are intricately related to proper use of the land, and how family farms and a return to true husbandry will ensure that people can engage in proper land use.

The essays of Part II, ranging from 1979

to 2006, profile individuals whose farming illustrates the philosophies outlined in Part I. The first three essays highlight, for example, how draft horses can have a place on modern farms by helping to complete the plant-animal cycle of ecological farming and capitalizing on solar energy. The final two essays of this section seemed a better fit with Part I but provided a helpful introduction to organic farming pioneer Sir Albert Howard, as well as the inspiring work on perennialization of grains crops being conducted by the Land Institute in Kansas.

The essays within Parts I and II are not



organized in chronological order, making it difficult at times to connect the dots. The historical perspective does illuminate the painfully slow pace of paradigm shifts (as far back as 1971, for example, Berry was talking of the burden that “food safety” regulations place on small producers); at other times it calls attention to our progress. In 1989 Berry was lamenting the insufficient number of people caring for the land; now we know that farmer numbers are increasing for the first time in over a century.

Bringing It to the Table showcases the most fundamental contributions of Berry’s life’s work, and it leaves you wanting more.

My only disappointment as a reader was that the path to “more” was not clearly paved. Just as a song’s artistic value can be difficult to interpret when isolated from its original album, I found myself craving more information on the original context of

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the current relevance of certain references to contemporary events would have unified the collection and made it easier to follow-up with additional reading.

The final section of the book brings an unexpected twist. Not only is there the sort of author’s note I had sought earlier, but the selected writings of Part III consist primarily of excerpts from Berry’s novels and short stories.

While switching gears from essays to fiction may seem disruptive, it was an effective way of underscoring the cultural elements that feature so prominently in Berry’s work. He believes that food and farming need to be connected not only with nature, but with families, communities and traditions. These excerpts of fictional characters preparing and enjoying meals together, as people have done throughout history, brought the book to a poignant end.

This book is a source of intellectual stimulation, with many gems that stop you in your tracks (as Pollan promised in his introduction). It also inspires, in ways that will depend on the reader.

For me, an ecologist and farmer-wannabe, the writings made my aspiration seem the most natural transition possible. From now on, I will refer all people whose jaws drop when I talk of being a farmer to the essay “Conservationist and Agrarian,” which summarizes an elegant argument for the common ground between those who want to preserve wildness for its own sake and those who understand that domesticity depends on wildness.

Lastly, the book acknowledges the heart and soul of sustainable agriculture. In trying to answer the question of why “good farmers farm well for poor pay and work as good stewards of nature for no pay,” Berry writes that through all his experience and analysis, “Always the answer is: ‘Love. They must do it for love.’” I suspect there is something in *Bringing It to the Table* for all lovers of good farming, whether you’re an old Berry fan or a new kid on the block. □

LSP member Sarah Stai is a Bloomington, Minn.-based freelance ecologist, educator and writer. She and her husband recently started a suburban market garden business as a step toward their dream of being farmers.