

This Land is Your Land by Joel Salatin

You can find Joel Salatin's soul in his slaughterhouse. Just behind the oversize shed that serves as his farm's shop is what Salatin calls the chicken-processing center, where the living birds that squawked in the field this morning are killed, defeathered and cleaned in swift succession by a bucket brigade of young farming apprentices. The bloody work of slaughtering is usually hidden away from those who will one day eat the meat, perhaps in nugget form. But at Polyface Farm in rural Swoope, Va.--where Salatin and multiple generations of his family have tended the land for decades--the processing is performed in open air, and customers who've driven out to pick up a bird can and do wander around back to take a look for themselves. Salatin is a firm believer in the disinfecting power of sunlight, even if government officials haven't always agreed with him. "We think it's important to create that visceral connection with food," says Salatin as he stands over a tub full of freshly slaughtered chickens, the ice water turning crimson. "It helps you appreciate food--and life too."

If you haunt farmers' markets and know what CSA stands for, then you may think you know Salatin, the rebellious Shenandoah Valley farmer who has emerged as a sage and celebrity in the sustainable-food movement. Salatin taught Michael Pollan how to chop a chicken in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and he was the beating heart of the Oscar-nominated documentary *Food, Inc.*, in which he emerged as a one-man symbol of an alternative food system. Even while selling a quarter-million self-published books on sustainable farming and giving talks around the world, Salatin has continued to raise some of the nation's best grass-fed cattle and "beyond organic" chicken and pork, all without using a single barrel of fertilizer. In the brewing culture war over food--which pits big Midwestern farmers and food companies against advocates for small-scale organic farming and food--Salatin is supposed to be on the side of the liberal good guys, eager to see stronger regulation of the industrial-agriculture system that they blame for pollution, animal abuse and just-plain-bad food.

Except that's not quite true. In his new book, *Folks, This Ain't Normal*, the 54-year-old farmer-philosopher emerges as a true American throwback: an agrarian libertarian who wants both Food Inc. and Big Government out of his fields. He thinks the ills of America--unemployment, obesity, disaffected youth--can be cured by going back to the land and its values, a return to what he likes to call "normal." It's about better food, yes, but what Salatin is really calling for is responsibility: a declaration of independence from corporations and bureaucracy. He wants us to be full citizens of the food system, like the Jeffersonian citizen-farmers who founded the country. "I differ from most foodies because I don't think factory farming should be regulated out of business," says Salatin. "It's up to people to step up and think responsibly about their food."

Salatin proposes nothing less than an extreme decentralization of the food system--no fast-food joints, no Whole Foods shipping organic produce from half a continent away. You eat what you raise--or what's raised around you--and you count on the good name of your farmer, not the Department of Agriculture, to keep your food safe. "We

hear about global this and that, and it makes us worried," says Salatin, who refuses to ship his products because he believes everyone should eat locally. "You have to look for anchor and root, and you can't find that 10,000 miles away from home."

Home for Salatin--and his 87-year-old mother, his wife Teresa, his adult children and his grandchildren--is Polyface, a three-hour drive west of Washington. On this 550-acre patch of Virginia horse country, Salatin raises thousands of chickens, cattle and hogs. His adult son Daniel helps direct young workers packing chickens, while Daniel's wife Sheri (who calls herself "the original Polyface chick") minds the register. Very much a family enterprise, Polyface is also Salatin's Monticello: the carefully crafted expression of his ideals. It's fueled by grass. His herd of cattle grazes in the pasture, bounded by mobile electrified fencing. When they've mowed down a patch of the field, they're moved along and replaced by chickens. The birds live in portable coops of Salatin's own invention, with wire mesh that can be dragged easily from place to place, following the changing pasture patterns.

The result is a farm built for independence. Nearly everything Salatin needs comes from his fields, and his mixed-use, pasture-based system keeps the land vibrant year after year, with little waste. "There's no energy bill, and we don't have to truck in manure," says Salatin. His way "doesn't dominate the landscape the way industrial agriculture does. This is ecological integrity right here."

Salatin believes freedom begins with food, with the security of knowing where your food comes from--preferably raising and preparing some of it yourself. But we're not doing that. There are about 2 million farms in the U.S., down from nearly 7 million in 1935. Less than 2% of Americans farm for a living. For many of us, our deepest connection to food is made via Top Chef. Sustainably produced Polyface chicken and beef are more expensive than conventional fare (its Thanksgiving turkeys will sell for \$3.25 per pound; the national average price in 2010 was \$1.10 per pound), but Salatin believes we get what we pay for. "We spend around 10% of income on food and some 16% on health care, and it used to be the reverse," he says. "Our culture has essentially abdicated our food relationship."

But food is just the gateway to Salatin's radical philosophy, which asks us to take what's generally considered progress and throw it in reverse. He knows that hard-core localization--and the beyond-organic, fertilizer-free methods he uses--would require far greater quantities of farmers at work. Industrial agriculture is no different from any other modern manufacturing process: machines and chemical energy have replaced human hands, which is why each remaining American farmer can support more than 140 people. Salatin's way results in a far smaller ratio, and he doesn't see a problem with that. "People say our system can't feed the world, but they're absolutely wrong," he says. "Yes, it will take more hands, but we've got plenty of them around."

Salatin is a hero to young Americans who are taking up the farming lifestyle. His apprentice program--a year of training at Polyface--attracts applicants from around the country and has an acceptance rate on par with that of Ivy League schools. "Joel's

work is definitely the inspiration for tons of young farmers who are getting started," says Benjamin Beichler, a 24-year-old former Salatin apprentice who now runs his own farm near Polyface.

Of course, human development has mostly been a movement away from the farm, family and village. It's hard to see us giving up free enjoyment of the fruits of the modern world so we can go back to tending them. Yet at a moment when the global economy is in a deep freeze, a quarter of Americans are obese and over a billion people worldwide are going hungry despite half the produce going to waste--well, maybe progress isn't all it's cracked up to be.

At the end of Pure Meadows Lane, where an always sunny Salatin banter with longtime Polyface customers and new fans while grandchildren scamper underfoot, classical agrarianism has never looked so good. "I am a proverbial optimist," says Salatin. "I don't think it's going to be easy, but the future is bright and promising." Spoken like a man who's ready for the harvest.