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## LETTERS HOME

BY ARIA SLOSS

# EATING IN IOWA



*DEAR GABRIELLE,*

It must have been the last week of October when I realized I'd never make it through the New Year. The air in Iowa City had a chill to it; patches of table at the farmers market downtown stretched bare. The families I'd watched descend on Betty's Produce those past few weeks for three-dollar dozens of sweet corn, the kids pushing their way through to get the biggest, most oddly-shaped squash from Donnelly Farms, the university students popping Wilson Orchard's tiny Flavor 100 tomatoes in their mouths while they fretted aloud about mid-terms and majors—they were gone, all of them. Come to think of it, Betty was gone. Donnelly Farms, too. That's how I found myself, right there in the middle of America's breadbasket, dreaming about Brooklyn.

If it sounds crazy, it's because it is. Iowa, after all, is home to some 89,000 farms, more than twice the number in New York State. I didn't know those figures when I packed up my car last summer and drove the thousand-mile stretch of Interstate 80 from Park Slope to Iowa City, but I sure felt them. Crossing the borders of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, I watched the landscape turn from skyscrapers and highways to hills and valleys. I came into Iowa somewhere around midnight, and my high beams threw long bars of uninterrupted light across fields of corn and soybeans on either side.

I'll admit I headed west with a pretty dim view of what I'd find, food-wise. I was raised by a mother who stockpiled *Gourmet* and

assembled dinners involving saffron, rosewater, and Meyer lemon; add a few years of waiting tables in New York City restaurants, and I guess I'd become the kind of elitist Northeasterner who thinks of the land between the coasts as culinary desert. My first few weeks in Iowa City turned those assumptions insideout. The well-stocked New Pioneer Co-op ("New Pi") downtown showcases local and organic ingredients. The Prairie Table, a smaller specialty market, ships in very non-local but very delicious favorites of mine, like Cowgirl Creamery cheeses, Dean & DeLuca espresso, and Chilean white wines. But what won me over was the farmers market. It ran every Wednesday and Saturday, and was so full of cheap, impossibly flavorful, local fruits and vegetables, I'd leave with a carload of eggplants and peppers, sweet melons and more varieties of heirloom tomatoes than I'd known existed, all for 20 or 30 dollars. Back in Brooklyn, I'd harbored dreams of hosting a dinner club, but like most 20-something city-dwellers, lacked the space and time. My apartment in Iowa City is the entire second floor of a small house, with a kitchen the size of my old bedroom, cabinets so big I didn't have enough dishware to fill them—and as a fiction MFA student, I suddenly had the time, too. So I decided I'd celebrate my new home in the heartland: I'd have my club, but I'd serve only foods grown within 150 miles of Iowa City. No problem.

And it wasn't, at first. Sure, we had to drink the same uninspired wine ("Barn Red") and I cheated with things like salt and pepper, but those little calibrations didn't feel so bad. Corn soup with corn pancakes, gazpacho drizzled with basil-infused (OK, illegal) olive oil,

peach upside-down cake, seared watermelon steaks, meringue with poached plums...except for a botched batch of corn ice cream, it was the easiest cooking I'd ever done. Every Saturday I picked up another carload from the farmers market; Sundays around three I started prepping for seven o'clock dinner. The 150-mile dinner club grew quickly to a dozen guests. Once we started switching up the weekly location to share the burden of all those dishes, I worked out a rudimentary but pretty effective catering system involving an old Cuisinart box and a few quart-size yogurt containers.

It was only after I'd run through the simpler presentations of all those fruits and vegetables that I found myself scrambling. One Saturday, I went looking for cheese to make lasagna and learned they don't sell cheese at the farmers' market; in fact, they don't sell dairy of any kind. At New Pi I found a white block of something labeled "table cheese product" from Wisconsin, which I stood weighing in my hand before asking one of the co-op workers if there wasn't anything—anything?—from someplace nearby. Goat cheese from Indiana was pointed out, inspected and duly discarded. Even if I'd been willing to double my mile limit, there would have been the sticker shock: \$10.75 for three ounces.

Cato Corner, where were you when I needed you? In the end, though, it wasn't just cheese that did my eating club in. It was yogurt, honey, radicchio, fennel, microgreens, nectarines, or rather the lack of

them—all of which I'd easily picked up at the Grand Army Plaza Greenmarket at Prospect Park. And berries! Even in September, when the farmers' tables in Iowa City were heaped with produce, I dreamed of Bill Maxwell's tiny, sweet strawberries, those purple-tasting conCORDs, and the pint boxes of Phillips Farm's raspberries I'd polish off on the two-block walk home to Carroll Street.

The 150-mile club died a boisterous, barn red and sweet potato soufflé-fueled death in November. The IC farmers market only runs May to October, and when I asked Sam, one of the farmers at Betty's Produce stand, why he didn't stay to sell potatoes and onions and Brussels sprouts and all the other winter vegetables I'd happily buy from him every week, he shrugged. "Too much work, and not enough profit."

Iowa may have the thousand-acre farms growing commodities and raw materials, but the vast part of the harvest isn't anything you can serve for dinner. America's heartland pumps out pork, wheat and soy, by the ton, corn for corn syrup, not for eating off the cob with butter and salt. With a gnawing hunger for sunchoke and cheddar, I'll tighten my belt and hang on until vacation, when I can hit 80 East headed back home. Because, as it turns out, Brooklyn has the breadbasket beat.

*Love, Aria*

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