

After ‘Animal, Vegetable, Miracle’: A Local Restaurant Helps Rebuild a Town

A decade after the release of Barbara Kingsolver’s local-food bible, her husband shares the story of the restaurant they built in rural Virginia.

BY STEVEN L. HOPP, MAY 18, 2017

Some people might expect a best-selling book to bring them fame and fortune. But I never saw this coming: a restaurant.

I wasn’t looking for a new career, a source of income, or more to do. I’m still a college professor and a farmer. I appear to have no good business sense: I serve as the director of this restaurant but have made no money from it, despite the hard work I’ve put into it, year after year. It’s a business founded on unconventional principles. When I first described my idea to a friend in the industry he offered these gentle words of encouragement: “Did a poleaxe fall on your head?”

Let me back up and start at the beginning.

Picture a town square, maybe half the size of a typical city block, a parking lot in the center surrounded by wooden-framed, early-1900s commercial buildings with pillared front porches. An empty shell of an old railroad depot stands alongside the quiet railroad track. Stand in the middle of the square and turn around slowly and you’ll see mostly empty buildings in advanced states of disrepair, their front display windows covered with plywood. This is my little town, really just a village, without enough of a population to support any type of town government. We have no downtown, no stoplights, and fewer than a thousand people.

During the year my wife Barbara Kingsolver and I were writing *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, something big came to our little village of Meadowview, Virginia: a national company proposed building a service station and truck stop at our town’s interstate exit. This proposal opened a community discussion around job opportunities. Before this, nobody had put much effort into reviving our little town, probably for decades, so the idea of some jobs was appealing. But would a national truck stop chain likely be a community-minded employer? How else might we turn things around and create meaningful jobs for a town so small and so far down on its luck?

Meadowview isn’t unique. All over our country small towns described as “once-thriving” are now home to too many empty buildings and declining community. People are quick to write these towns off, calling them the doomed victims of the global economy.

In 2007, when we were preparing to hand in our manuscript, I had just spent two years reading about [building local economies](#) and regional food systems, and I began hatching the idea of creating a local business in our village. My goal was to maximize the number of people who could benefit. How could we effectively get money flowing *into* the community, rather than out?

Like many rural towns, the economic base of our region is historically rooted in small farms, but for decades that livelihood has slowly declined, following the same pattern of corporate consolidation we describe in this book. Tobacco farming has now lost its support. The main agricultural product of our region these days is cattle, but not for local consumption. Calves are raised on our grassy rolling hills, then shipped off to be finished and [processed in huge Midwestern feedlots](#), with the bulk of the profits also rolling out on those cattle trucks.

But we still had small local vegetable growers who needed consumers. I wondered if we could use the ideas from our book to help connect more local diners with the food of our region. After lots of talk and a roundup of community and family support, we decided to pull the plywood off the face of one of those derelict buildings on the square, modernize the electricity and plumbing, and hang up a sign.

That's the simple version of how we opened [The Harvest Table Restaurant](#). Farm-to-table restaurants are becoming popular across the country, but The Harvest Table is working at the front edge of this trend, building its whole menu around [local sourcing](#). We depend on local growers in every way possible, and change our menu daily. At our specific request, various farmers have grown sweet corn, winter squash, parsnips and turnips, heirloom tomatoes, mushrooms, and heritage Appalachian dent corn for grits, to name a few examples.

At the time we released this book, most local foods changed hands via direct sales, with farmers serving as both growers and salespeople. Since then, many creative entrepreneurs have invented novel ways to collect and distribute these foods. Existing conventional food distributors have been happy to add local products to their inventories. Food hubs pool products from local or regional producers and make them available to restaurants, schools, hospitals, country clubs or private dining events. More than 40 percent of school districts in our country now have some version of a [farm-to-school](#) program. Food hubs have been most successful in urban areas, and the growth of urban markets has led to an explosive growth of small-scale sustainable farm operations surrounding cities and even embedded in city centers.

Diners visiting our restaurant can see on our menu that we're committed to our region's small farms, and are often curious about how we define local. It seems like it should be easy to specify some percentage of our food that comes from within a 100-mile radius, but we have goals beyond just reducing our food miles. First, we want to promote

farming systems that respect the environment, soil and animals. This means partnering with our neighbors who follow sustainable practices, including organic production, and other methods that sequester carbon in the soil.

Our second criterion is that we prefer to source from families rather than companies. Our commitment isn't only to quality food, but to the community as a whole, and the people we know personally. We often visit their farms and see their growing practices.. In committing ourselves to food sources that haven't traveled far, we're not just participating in the local challenge, but truly working with our neighbors, helping to build a better community and economy.

What we've created over the years is a modern restaurant with a neighborhood feel. We try to find a happy, creative balance between casual and refined. So you can find a pasture-finished burger of the day, or step it up to an oven-roasted pork tenderloin with herbed fingerling potatoes, squash, butternut squash butter & fennel flowers. Or a vegan dish of roasted yellow squash with oyster mushrooms, curtido, Carolina gold rice, sour gherkins and purslane. Those were actually on our menu the day I wrote this. Every day our farmers bring us something new, challenging us to reinvent ourselves.

In 2010, we opened Harvest Table Farm to boost supplies, extend the normal growing season, and provide items that other local growers weren't producing, mainly because of low market value. A restaurant uses, for example, a lot of onions and potatoes, but local growers can't get much for these at farmers' markets so they haven't been excited about them. Our own farm could help fill in these gaps, and also provide a reliable supply of greens all winter using innovative, low-tech methods like unheated hoop houses.

Our farm also serves as an education center. Our restaurant customers can visit if they're interested, and we frequently give tours to school and faith groups. The farm also brings in WWOOFers, interns and agricultural volunteers from all over the country, and helps to train a new generation of sustainable-minded farmers.

Food represents about 10 percent of the American economy, and that's a starting point for a small community without much else. We decided to expand our contribution by creating a general store featuring not just food but other local goods. We have an open invitation to anyone in our community who makes anything they think is worth selling. The general store's shelves are stocked with arts and crafts, hand knitted caps and scarves, ceramics, soaps, jewelry, and the occasional children's tin-can art (which we allow to stay for at least a few months).

Over 200 of our neighbors, friends, and community members have earned money from the general store. We also offer the restaurant walls as gallery space for local fine

artists to exhibit their work, and showcase our best local musicians in performance during our weekly live music nights.

Between all these enterprises—the restaurant, general store and farm—we’ve managed to redirect over \$2 million into our formerly boarded-up village and local community. If we’d opened a conventional restaurant or other business based on outsourced goods, that much money would have been taken out of the community. I never thought of myself as a business owner, but as a citizen of Meadowview, I’m proud to be part of a dedicated group working to bring life and cash flow into my community. Our goal is to make profits that will flow into the community, not to me or my family, since we have other sources of income. Maybe a poleaxe did fall on my head, but I believe people matter more than the bottom line.

Now when I visit Meadowview, I’m likely to see the town square buzzing, and cars with license plates from anywhere in the country parked alongside those belonging to our regular restaurant customers. We’re located close to the interstate and, thanks to modern mobile devices, it’s hard to predict who might find us and walk in the door. We’ve seen local, state, and national legislators, famous musicians, film celebrities, and environmental activists, and we’re a mecca for book clubs.

We’ve also fed vanloads of tattoo artists heading for a convention, and fleets of motorcycle enthusiasts out for a joyride on a sunny afternoon. There’s no telling who might pull in next to the pickup truck of a farmer bringing produce to the restaurant, or a local church group coming in for brunch after Sunday service. To me that looks like success.

Steven L. Hopp is the coauthor of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* with his wife, Barbara Kingsolver, and Camille Kingsolver. He is also founder and director of the Meadowview Farmers Guild, a community development project that includes a local foods restaurant and general store that source their products locally. He teaches at Emory & Henry College in the Environmental Studies department.

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