

WHAT I EAT AND WHY

BY SHARON DOERRE

As a child, I was a picky eater—often too disgusted with the appearance and texture of foods to even attempt to eat them. And these were not exotic foods! I wouldn't, for instance, go near a tomato. And I had serious doubts about cucumbers.

It wasn't until I went to the Middle East at 19 that my palate expanded. Working on an archaeological project in Syria, about 30 miles from the Iraqi border, I became part of a 14-year project to excavate a huge and ancient city. I was in charge of five men from



nearby villages who did the actual digging while I kept notes and tagged artifacts, and I soon realized that I was more interested in the lives of my workers than I was in what we were uncovering.

I learned more than I could have imagined about modern Syrian and Bedouin culture, and in many ways I lived that experience. A big part of it, of course, was food.

Like everyone else in that part of the world, I ate only local, seasonal foods prepared from scratch. It was startling to understand such things as the progression of fruits: a revelation to have to wait all summer for grapes to ripen; to realize that you should eat all the cherries you can before the end of May. And, in a strange twist of fate, I learned not just to eat, but to love, tomatoes and cucumbers.

I brought my new interest in food back to the States with me. My soon-to-be-husband and I befriended another graduate-student couple, and grocery shopping and cooking soon became our entertainment and release from studying.

We grilled and stir-fried—my husband is now an expert Thai chef—and hung out at Sun Harvest exploring natural and organic foods.

But it was only in the Middle East, where I continued to travel for the next five years, that I really ate seasonally. Back in Austin, I tended to let the imported abundance of the supermarket guide my eating.

It took pregnancy, and then child-rearing, to change my relationship both to food and to Austin. I was now raising native Texans! I discovered that jarred baby-food tastes terrible, and that it wasn't that hard to make my own. My babies were raised on much improved flavors: mango, papaya, red peppers, lentils and beans, prepared fresh, if from supermarket produce.

But when our oldest child reached preschool, we suddenly

realized how disconnected he was from food. Alexander thought meat came from the store, not from animals. He found it hard to believe that the packages in the store had any connection to cows or chickens.

"How do you think the packages got there in the first place?" we asked.

"They just appear," he replied.

This prompted the first of many visits to the Boggy Creek Farm stand in East Austin, where my children discovered fresh-dug potatoes and lettuce transported

mere blocks—not thousands of miles—to reach our table. Chickens morphed from a distant abstraction to a much-loved reality that clucked and scratched in the dirt.

We came to know the incredibly rich and heavy taste of goat's milk ice cream from the farm stand—just a small cup was deeply satisfying.

By the time our family had grown to three children and two adults, we were spending a lot of time exchanging labor for produce at the Oasis Garden CSA, which my daughter called "our farm." I remember removing cantaloupe seedlings from their trays and handing them to my eight-year-old son, who would place them in holes made by his five-year-old sister. Dad would cover the seedlings with soil.

On other Saturdays, we trimmed back basil flowers and did the hot, hard work of tying up tomato vines, while the kids played in the sandbox. We worried about rain during dry spells and worried about weeds when it rained, and when we were hot and tired, we were revived by heart-lifting views of fields ringed with trees at the confluence of Boggy Creek and the Colorado River. Working a farm changed us.

We still shop at the grocery store for things like breakfast cereal, potato chips and graham crackers, but no longer buy our produce there, perhaps because I no longer consider produce to be any kind of convenience food. This year, our spring strawberries and summer melons will come from the CSA, while our garden at home will give us herbs and tomatoes.

Eating this way has reconnected me to Austin and Central Texas, but also to places much further removed in geography and time—to my husband's grandfather, who farmed with a horse-drawn plow, and to women who garden everywhere with babies on their backs.

And of course to Syria, the place where I made lasting peace with a tomato.