

WHAT I EAT AND WHY

BY LOUISE DUCOTE

My sons and I love Laura Ingalls Wilder. The boys love all nine of her autobiographical books—about the American West in the 1870s and '80s—for their own reasons; I love them for the understated, elegant writing. I love them because I'm an atheist, and they are the closest thing I have to a guiding moral framework. I love them because my boys and I have spent many happy hours on our back porch reading them aloud and talking them over. And I love the way Wilder wrote about food.

For the sod-busters, the salient dietary factor was not lifestyle or variety, but, of course, survival. The Ingalls family happily consumed a monotonous regimen of bread, potatoes, salt pork, occasional milk and butter when they were able to sustain a cow, and whatever meat Charles Ingalls could shoot. Delicacies like green peas and corn grew in a carefully tended summer garden.

In the seventh book of the series, when Laura is 15, she attends a birthday party where she encounters an unthinkable luxury: "Most marvelous of all, in front of each plate was an orange. Not only that; for these oranges ... had been made into flowers. The orange's peel had been cut down from the top in little pointed sections, and each section was curled inward and down, like a flower's red-gold petals. Held within these petals, the flesh of the orange curved up, covered with its thin, white skin." Laura is confused by the orange, not sure if it's meant to be eaten, or how to go about it, or if the whole orange is truly hers. She wonders if she could possibly take it home to share with her parents and sisters. Finally the host picks up his and eats it, and the other guests follow. On returning home, the first thing Laura tells her mother is, "Oh, Ma, each one of us had a whole orange!"

She does not describe its taste. But the experience was memorable enough that she chose to write about it nearly 60 years later.

Within the nine books and within that tiny culinary universe are many vivid descriptions of food: vanity cakes, pickles, codfish gravy, butter brought by a neighbor when the Ingalls family had none. An out-of-the-ordinary meal resonated, and anchored in time that particular moment for the author.



In my easy, well-fed life, with my complex grocery lists full of luxury items (kombucha, organic blueberries, the tres leches cake from Whole Foods), I have two food memories that are absolutely clear. One is of being 22 and eating a cantaloupe from my tow-truck driver's garden—my '71 Cutlass kept me in frequent contact with several tow-truck drivers and mechanics—years before I would have a garden of my

own. The other is of eating a St. Pierre tomato from my own garden the summer before last. I've grown a lot of excellent tomatoes before and since, but I'll spend the rest of my gardening life trying to duplicate that one.

Were the 1880s a better time to live life than the 2000s? I'd say not. Not having to farm with oxen and hand tools or having to sew by hand every stitch of my family's clothing, I have more time for intellectual and plain old fun pursuits. I get to read to my children and watch them play, instead of doing hard physical work all day until they're old enough to do it with me. Yet I think the Ingalls family had something we don't in that their pleasures weren't jumbled up with myriad other pleasures. The taste of an orange could not possibly have been confused with orange soda or orange candy or mineral water infused with essence of orange or pistachio-crusting salmon with orange coulis. A new piece of reading material was devoured, shared and treasured, not thrown onto the giant pile of things I won't have time to read even if kombucha does half of what they claim and I live to be a hundred. When Laura's father looked at her mother, he didn't see her through a fog of Victoria's Secret models, rock stars and a generation of girls that considers two inches of exposed thigh part of a normal outfit. He saw her.

I buy a lot of organic oranges. Some of them I juice for the children. Some I make into Kentucky martinis to be enjoyed with my hot, sweet husband on the back porch. That's (per person) juice of one orange, two ounces bourbon, one ounce amaretto, shaken and strained. Some collapse in moldy defeat in the refrigerator's bottom drawer and I guiltily toss them into my compost pile. Sometimes I think about Laura's orange. Then I have something of what she had, along with everything that is mine.