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## Clark Wolf's Napkin Notes

**Vocal about being local. Enough stunt-eating. Let the real harvest begin.**

By Clark Wolf

*Splitting his time between Guerneville and Manhattan, acclaimed consultant Clark Wolf graces these pages with the occasional diatribe from the periodic local.*

Have an apple. Have a pear. For goodness sake, have a handful of recently harvested grapes! As September ends, yet another brilliant peak harvest season turns toward the next crop and the crunchy fallen leaves beyond.

I really am done with peaches for the year, focusing on dry farmed tomatoes and dreaming of pomegranates and Pixie tangerines. In the wonderful film *Postcards from the Edge*, Meryl Streep's Carrie Fisher-inspired character complains that instant gratification "takes too long." But with ripe fruits, anticipation seems just right.

The last year or so has also seen a hefty crop of what I can only call publishing-related stunt farming. You know, where a writer gets a contract for a book or an article that requires him or her plus family to live for a year on the crops grown in their basement bathtub or out of their rooftop flower pot collection or even from their previously overgrown and somewhat frightening Brooklyn backyard, so they can tell (and sell) the story of magic and woe relating to what humans have been doing for thousands of years. Namely, growing food.

It's like publishers have just discovered that food comes out of the dirt and that—what a shock!—dirt (known socially as "earth"), is all around us.

Compelling writing though it may be by bestselling novelist Barbara Kingsolver, her popular book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* doesn't change, for me, the fact that there is a sort of moral high-ground of opportunism involved. It's a bit like Salman Rushdie's soon-to-be ex-wife Padma Lakshmi kicking her Manolo Blahnik stiletto-heeled toe in water while the wind machine blows her hair and she undulates her lips in the introduction to the Bravo TV's hit show, *Top Chef*. As a TV exec recently explained to me, "These are television values, not food values." So, too, with stunt eating.

I appreciate the enthusiastic sense of discovery and am pleased that more men and women aged 15 to 55 are discovering the pleasures of public (and low-cut) cookery. But for those of us who treasure the common sense of at least somewhat natural living, paying attention to the seasons as they come and go year after year, the term "big whoop" comes firmly to mind.

That said, some of this is simply good writing and storytelling, both to be respected and enjoyed. If it is the current fashion to idealize—or even make indie films of—working the land, then it's a fad-let I can swallow. Just as greening things is all the rage, thoughtful foodism can have lasting and meaningful results if we can work through the dross. There's nothing wrong with going along with the crowd if the crowd is going somewhere swell.

Ms. Kingsolver says, "No matter what else we do or believe, food remains at the center of every culture. Ours now runs on empty calories." She adds, "A lot of us are wishing for a way back home, to the place where care-and-feeding isn't zookeeper's duty but something happier and more creative." I wholeheartedly agree.

I suppose it's really the bloggers that have me cranky. I'm all for free speech but editors are one of the great gifts of the civilized world. So too are editorial meetings, where the Straight Face Test ("Are you kidding me? Another story about purslane?!) weeds out embarrassment before they can go public.

That said, the reasonably ingenious website [www.locavores.com](#) is full of interesting information and resources for learning more. But [www.eatlocalchallenge.com](#) makes me chuckle. First, why does food need to be a competition? We're not exactly vying with the



Dangle: Grapes and Galas at the Sebastopol Farmer's Market.  
Photograph by Ed Troxell

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mountain lions for life-sustaining kill. And really, how challenging is it to eat locally in the North Bay in September? It's a treat, a treasure, a privilege and not nearly as challenging as 10 minutes in a Costco.

More interesting to me is the growing movement, or rather return, of raising chickens out back. Not surprisingly, this practical and logical phenomenon is showing up in places like Oakland, Austin, Brooklyn, Seattle and Portland. But it's the flocklets in Chicago and Houston that catch my eye. "Chickens are the gateway animal for urban farming," says our own former *REV* columnist Novella Carpenter as quoted in the *New York Times*. And there are all those good eggs. Carpenter's writing a book too, about her "menagerie" of urban Oakland birds and rabbits, turkeys, duck and the occasional pig that should have enough how-to—both husbandry and interpersonal—to be of real use. Check out her posts on [yourcityfarmer.blogspot.com](http://yourcityfarmer.blogspot.com) as well as [thecitychicken.com](http://thecitychicken.com) and [backyardchicken.com](http://backyardchicken.com) for more. When live animals are involved, the experience moves quickly from stunt to real life to, well, Sunday supper, a trajectory I can warmly embrace and enjoy.

So, this harvest season make an extra effort, if you can, to relish and rejoice. Let flavor and freshness guide your nose to good foods, some—but perhaps not all—raised by your neighbors and friends, by farmers you know or ranchers you trust. It doesn't have to be a challenge or a game. Better yet, make it a party.

*Clark Wolf is the president of the Clark Wolf Company, specializing in food, restaurant and hospitality consulting.*

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