



BARRY ESTABROOK

If you want to go deep on how food is produced, Barry Estabrook is your go-to resource. His two recent books, *Tomatoland* (2011) and *Pig Tales* (2015), drill down on troubling conditions that plague laborers and livestock on modern American industrial farms.

Estabrook moved from Canada to Vermont in 1988 as editor-in-chief of *Eating Well* magazine. Ruth Reichl invited him to serve as contributing editor for *Gourmet* from 2000 until it folded in October 2009. His work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Saveur*, *Eating Well*, *Modern Farmer* and the *New York Times*. Since 2002, Estabrook and his partner, the cookbook editor Rux Martin, have lived in Vergennes in a stately 1785 white-washed brick colonial house with vegetable and perennial gardens, fruit trees and berry bushes. Both have offices in a small house a few steps away. When the two writers find themselves at home, they gravitate to their kitchen where they enjoy cooking meals centered on garden veggies, eggs from their hens and local meats.

Edible Green Mountains: Tell me about your background in agriculture.

Barry Estabrook: I worked on a dairy farm in Michigan for a couple summers, and much to my parents' chagrin, I spent a season as a commercial fisherman in Nova Scotia right after graduating from university. A guy on that crew had been thrown in jail and they needed another pair of hands. Those experiences convinced me that I enjoyed seeing how food was produced but could not pursue it as a career.

EGM: You've traveled around the country and seen countless farms and communities. How does Vermont compare?

BE: I interviewed Tom Willey, a farmer in the Central Valley of California. He was an early purveyor to Alice Waters. He said that Central Valley farmers have crops in the ground 12 months a year but people in that area can't buy fresh food because most of it gets shipped away. He said, "Vermont has it figured out—even with a shorter season, farmers can grow food and people can purchase it nearly year-round through farmers' markets, CSAs and co-ops." I think we've come a long way in improving our ability to supply farm-raised products to consumers through the above channels.

EGM: How do you choose your topics?

BE: *Tomatoland* started with the question of why winter tomatoes taste like crap. We can put a man on the moon but we can't grow a decent winter tomato? But while doing research in Florida in 2008, I learned about fieldworker slavery—people being severely beaten and locked up overnight, or shot if they tried to escape—and that cast a whole new light on the story. So what began as a piece on tasteless

winter tomatoes morphed into something far more consequential. I owe everything to Ruth Reichl, who was bold enough to publish the piece in *Gourmet* in 2009. The tomato industry in Florida has undergone a night and day change since I wrote that book. I take no credit; I merely chronicled what was happening. It was the persistence of the tomato workers that led to the change in conditions.

As for *Pig Tales*, I wanted to write about livestock production. I had raised pigs in the past and knew they are by far the most sensitive and intelligent animal. Pig farming contains all the evils we associate with factory farms, such as horrific pollution and abusive conditions for animals and workers alike. 97% of pigs in the U.S. are raised in CAFOs, but fortunately, there's an increasing number of alternative farms that raise pigs conscientiously. Tomatoes and pigs provide a good lens through which to look at commodity production and the alternatives.

EGM: What concerns you today?

BE: The subtherapeutic use of antibiotics in farm animals. 70 to 80% of the nation's antibiotics are fed to perfectly healthy animals—that's inexcusable. A related fact: 23,000 Americans die annually from bacterial infections that are now resistant to antibiotics. Big pharma and big ag are lobbying to convince farmers and consumers that antibiotics are the only way to go despite mounting evidence to the contrary. The pork industry in Denmark is every bit as industrialized and more sophisticated than ours yet somehow they avoid using antibiotics. So what's our excuse?

EGM: Any advice to our readers?

BE: Be mindful of how our food is produced. We have the opportunity to vote with our fork and wallets. The commodity food industry relies on consumer ignorance; they prefer to keep us in the dark on how food is produced. Once you know, the decision is yours. The dollars you spend support the practices of that farm or producer. It's easy to get frustrated until you realize you actually *do* have some power to create your own food system, especially here in Vermont. We can make win-win decisions when we purchase food: better conditions for the environment and farmers, and better taste and nutrition for consumers.

EGM: So how do you and Rux unwind at home?

BE: During the summer, I work in the gardens. There's nothing better than a garden for a procrastinating writer! My garden is weedless in the months leading up to a deadline. We walk our three dogs in the forest preserve behind the house. In the winter, we cross-country ski.



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And of course, we both cook. Sometimes we're guinea pigs as Rux trials recipes to get a visceral feel for a cookbook she's editing.

EGM: Describe yourselves as cooks or eaters.

BE: In summer we eat through our garden. In the colder months, we do a lot of braising—nice fatty heritage pork or lamb. And chicken in some fashion or another. Our fridge is filled with all sorts of Vermont cheeses. We do most of our shopping at the Middlebury Co-op, which has an incredible produce section, the Middlebury farmers' market and Green Pasture Meats.

EGM: Do you do much canning or preserving?

BE: The garden is designed for fresh eating, not canning or preserving. But I do put up some pickled beets and I make a hot sauce with Scotch bonnet peppers. I smuggled some seeds home from Jamaica about 15 years ago and those plants are my babies. In winter, I have 50 taps in our maple trees and have a small backyard evaporator up there. I produce just enough syrup for us and our kids. It makes a great hostess gift for our friends in the city! I also brew the world's rankest hard cider, right here in the house. I enjoy it, but no one else does. Maybe that's a good thing... 🍁

Maria Reade remains in awe of Estabrook's encyclopedic knowledge and relentless pursuit of leads. And shares his passion for fatty pork.

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EGM: Breakfast today?

BE: A fried egg from our hens and toast.

EGM: Cake, pie or cookies?

BE: Pie—rhubarb or sour cherry from our gardens.

EGM: Favorite childhood meal?

BE: Perch fillets floating in melted butter from Phil Schmidt's, a now defunct famous restaurant on the shores of Lake Michigan.

EGM: Guilty food pleasure?

BE: Bacon. A couple times a year, I cure and cold-smoke a fatty heritage pork belly from a local farm or Flying Pigs down in Shushan, New York.

EGM: Midnight snack?

BE: A glass of red wine and whatever cheese hasn't gone hard or moldy.

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