



EATING GUIDE

# Eat This Word

**A Faith-Inspired Guide  
for Eating & Sourcing  
Your Food in an Age of  
Ecological Upheaval**

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WRITTEN BY

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*in consultation with members of the  
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**F**armer and writer Wendell Berry has famously remarked that eating is an agricultural act. Every bite we take affects our bodies and the ecosystem from which our food comes from. Besides nourishing us, eating well can also support virtuous farms and food producers who treat the earth with respect.

When their integrity is respected, healthy and wholesome foods can also be turned into vibrant meals. Food has the immense potential of converting tables into places of encounter and communion between us humans, our Living Source, and the rest of the living world.

Drawing from the land-ethic of healthy relationships and on the earthkeeping tradition of the descendents of the ancient Hebrews, Jesus and his earliest followers feasted and celebrated this communion. Gathered around meals, they tasted an abundant hospitality by celebrating food as a centerpiece of the Eternal One's purposes for the world.

What might it look like to eat food in a way that upholds the gift of life, that respects the air, soils and watersheds, and that honours the well-being of other human and non-human creatures? What would be some implications of being part of a journey that ceases to see food as 'fuel', towards one that embraces it as a sacred 'gift'?

Beyond its individual parts, consider the following guide holistically, embracing it as an invitation to participate in an open challenge that has room for joy, mistakes, and experimentation.

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## **I. Humble, Provisional, & Committed: Ways to Eat**

We are all on an ongoing journey and every step counts as we seek to contribute towards the healing of the food community. Granted: Rules tend to oversimplify things. And they tend to make us legalistic and at times stand-offish, doing little service to the calling of following the way of peacemaking called for by Christ.

Still, the calling is not to be self-righteous, but to live righteously. And that's why we need the right attitude and the right practices when it comes to eating and sourcing our food. We should thus aim to be grateful while also committed; open-handed, but also intentional, avoiding apathy or passivity. Changing our food system and our eating habits may often be a gradual process. But every bite counts.

Good news is that change is happening, calling us to participate actively in taking tangible responsibility for what and how we eat. So, in that spirit, consider incorporating the following postures and eating practices in your personal and shared life.

### **I** Open your kitchen & extend your table

Just as eating is an agricultural act, cooking should be a communal one. As our tables have become some of the loneliest of places, many folk are excluded from eating good food. We are also squeezed by tight schedules that often impede us from cooking properly every day.

In contrast, opening our kitchens and extending our tables to others (and especially to 'the least of these') helps us spread the work and share the blessings. Food always tastes better when eaten with others. It's thus worth opening our kitchen at least once a week, and making the move of inviting yourself over to a friend's. In fact, that's precisely what Jesus did; "Table fellowship 101."



**2**

## Refine entertainment & cook with joy

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Cooking can either be seen as a burden or as an act of creativity. In the province of British Columbia, around 25% of our budgets go to clothes, leisure and miscellaneous activities. Only 10% goes to food. What would happen if a greater part of that budget was destined for virtuously-grown food?

Consider turning artificial needs upside down by setting apart a greater part of your income for food. Get hold of a good seasonal recipe book and invite friends over to cook together. Become creative gastronomes in a day and age where everything is (boringly) ready-made. Unleash the buoyant joy hidden in food.

When eating out, or being invited, remember that there are a number of restaurants committed to ethically sourcing their ingredients. Take initiative and find out who they are ([www.earthsave.ca](http://www.earthsave.ca) is a good place to start).

**3**

## Relinquish & embrace

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Supermarkets and fast-food chains are modern temples where health and socio-ecological well-being are sacrificed at the altar of efficiency and 'cheap' prices. But fast food feeds fast people. Instead, eat slowly, embracing the wonder of flavour and in appreciation of every bite.

Followers of the Way are summoned to uphold concrete and tangible practices of care, attentiveness, and respect for farmers, for the land, and for the sacred ecosystem of creation through which we are all sustained.

**4**

## Treat food as gift & responsibility

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While not divine, food is sacred—and as such it calls for songs and appropriate rituals of appreciation and thanksgiving. And it calls for us to be content with our daily bread, even as we work prayerfully in expectation for the divine justice to flow down like a river, and for the ecosystem of heaven to come down here to earth.

Having been commodified and controlled by fewer and fewer corporations, our food systems require that we embrace our responsibility as eaters by getting involved in broader city-wide and nation-wide efforts that advocate for peace, living-wages, justice, and ecological stability. Eating should also be a political act.

**5**

## Fast & feast

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Protect wonder and excitement from expediency and cheapness, recovering the rhythms of seasons nowadays that time has become dull and flat in our (dis)connected culture. Fasting during one weekly meal, while embracing simple diets during the rest of the week, adds expectation and enhances the feast of Sunday. Fasting and feasting go hand-in-hand with living humbly and joyfully.

## II. Defining Food: What to Eat

When considering what sorts of foods to eat in a way that contributes towards the flourishing of all the created world, the rule of thumb that has stood the test of time is this: as much as we can, we should eat off the hands of farmers and food producers we personally know.

A greater curiosity and involvement in knowing who and how food was grown will bring us the closest to the sources of what we eat. Hence 'knowing and loving the farmer as ourselves' is the motto here, because a relational proximity is perhaps the best way to foster the care that we need to heal our food economies.

Several well-known frameworks are useful for embracing and practicing this sort of attentiveness. Consider these three popular ones:

*Not only are natural foods better for our wellbeing (preventing cancers and many sorts of cardiovascular diseases) but they are also healthier for the soils and the ecosystems we depend upon.*

*When grown in a small scale, natural foods nourish our bodies and also safeguard the wellbeing of lands and watersheds.*

1

'Good, clean,  
& fair'

First, eat 'slow food': food that is Good, Clean, and Fair. Food that is 'good' is tasty, diverse, full of colour and vitality. Food that is 'clean' comes from small-scale farms that use no chemical pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers, and that hardly depend on fossil fuels and heavy machinery. Food that is 'fair' is grown by workers who are paid justly and treated well.

2

'Near, naked,  
& natural'

Become co-producers in the sort of food that is Near, Naked, and Natural. Food that is grown 'near' to where it's eaten is fresher, and healthier. Food that is 'naked' (or nearly naked) is food that has not been highly processed or dressed up with fancy additives; it's wholesome food that is more true to itself, and thus has more integrity and more life. Food that is 'natural' is, well... food. The rest is imitation.

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3

'Eat food,  
not too much,  
mostly plants'

And third, consider the well-known slogan by food journalist Michael Pollan: Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.

Here's a most obvious but often forgotten truth: 'Food' is what the living creation offers to us (and not what industry tries to sell us). Eating 'not too much' means paying more for food, but eating less of it, because it's already more nutritious—surely a wise trade-off. (In

North America we ingest up to 30% more calories than we actually need, while discarding over 35% of our food.) Eating until we are near 80% full is good for our body – and for our wallet too. And what is more, slowly savouring every bite also makes us more joyful people. Shifting to a diet made up of ‘mostly plants’ will also contribute towards greater ecological stability.

## 4

### What about meat, fish, & dairy?

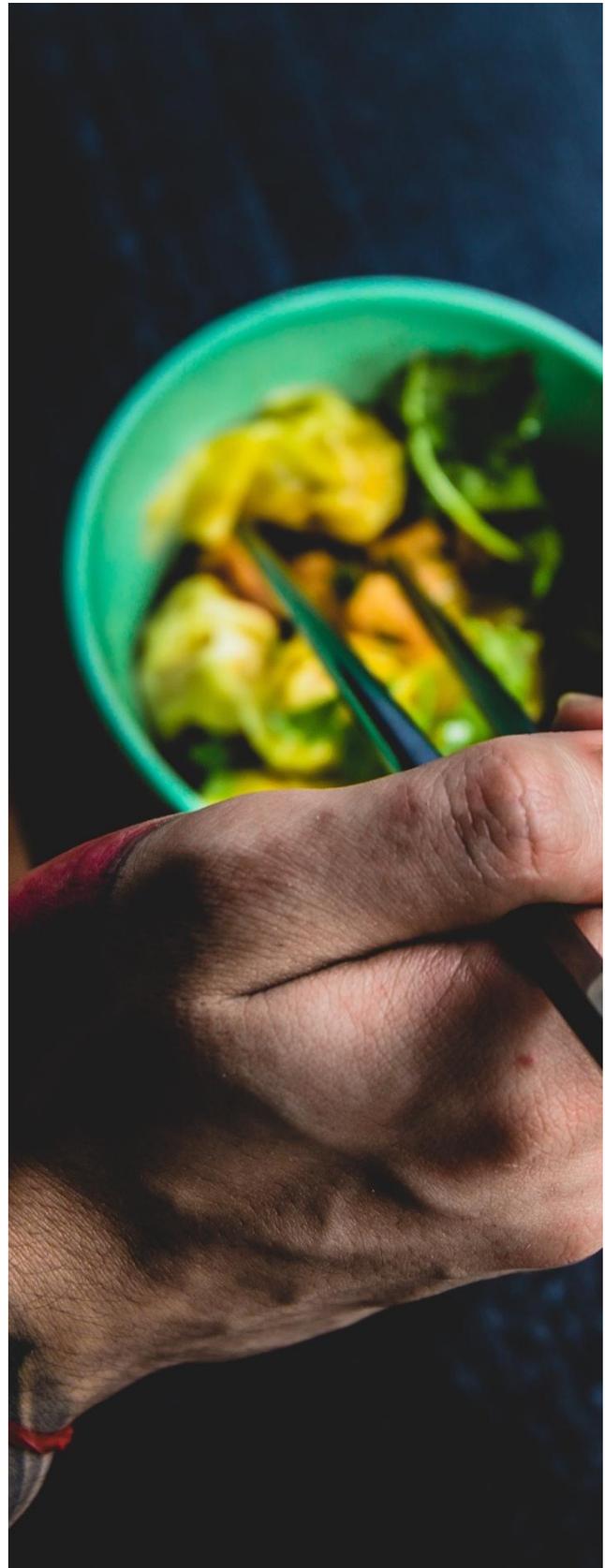
Eating ‘mostly’ plants means eating animals and their products with a much higher degree of awareness and responsibility than we do so now. Animals are currently being abused, mistreated, pumped with drugs and hormones; let alone the fact that they are not honoured in their unique, God-given creatureliness. (This often includes ‘free-range’ organic chickens.)

Animal meats and animal products also put very large pressures on ecosystems. For example, 20% of Vancouver’s ecological footprint is solely tied up to meat, fish and dairy — an impact itself greater than that of all of the city’s cars put together. And what is more, feeding animals requires lots of croplands. This bumps up food prices, elevates demand on imports that use up the best soils from nations in the global South, and compromises the affordability of healthy foods for low-income populations.

So, if one is going to opt for an omnivore diet, look for ‘pasture-finished’ animal products and for animals that fed themselves on non-arable lands, and that were raised in farms you personally trust to have treated them well. And eat farm animals sparingly, on feasting days, for instance, and not as daily necessities.

To give us a sense of what this implies, estimations are that for us to eat more sustainably we should have a *weekly* intake of no more than two sausages, one chicken breast, three strips of bacon, one pork chop and one litre of milk — either in liquid form [for cereal or drinks] or in milk products [e.g., three cheese sandwiches].

Certainly this represents a tough cut back for most of us — but it is a much needed one given the fragile state of our crowded planet. For these reasons, *a predominantly vegan diet should remain the alternative of preference.*



# III. Sourcing Your Food: ~~Where~~ Who to Purchase From

Consider these 'food rules' as a guide to enrich your discipleship as an eater. (Credits to Prof. Pollan and to St. Wendell.)

## WHAT KINDS OF FOODS TO LOOK FOR?

> **(Real) food.** Stay away from products that make health or nutritional claims. Real food is always healthy and nutritious. Oh, and don't worry... real food is always 'natural' — 100%.

> **(Whole) food.** Eat whole foods, or at best slightly processed ones. And keep in mind that salt, fat, and sugar (glucose, fructose, corn syrup, etc) are the most effective weapons of the (?food) industry. They relentlessly add them to their products to make us addicted and keeping us coming back for more.

> **(Traditional) food.** Eat what your great-grandma recognized as food. (Yes, that excludes Vitamin A,D&E-fortified Fruit Loops, or 100% organic soy protein bars.)

> **(Pronounceable) food.** Seek foods containing ingredients that are all i) familiar, ii) pronounceable, iii) less than 6 or 7 in number, and that (red flag) do not include iv) glucose-fructose or high-fructose corn syrup.

> **And, especially, eat leaves.** Leaves are rich; grains and seeds are too, but they're high in calories and eating them in excess leads to chronic diseases. Fruits and lots of vegetables should remain our first choice.

> **While also trying non-trationals,** such as wild greens, foraged mushrooms, and Ocean-wise (ie, not overfished) wild fish.

> **Beware of 'green-washing'...** While foods labelled 'local' and 'organic' treat ecosystems with somewhat more respect, do know that these foods can still follow the logic of fossil-fuelled industrial monoculture (and thus continue to displace small-scale agroecological farms).

> **And of overeating (well-treated) animals.** Eat pasture-finished (not corn-fed) animal and dairy products as occasional and minor toppings for a meal, and not as its centerpieces.

> **Oh, and eat meals.** You guessed it: energy bars and snacks do not replace meals.

## WHO TO GET YOUR FOOD FROM?

> **Be peripheral.** Stay out of the middle of the supermarket (where processed foods are sold). In fact, try to stay out these retail giants in the first place. Small and locally-owned shops are usually more promising.

> **Co-produce.** But, in all preference, a) do visit farmers markets, b) join a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) green-box program, c) become a member of a virtuous food-coop, or d) start a responsible-food direct-buying club. In any case, always seek to shake the hands that feed you. Up-close and personal are the way to go forward.

> **And equally, if not more important, advocate.** In fact, advocate lots. Beyond individual acts of eco-perfectionism, we need to support broader citizen coalitions that defend and promote small- and mid-scale agro-ecological farms. They need us! Far beyond our individual choices, the time is ripe for collective support towards bold, collective initiatives. So, make sure to vote with your fork, but also with your ballot. By every means possible, browse for a local chapter of the *Vía Campesina* and support it as a fan, a donor, a volunteer; or even better, by working for them.

> **Make this one of your prayers:** God of life: Living Source, Liberator, and Upholder of all things: as we seek to eat by following a different Way, may you always give bread to those who are hungry for justice and create a hunger for justice among those who have bread.

*Eduardo Sasso is the co-founder of Earthkeepers and the author of A Climate of Desire - a book project reconsidering the original roots of Christianity to more fully enable us to respond to the challenges of climate change.*

*This guide draws on the contributions of several members of the **Grandview Church** community in the unceded traditional territories of the Coast Salish Nations, Vancouver, in the Fraser River watershed.*

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