

Preface

We live in a land of abundance and plenty. Examples of this substantial bounty can be found in various locales, but perhaps no other place highlights our good fortune quite like the sprawling American supermarket. With dozens of aisles, stacked floor to ceiling, loaded with fresh fruits and vegetables, breads and beans, processed and packaged foods, herbs and spices from faraway lands, household products, anything and everything that we may hope to purchase and enjoy, the supermarket has it all. If we approach the grocery store with the eyes of a consumer, we are thrilled by its diversity of offerings. In fact, many consumers have come to expect this abundance, demand it, and are quick to complain to the store's management if the selection available isn't as diverse and lavish as expected.

If we view the market with the eyes of a producer—whether farmer, homesteader, community activist, crafter or artist—we see these aisles of grocery-laden shelves in a very different light. We see the hours of labor spent cultivating, harvesting and processing the crops. We see the daily struggles of the farmer, battling the elements to ensure a fruitful season. We see the processor, crafting raw ingredients into viable commercial products. We see, and are acutely aware of, the sheer amount of resources that are spent, exploited and far too often wasted in a desperate attempt to keep these shelves filled with a myriad of choices, in what too often appears to be an overly aggressive assault on our senses. As if, perhaps, by loading these shelves with dozens of options, countless brands of packages stacked up in neatly organized rows, the store itself is trying to convince us of our wealth. How could we possibly feel insecure or unsure of our standing in the world when we have 24 different brands of breakfast cereal to choose from? But the producer knows better.

Through the eyes of the producer, we see that what appears to be 24 distinct selections to choose from is merely an illusion. Although the choices may have unique packaging with different colors, slogans and mascots, the producer knows that a majority of these products are

just varying ratios of corn and sugar. And in most of these cases, the sugar is likely just high-fructose corn syrup.

While the illusion of choice may appeal to the wide-eyed, eager consumer, those of us with a production-centered state of mind find ourselves quickly disenchanted by this overreaching, almost ridiculous, façade. Farmers, homesteaders, community activists, crafters and artists alike are driven by a philosophy of creation, a true do-it-yourself mindset. We will not, we cannot, just sit back contently and allow others to produce the world's goods for still others to consume, because a system based on unlimited consumption, with limited production, simply cannot sustain itself. And certainly not with the quality that we so desire. When as individuals, or cooperative communities, we commit to a focus on production, creating for ourselves what we can with the resources available to us, this is when we begin to restore balance to a system that has become stretched so thin it can hardly be expected to support us for much longer.

The realities of self-reliance, to any degree, can certainly seem overwhelming, even to the most energetic and inspired among us, but as with any other endeavor worth pursuing, the realization of our goals is well worth the stress, sacrifices and hard work required to reach them. And like any other journey toward self-improvement, the path forward begins with the first step. None of us will see our dreams manifest overnight but only through a continual process of small steps forward, coupled with self-evaluation and continual redirection, always steering ourselves toward our desired destination. Over time, even our destination may change, but each small step forward brings us that much closer to where we wish to be.

My personal journey toward finding a balance between my perceived need to consume and my ability to produce began many years ago. As a practicing herbalist, I was already keenly aware of my consumer-based dependency on goods produced outside of the family homestead. In an attempt to rectify what I saw as an unsustainable imbalance, I committed myself to shifting this perceived need into action. Why purchase what I could create? If I am unable to produce what I believe that I need, do I, in fact, really need it? Or is there an alternative?

To improve upon a system, we must first evaluate its flaws. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't recognize its strengths as well, but this

latter task is generally a far quicker and more comfortable one. Identifying our flaws, be they personal, professional or societal, requires honesty and reflection, and this often leads to realizations that are difficult to embrace. But embrace them we must, if we ever hope to shed this skin of consumerism to emerge as independent, truly sustainable producers.

When faced with these difficult, personally existential questions, I was surprised to find answers in the least likely of all places: the grocery store. I suppose that what I discovered there was not so much direct answers to my questions but the impetus for the train of thoughts that led me to where I now find myself.

As a proponent of local food and a catalyst for positive change, I had long endeavored to scale down and simplify my family's personal food system, growing our own whenever possible and purchasing directly from local producers to supplement our needs. Studying local food systems, I realized that the foundation required by these systems in order to meet the true needs of a community is built upon grains and legumes. These staple crops provide the caloric requirements, and therefore the energy, that a society needs in order to properly function.

The community where I live in central Michigan is fortunate enough to be home to a number of artisan bakers, all skillful and dedicated to their craft. Many of these bakers offer unique breads made from ancient grains such as emmer and einkorn wheats. Some of these artisans source their grains locally, dedicated to the finest flavors that can be achieved only through the freshest ingredients, choosing to mill their own flours for each freshly baked batch of breads.

It was with these artisan bakers in mind, and their devotion to producing the highest quality offerings by milling raw ingredients into viable commercial products with their own hands, that I found myself deep in personal reflection, staring out at the abundance of cooking oils available for purchase at my local supermarket. Just as bread itself has an ancient history, with the first flatbreads being produced many thousands of years ago and leavened breads, those made light and fluffy with yeast, becoming common around 300 BCE, vegetable oils have been a part of human cuisine since antiquity. If producing my own staple crops, such as grains and beans as well as fruits and vegetables, was essential in my quest to avoid needless consumption and