



A Human Future

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Adam Gopnik was born in Philadelphia and grew up in Montreal. He has been writing for *The New Yorker* since 1986. He has written fiction and humour, book reviews, profiles, reporting pieces, and over a hundred stories. He has received several magazine awards. He is also the author of six books including *The Table Comes First: Family, France, and the Meaning of Food* (2011). Adam Gopnik delivered the CBC Massey Lectures in 2011, on the theme of Winter. He lives in New York with his wife Martha and two children.

Food and Community:

An Interview with Adam Gopnik

The shared meal, whether at home or in a restaurant, is one of the great social pleasures of life, and probably one of the great civilizing influences in our world, but it is put at risk by the increasingly hectic pace of North American life. At the same time, as concerns about sustainability and our environment grow, many of us are thinking more about the quality, origins and preparation of the food we eat. We are grateful to Adam Gopnik, gifted writer, thinker and cultural observer, who draws several of these threads together.

– Beth Porter, ed.

Beth Porter: Were there experiences of meals and family growing up in Montreal that led to your sense of the importance of food and the table?

Adam Gopnik: I give my parents all the credit for making meals a central ritual of the day. They weren't religious, but they were culturally as Jewish as people could possibly be. One thing that was central to their lives (and still is, I think) was the idea that the day always led up to dinner. I have six brothers and sisters and we always had lively if not heated conversations and debate over the dinner table. I think that's very Jewish. When I was at McGill, I did a paper about a famous Jewish manuscript called the Darmstadt Haggadah. It's a Passover manuscript, and what's lovely about it is that it just shows people arguing around a table. I thought that was a wonderful image of my own family.

Of course Montreal had an abundance of all kinds of good food and still does. If I had to pick one food memory it would be

the Peking duck my parents used to get in Chinatown for Saturday nights. Then they realized they could

actually make Peking duck. I have a keen mental image of my father drying a Peking duck, a lacquered duck, with my sister's hair

dryer! I also remember the wonderful smoked fish, a family tradition passed down from my grandfather who was a grocer in Philadelphia. I still try to do Sunday-morning smoked fish for my kids.

In *The Table Comes First*, you talk about "the perpetual fragility of the table's concord," in the context of Mrs. Parnell's turning out to be an anti-Semite. Do you have any informal rules for preserving a modicum of concord?

Sure. I don't want to be too sentimental because ours was a real family when I was

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L'Arche Canada
10271 Yonge St., Suite 300
Richmond Hill, ON L4C 3B5

Tel: 800-571-0212

Ed: eporter@larche.ca

www.larche.ca

Charitable # 88990 9719 RR0001



growing up and mine remains a real family, and real families have hurt feelings and people who storm from the table misunderstood, and all the other signs of real emotion. But I do think

there are two general rules: one is courtesy—that one person at a time has the floor; and the younger ones get equal time with the older ones. I don't know if my younger brothers and sisters would all think that we respected that, but we try to here.

Eating meals around a table together needs to be learned. One of the rules my wife and I make is that you can't bring your Smartphone to the table—because the urge is to check it. I get a lot of email and am as guilty of this as the kids. Breaking that addiction for long enough to actually talk to real people is a challenge. I would add that I'm blessed that I have flexibility in my work as a writer. Though I work long hours, it's fairly easy for me and for my wife to cook dinner and get the kids around the table. For millions of people, that is not easy, and I never want to seem to be looking down on people who take their kids to McDonald's or wherever—because they don't have a

The Table Comes First

“Good things do happen when people sit down to dinner. That's itself a faith. Obviously, we don't want to sit down with Nazis, and we rightly condemn those French artists who did. But we do want to sit down to dinner with people before they become Nazis, if it might help keep them from becoming so. It is not wrong to hope that the revelation of a common human touch, a common taste shared and relished, can become itself an argument for humanity.”

From Adam Gopnik, *The Table Comes First: Family, France and the Meaning of Food*, Alfred A Knopf, p. 251

lot of choices. Increasingly, family dinner is becoming a privilege. This is very worrying, and it's particularly true in the United States where even daily leisure is being squeezed out of people's schedules by relentless economic pressure.

In terms of “rules,” at a more cosmic level, I'd say that we benefit from breaking bread with the widest possible variety of people. It's an effort to keep the table open in that way. One of my favourite books is by

Santropol Roulant – Meals on Wheels for Seniors – MONTREAL, QUEBEC

Santropol Roulant's Meals-on-Wheels program brings together two segments of the Montreal population who do not necessarily meet otherwise—youth and seniors—in order to build an intergenerational community. The meals are well-prepared, drawing on produce from Santropol's rooftop garden. Through the delivery of meals to individuals living with a loss of autonomy, young people and elders meet and build relationships. Communal brunches and dinners strengthen friendships. Santropol staff explain, “We get together around food, and talk about what excites us, and the dreams we have for our communities. In the process we exchange ideas and conserve

social memory. These relationships strengthen not just our community, but also an entire future generation.” [Santropol Roulant](#) is a not-for-profit organization.

Santropol Roulant is an example of a social enterprise. Read more on the site of the [Social Enterprise Council of Canada](#).



An intergenerational meal at Santropol Roulant

Friends touring Santropol Roulant's rooftop garden



Photos courtesy of Santropol Roulant



John Crossan and is about Jesus (to change religions briefly, or maybe not if you think of Jesus as essentially a Jewish figure). Crossan says the most radical thing about Jesus was that he kept an open table. He dined with publicans, prostitutes, tax collectors, and non-Jews, and though that seems to us just admirable now, what Crossan emphasizes is that in Jesus' time it was unimaginably radical. In any peasant society, who you sit down with is so bound by taboos and rules that

sharing food with somebody from outside your circle is almost unimaginable. All else about Christianity aside, that remains a wonderful moral exemplar.

You say you share the values of the locovores, but not the pieties.

What I meant is that whether or not we're going to save our lives and the planet by eating locally seems to me a very unsettled question. I was reading in *The New York Times* that a new study suggests even organic food, let alone local food, is not necessarily healthier.

Ignatius Farm: Community Shared Agriculture and much more – GUELPH, ONTARIO



Photos courtesy of Ignatius Jesuit Centre

The visionary use of Ignatius Farm feeds people while farming using ecologically sustainable practices. The farm facilitates a spiritual connection to the land, and is the foundation of ecological initiatives and community projects.

Ignatius Farm is certified organic and consists of 260 acres of Class 1 and 2 agricultural land in addition to 340 acres of woods, wetland, and recreational land. The Farm has several dimensions. Its community garden plots enable over 125 families to grow their own food. The Farm supports biogeographical research by Land Saga, and research on organic pest management of bees by the Ontario Beekeepers Association. High school groups visit to learn about ecology, and an organic farm internship program trains young people in organic methods of food production. The largest portion of the farmland is devoted to a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm. In their share, Ignatius Farm CSA members receive many varieties of vegetables (over 60 vegetables are grown) and apples.

The [Ignatius Farm website](#) explains that it is an advocate of the 100-mile diet, and adds: "Although not entirely feasible, an innate preference by consumers for locally grown food would result in numerous benefits to our community, the local economy and the family farm."



Top: Ignatius CSA Farm intern with harvested pumpkins, 2011.

Left: Jim Profit, SJ, is the past director of the Ignatius Jesuit Centre and presently the Co-ordinator of the Ecology Project. He has academic training in agriculture, rural sociology and theology.

Community Shared Agriculture

CSA is an alternative food-access and distribution method where the customer is linked directly to the farm and farmer. Customers (CSA members) purchase "shares" in the harvest, paying at the beginning of the season and receiving a portion of the harvest over the course of the season. Thus they share in the risk and bounty of food production.



Certainly, there are arresting arguments made in good faith that we are better off eating lamb shipped to us from New Zealand where lamb grows easily, than eating lamb raised a hundred miles away where lamb is raised with difficulty.

Increasingly, family dinner is becoming a privilege. This is very worrying....

But regardless of how you feel about those questions, the emphasis on putting a face on your food is positive—knowing that chickens are living things slaughtered for your dinner.

When we are fully conscious of where our food comes from, we are more enlightened human beings. In the spiritual life, whether you are attached to a faith or not, being mindful and being in a state of grace are deeply connected. My daughter Olivia and I recently went to a wonderful restaurant in Maine called *Primo*. It's attached to a garden, a hen-house and a pig sty, so there's no mistaking for anyone who eats there, where

your food comes from. If you are mindful about this, you are in a better state of grace for eating it.

Local food tastes better too?

I think so, but even if it doesn't (and in the agri-world we live in now, sometimes the food I bring home from the farmer's market tastes odd compared to the homogenized tastes of agri-industrial food), it tastes distinct, real; and I think that that is valuable in itself. Also, eating local food creates several circles of community—people who sell or shop at the green market, people proud to be eating local carrots.

You open *The Table Comes First* with the story of the French resistance fighter, hours before he is to be executed by the Nazis, writing home about his memory of family meals. Why open with that story?

I recognized that it was a somewhat risky place to begin because it's a grim story at the beginning of a book that I hope gives pleasure and is largely fun. But more than any document I knew, that letter asked us to

Jean Vanier on the Centrality of Meals in L'Arche

- Meals are daily celebrations where we meet each other around the same table to be nourished and share our joy. They are a particular delight for the body and the senses. So we shouldn't bolt our food under the pretext of having more important or more spiritual things to do than sit at table...
- Too many people come to a meal simply as consumers. They don't realize the role which meals can play in the building of community.
- A good meal takes careful preparation—from drawing up the menu, to buying the food, to cooking it, to setting the table and presenting the meal attractively. Everything has to be thought of: the wine, the flowers, who sits next to whom, the way conversations can be encouraged...
- Eating well doesn't mean eating expensively. It's a question of creativity, of culinary skill, especially of sauces—think of spaghetti without a sauce!



Dinner in a L'Arche household

- Self-service is the worst of inventions. There we are, all with our own tray, our own little wine bottle, our own sachets of sugar, salt and pepper. It's like spending every meal on an airplane.

Excerpts from Vanier's classic *Community and Growth*, NY: Paulist, rev. 2003



think hard about what food means. This guy was clearly not thinking about going to a trendy restaurant nor about improving the planet by eating organically. He was saying something much deeper and more humane about the role that food plays, that the table plays, in making our

lives meaningful. I thought that this story could raise the stakes of the book, could make it plain that the philosophy and the very chewy bits of the book were essential because they were about something so important that it would be the last thought in the mind of a heroic figure in tragic times. ■

TapRoot Farms – PORT WILLIAMS, NOVA SCOTIA

TapRoot Farms is a community-minded family CSA farm. It offers CSA memberships and also opportunities to contribute Food Shares for families in need. The Farm has a link with the nearby L'Arche Homefires community in Wolfville. Twice a week a small group from the L'Arche community works on the farm, mainly helping to pack the CSA boxes. In exchange, once a month the farm gives L'Arche a cornucopia of fruit and veggies. These are turned into a delicious local meal that is shared at the L'Arche monthly community night. The TapRoot website offers an informative video on CSA farming.



Patricia, Josh, and family started TapRoot Farms.

Leaf & Lyre – A New Approach to Urban Farming – CALGARY, ALBERTA

In 2010, Rod Olson and Chad Kile of Calgary founded Leaf & Lyre Urban Farms, a small for-profit enterprise and the city's first SPIN farm. (First developed in Saskatoon, SPIN is an acronym for Small Plot INTensive farming, an approach in which people with houses in the inner city lend a portion of their yard for farming.) Leaf & Lyre now has 25 plots, totalling the half acre that fulfills their business plan. They grow greens, since these are best suited to the Calgary climate. The business has three income streams—CSA shares, and sales to local restaurants and at a farmers' market. Those who lend their land range from seniors to young families. They receive a portion of the produce, their land benefits from being turned into richly fertile soil and they have the opportunity, if they wish, to learn sustainable gardening practices. The lenders are often people who want a closer connection to their community. Beyond their business, Kile is pursuing a doctorate in religious studies and Olson does youth work and sings in the Philharmonic Orchestra Chorus.

Leaf & Lyre website. Read more in the *City Palate*, July-August 2012, p. 24.



Rod and Chad in a SPIN Plot

For Your Information

More by Adam Gopnik

- Adam Gopnik's 2011 CBC Massey Lectures on "Winter" (Listen to the first lecture.)
- Gopnik's 2011 CBC Massey Lectures are published in the book *Winter: Five Windows on the Season*, Toronto: House of Anansi Press.
- Other books by Adam Gopnik:
 - *Paris to the Moon* (2000)
 - *Through the Children's Gate: A Home in New York* (2006)
 - *Angels and Ages: A Short Book about Darwin, Lincoln, and Modern Life* (2009)
 - *The Table Comes First: Family, France, and the Meaning of Food* (2011)
- Children's books:
 - *The King in the Window* (2005)
 - *The Steps Across the Water* (2010)
- One of Gopnik's many thought-provoking *New Yorker* essays on social themes: "The Caging Of America: Why do we lock up so many people?" (January 30, 2012)
- Adam Gopnik speaking about Darwin (short video). Gopnik points out that for Darwin, "the key human attribute is sympathy..."

Related to Adam Gopnik's interview

- John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, Harper Collins, 1993.
- Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*, Hyperion, 2006.

Sustainable local food production

- Canadian Organic Farmers
- Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada: Research from provinces across Canada (a bilingual site)
- On CSAs in Canada
- Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario
- Acorn provides links to organic farms across the four Atlantic provinces
- Community Supported Agriculture in Alberta

Some urban examples

- UBC Centre for Sustainable Food Production
- Lufa Farms in Montreal
- Vertical urban garden in Vancouver

Connecting food and community

- L'Arche Tova Café, opened by L'Arche Winnipeg earlier this year, serves appealing, affordable food to friends and local business people in a welcoming atmosphere.



L'Arche Tova Café

www.larche.ca/en/inspiration



The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 137 communities of L'Arche on six continents, 29 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with intellectual disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.

A Human Future is offered as a contribution to the Canadian conversation about values and the fostering of a society where everyone belongs and can make a contribution.