



ILLUSTRATION BY LINDA BLECK

# Three Years Without Groceries

By Bill Robichaud

I am blessed to live in the Driftless Area west of Madison. There, I have a large vegetable garden and do a fair bit of foraging, hunting and fishing. In January 2020, with the seasons of food-gathering and preservation mostly behind me (and COVID-19 still ahead), I found myself thinking about preparing my next meal. As I mentally scanned the contents of my canning shelves and freezer, I found myself idly wondering: How long could I go without grocery shopping? What if I tried to sustain myself only with what I had on hand, or could grow, or find? On a whim, I decided to find out.

The global lockdown was still a few months away, and so my sabbatical from grocery stores wasn't driven by necessity. Nor was it a premeditated, ideological plunge into self-sufficiency. It was brought on by a simple spark of curiosity. I'll note that the middle of a Wisconsin winter—with no advance preparation, no last, big shopping trip to Woodman's or Willy Street Co-op to stock up on basics—isn't a particularly propitious starting point for such an experiment. But more than three years later, somewhat to my surprise, I'm still at it. How?

For one, I was amazed at how long it took to eat through the contents of my cupboards—all that forgotten rice and pasta! Some basics such as flour continue to fall, manna-like, into my larder's lap, through barter or in the wake of visits and meals prepared by houseguests, such as my daughter. (So, to be fair, *someone* is doing some grocery shopping, even if it isn't me). Still, I've lived mainly on gifts of the Driftless land—herbs, fruit and vegetables from my gardens; eggs from my hens; and treasures from the woods and waters beyond the yard: maple syrup, venison, mushrooms (morels!), watercress and trout.

I get dairy (from which I make butter) from a neighbor whose cows I know, and I sometimes pick up bread from my almost-neighbor, Cress Spring Bakery, near Blue Mounds. Through loved ones in Italy and Switzerland, I have access to olive oil (produced by my nephew) and chocolate. I have gone to stores to buy coffee beans, tea and wine, sugar to make kombucha, salt and on occasion some spices and popping corn. But with the exception of trips made to pad a couple of Thanksgiving dinners I hosted, I haven't grocery-shopped to prepare a meal in more than three years.

Feeding myself has been easier, and has lasted longer,

developed along the way. Here in my quiet corner of Iowa County, I'm blessed to live along a road with some wonderful neighbors who also produce some of their own food. My road has become something of a 2-mile version of China's ancient Silk Road trade route: Judy and Allen give me starter tomato plants in exchange for maple syrup; from Greg and Linda I receive a freshly cut Christmas tree in exchange for eggs (although not quite a grocery product, in my book a Christmas tree is an essential perishable). One of my best trades has been with Mary and Dave: I give them produce from my gardens and they turn it into sublime quiches, soups and pesto, then send a cut of the output back to me.

My buddy Greg has helped me with pickling, and in payment he took some jars home. He also drops off venison sausage and apple butter, and I give him eggs and home-made kimchi in return. With my friends Willi and Kitas at Bleu Mont Dairy, I swap my birch syrup for some of their award-winning cheese.

One thing I've struggled with is the language to describe this journey. I'm not, in fact, "feeding myself" or "producing my own food" or "living self-sufficiently." Quite the

## There is also the emotional nourishment that comes from putting one's hands in the dirt, or legs in the flow of a trout stream.

than I expected. It is, after all, hard-wired into millennia of human DNA. Billions of humans still mostly feed themselves (although the trend is shifting; in 2007, the global number of urban dwellers surpassed rural residents for the first time in history). A grocery store isn't really a source, it's just a middleman, and I've simply brought myself closer to the source. For me, grocery shopping turned out to be more habit than necessity, and it's a habit I've simply dropped, for the time being.

It feels good to move through the day disengaged from the industrial food system, and with a markedly reduced ecological footprint. Granted, I have advantages where I live, mainly due to my available space and proximity to abundant nature. But feeding ourselves is something any of us can do more of by seeking opportunities to buy local produce, or even just putting a pot of herbs on the windowsill.

Perhaps paradoxically, as the experiment unfolds, I've found abundance rather than deprivation. There's no material here for another Jon Krakauer book on misadventured starvation. My health, in fact, is better—in part because I'm insulated from the temptation of snacks and other processed foods that line the grocery store aisles. There is also the emotional nourishment that comes from putting one's hands in the dirt, or legs in the flow of a trout stream.

Granted, the time and energy required to feed oneself can be significant—but the spiritual benefits more than compensate. These include the relationships that have deepened or

opposite. In fact, I've become *more* aware of my dependence and of the myth of self-reliance. Even a hermit in the Alaskan bush doesn't eat his own fingers—he is utterly dependent on gifts from the Earth. As I am—on the sun, the soil, my hens, the wild deer and trout, and the generosity of my bartering neighbors.

Gratitude, then, has been a significant part of the equation these past three years. In contrast, a sure way to dive into the illusion of separateness and self-reliance is to roll a grocery cart by yourself through the aisles of a warehouse food store.

Some months into my grocery sabbatical, my anemic harvest of garlic ran out, and Willi gave me some of his. When I asked what I could give him in trade this time, he replied, with a smile, "friendship."

Willi's beautifully succinct answer captures well how my adventure in sourcing my own food has manifested primarily as deeper connections—with myself, with the land on which I live, and with other people. Particularly during the thin time of isolation wrought by the pandemic, such connections—and my awareness of them—have been a most fortuitous and abundant harvest.

**Bill Robichaud** is a writer, an award-winning conservation biologist and co-founder of the Saola Foundation for Annamite Mountains Conservation. He writes about living from the Driftless land at [birdinthebush.net](http://birdinthebush.net).

*Would you like us to publish your essay? Submit your Wisconsin-centric piece for consideration here: [madisonmagazine.com/essays](http://madisonmagazine.com/essays).*