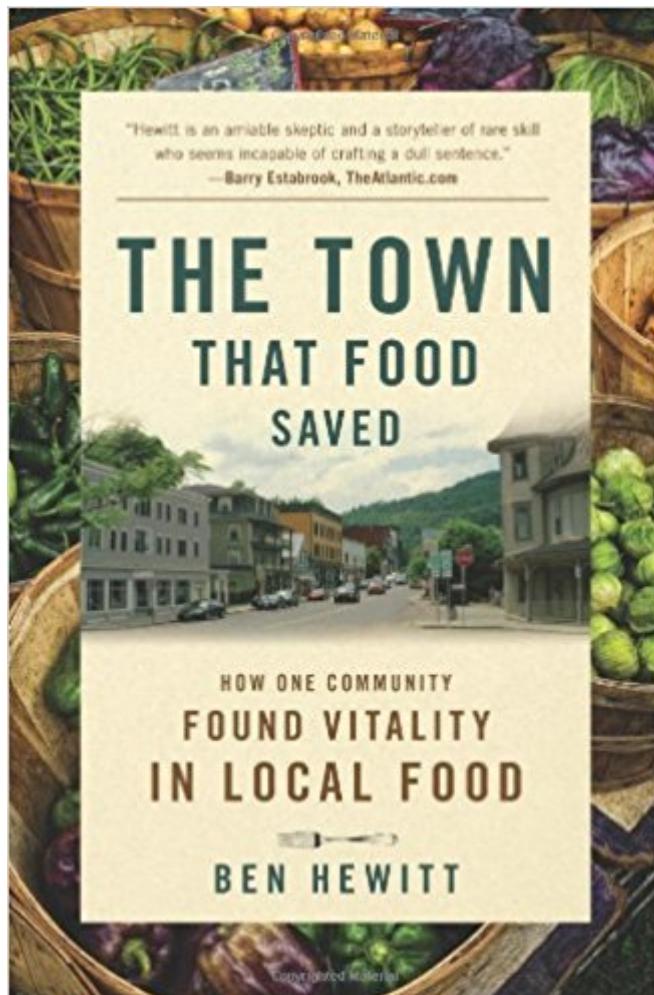


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The Town That Food Saved: How One Community Found Vitality In Local Food



Synopsis

Over the past few years, Hardwick, Vermont, a typical hardscrabble farming community of 3,000 residents, has jump-started its economy and redefined its self-image through a local, self-sustaining food system unlike anything else in America. Even as the recent financial downturn threatens to cripple small businesses and privately owned farms, a stunning number of food-based businesses have grown in the region. The Town That Food Saved is rich with appealing, colorful characters, from the optimistic upstarts creating a new agricultural model to the long-established farmers wary of the rapid change in the region. Hewitt, a journalist and Vermonter, delves deeply into the repercussions of this groundbreaking approach to growing food, both its astounding successes and potential limitations. The captivating story of an unassuming community and its extraordinary determination to build a vibrant local food system, The Town That Food Saved is grounded in ideas that will revolutionize the way we eat and, quite possibly, the way we live.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Based on the description of this book, I kind of assumed that author Ben Hewitt was a local food zealot deeply involved in whatever it is that's going on in the "town" of the title, and that it would therefore be a self-congratulatory memoir, more than a careful look at anything. I was wrong. While Hewitt is a proponent of local food and a (very) small-scale subsistence farmer living just a few miles from Hardwick, Vermont, this book is thoughtful, well-researched, and almost stunningly well-written. I read it in less than 24 hours, captivated not quite as much by the story as by the writing. It's delightful, and worth reading for that reason alone. That said, the story is pretty

captivating, too, but it's a blueprint of how to save a town with food in the same way that John McPhee's "Oranges" is about how to grow oranges. (The writing, btw, reminded me a bit of McPhee.) This is an insightful look into a town and the folks who populate it -- some "agripreneurs", some traditional famers, some true radicals, some completely indifferent. It seeks less to see Hardwick as emblematic of what should be done everywhere than it does to tease out some of the complications with local food that many of its advocates gloss over. Another reviewer slams this book as being a hippie socialist manifesto. I couldn't disagree more. Hewitt explores that side of the local food movement, but ultimately rejects it, coming out in favor of a very capitalistic view of the whole thing. Sure, this whole thing is about evaluating costs other than those that appear on this year's balance sheet, but it's certainly not about doing away with a market-based system. I'm tempted to wonder if that reviewer actually read the book.

I can't start planting seeds in the veggie garden for at least another month up in Northern New Hampshire and so to keep me sane until the digging begins I turned to the new book by author Ben Hewitt, "The Town that Food Saved: How One Community Found Vitality in Local Food." The main thesis of this book is: Don't Take Food for Granted. Oh, and... Don't Take Your Neighbors for Granted Either. If you care about food or about eating in the years to come: read this book. I read it as if I was gobbling up the first greens of the spring garden: total joy that the book, the people in the book, the work and ideas in the book, are alive. Hewitt documents, discusses, and dissects how the town and the towns that surround Hardwick, Vermont are reinventing the circle of food. You know, the circle that has happened since the beginning of time where we grow food, eat food, compost food and grow more food from the remains of the old food--all in our own backyard. I admit, before I read this book I was already well versed in the critical reasons why this country needs to change how we grow, deliver, eat, and engage in the food system (if you don't know already, read the book and find out.) So Hewitt didn't need to convince me, and he isn't really setting out to convince you either. If you think broccoli grows at the supermarket and you are content to think that, this book isn't for you. But if you suspect something is wrong with the whole system where food grown under corporate foot is shipped thousands of miles to feed your family, but you can't really envision another workable system or you can't imagine a workable transition from one system to another--well then, this book is for you. As much as this book is about food, it is about community.

Hewitt's book tells us of a small town (and surrounding areas) which was prosperous from the local granite industry many decades ago, but has since fallen into what one might call substanience-level

farming in the post-war era. But recently, a spate of entrepreneurs has created a new, interactive business model - a seed growing company, an artisan cheesemaker, various people growing organic and heirloom produce, a local co-op, and even something of a high cuisine restaurant using foodstuffs from local suppliers. The synergy between these concerns makes this new business model viable, despite mistrust and dismay from some locals . . . and despite the fact that many locals cannot afford many of these products themselves. Hewitt's a good writer, but the book is a little short of personality, and it fails to live up to its grandiose title or many of the ideas presented early on. There's no real proof that food has "saved" this town. It's brought some jobs into the area and helped spur many community activities, but most of the benefits from those active in this "movement" have not yet been fully reaped. Some of the most promising concerns, such as the seed company and the cheese producers, are heavily in debt and their success is not fully guaranteed. Most of the town still earns very low pay for the work they do, and suffer the many anxieties of small-town produce and dairy farmers without any huge improvement in their lifestyles. And because many of these promising start-ups are geared towards "export" to big cities where there is a concentration of people who can afford (say) \$20 a pound cheese, using this town as a model for local food security - something Hewitt touts - is exaggerated at best. That aside, there is room for thought in the book.

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