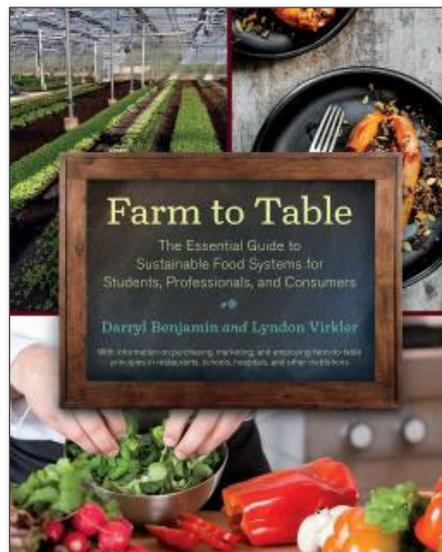


Resource guide sets the table for change

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Review of *Farm to Table: The Essential Guide to Sustainable Food Systems for Students, Professionals, and Consumers*, by Darryl Benjamin and Lyndon Virkler. (2016). Published by Chelsea Green Publishing. Available as hardcover; 272 pages. Publisher's website: <http://www.chelseagreen.com/farm-to-table>



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Farm to Table: The Essential Guide to Sustainable Food Systems for Students, Professionals, and Consumers by Darryl Benjamin, sustainable food system educator and activist, and chef Lyndon Virkler, dean of the New England Culinary Institute, is a beautifully produced book that has much to offer the farm-to-table novice. The authors draw

on their substantial educational experience (Virkler has an MS in adult and higher education and Benjamin has taught at over a dozen northeastern institutions) and background in writing and literature to present readers with an overview of the evolving terminology, tactics, and organizations contributing to the farm-to-table movement.

The text is divided into two sections, Farm and Table, and relies on short, subject-focused sections supported by colorful visual and verbal illustrations to make the book read much like a blog. This makes it easy to enjoy in an intermittent “pick-up-and-put-down” manner, but less satisfying as a straight-through read. Even though it does not develop themes or use terms other than “farm-to-table” to unify the book, the authors do summarize the origins of the farm-to-table movement. The

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long-time alternative agriculture community will be perfectly comfortable with the goals of the farm-to-table farm philosophy, which strives to achieve the goals of providing a good living to farmers while both mimicking nature to provide a balance of resources and preserving soil and adjacent landscapes for future generations. Consumer advocates and food-system activists will appreciate the telling of how the movement evolved from one focused on the producer and means of production, to one that addresses societal goals through food systems and food regimes.

The first section (“Farm”) nicely summarizes the problems of (chapters 1 and 2), and solutions to (chapters 3 to 5) industrial agriculture, but unfortunately does not provide evidence to support the authors’ complaints about the environmental and human costs of agriculture. The number of concepts presented in short sections often results in superficial coverage; for instance, they note that declining shares of the food dollar have been returned to farmers since the 1990s, but do not explain the forces driving this (p. 28). Still, patient readers will come to understand the inter-related issues (e.g., the plight of farmers) and come away with an understanding of farm-to-table goals and critiques of the corporate power—supported by industrialization and consolidation—that favors profits and exploits the environment, people, and resources.

Readers will come away from the first section with some understanding of the reasons that sustainable agriculture advocates connect their success to diversity in plants, seeds, and livestock and desire changes in the crops and livestock produced, methods of production and distribution, and scale of agriculture. Readers will also begin to understand why a central thesis of the movement is that systems that benefit small-scale producers will benefit society at large. Along with this overview, the authors provide an up-to-date summary of actors working to maintain crop diversity and seed and breed access, and explain how ownership, market concentration, and laws are evolving to shape our food system. Readers will be glad to be pointed toward longstanding contributors to the movement (e.g., Seed Savers Exchange) and learn about important efforts (e.g., the Open Source

Seed Initiative). Tactics like taking the safe seed pledge to share varieties for others’ use, increasing demand for diversity and taste, and sharing farmer knowledge are presented as ways to counter the consolidation of the industry and to protect seeds and breeds and support local food systems.

Part one sets the table for the second part of the book (“Table”), which covers the farm-to-table, farm-to-restaurant, farm-to-school, and farm-to-institution movements with chapters packed with up-to-date information and links to resources. Tactics and examples provided in the second section are likely to inspire activists interested in achieving farm-to-table goals discussed in the context of market scale.

This practical information is probably the most important contribution the book makes, as it provides resources and complements them with rich examples tailored for various audiences. Farmers who market directly are likely to focus on the sections written for them, as will institutional buyers and consumers, while those just getting started in local food purchasing efforts at institutions will benefit from the distinctions made about scale.

Overall, the book will serve as a primer for the reader who was not already familiar with the farm-to-table movement by providing a brief review of the sustainable agricultural critique as it has evolved in the U.S., but it may not be in-depth enough for academics. The documentation provided will probably not convince a skeptic of the full merit of the issues touched upon. I certainly had my gripes with the text and found gaps in coverage. For instance, readers will need to explore other resources to discover why cheap food is thought to be so costly and how the food system might simultaneously contribute to obesity and food insecurity—but the book will likely whet their appetite to do so. This resource guide will be most useful to adult learners who can follow up on assertions that, for example, small farms are more likely to achieve balance than large ones, or the intriguing statement that “for farms in the future to be sustainable, farm size should correspond to market size” (p. 88). The interested reader need only to pursue the work of John Ikerd, cited in association with both claims, and will be glad they did.

Still, subject matter experts are likely to find the book frustrating because it often glosses over or groups topics in ways that could confuse readers or obscure important nuances. For example, I thought it was misleading to juxtapose a section on nutrient-dense agriculture, which includes an agglomeration of topics and assertions that vary in terms of their scientific legitimacy, with integrated pest management, which is well-developed and widely accepted. But if domain experts resist letting perfection get in the way of the good, they should also like the book. Once I accepted that the authors were explaining the rationale driving the farm-to-table movement, and not trying to support the critique with copious amounts of evidence, I could appreciate the important point they seek to make: that the dominant farming system may not satisfy the human soul. I also enjoyed the use of Maslow's theories of human motivation and the hierarchy of needs (physiological, safety, love and belonging, and esteem) to evaluate the performance of industrial agriculture.

While the text is domestic in focus and centered in the Northeast—specifically Vermont—it

frequently refers to the global food system. It uses, for example, attempts to reverse the loss of biological heritage by the Ifugao people in the Philippines to illustrate how a return to more traditional production systems could sustain the ecology and economy of a once-threatened UNESCO site. While readers are left to translate the domestic application, it does offer a beautiful case example, and the regional emphasis of the book embodies the authors' bioregional tenets. Teachers in particular should appreciate their summary of seminal or classic case examples and coverage of major players contributing to the discussion fueling the farm-to-table movement. By contextualizing classic cases or examples of which the broader public is likely to have heard—like the Monsanto vs. Schmeiser lawsuit, Growing Power, or Michelle Obama's White House garden—and accompanying them with local, often colorful examples, they keep the reader's interest. In the end, these authors have curated an amazing smorgasbord of ideas and organizations and illustrated associated concepts with rich examples drawn from around the globe. 