
CURT MEINE

My first stop this morning is the Tower Rock Farmstead Bakery, where Alma and her crew grow and mill a variety of grains and sell flour, bread, and other baked goods. Their kitchen and shop are squeezed between the house and barn on the farm that has been in the family since the 1870s. They ask their customers to wear masks and to enter one at a time.

My second stop is Straka Meats, a third-generation butcher shop and processor that features locally raised meat. Foot traffic is light at the moment. I enter cautiously, keep my distance, and purchase a box of a dozen chicken breasts.

My third stop is the Cedar Grove Cheese factory. They are especially known for their organic cheese curds, their use of growth-hormone-free milk, and their devotion to ecologically responsible farming. I especially like their baby swiss and mozzarella. They have closed their retail space but offer curbside pickup.

My fourth stop is Enos Farms. When the coronavirus closed everything down, my friends Erin and Jeremy saw their catering business evaporate overnight. They quickly converted themselves into an online store, selling their own prepared foods and offering other items from their supplier farms. I spot my order in a bag on a table under a tent. We catch up at a social distance.

My last stop is the Cates Family Farm. Just a couple years ago Eric and Kiley took over the farm from Eric's parent's Dick and Kim. Their grass-fed Angus and Jersey cattle are grazed with such care that their stretch of Lowery Creek has recently been upgraded to a Class 1 trout stream. Eric has directed me to pick up my order from a walk-in cooler in the barn. No need to interact directly. But Eric comes walking down the gravel driveway to say hello and give me an update on the imminent birth of their second child.

I could keep going, but it's time to head home and shelter on. And I have work to do; I have been a little late getting my own garden going this spring. It is a comfort to know that, even if my modest production falters, I have these neighbors. All my stops today are within twenty miles of my home. I still go to the grocery store in town, which has done an admirable job of making it as safe as possible to shop there. But I have also made a conscious choice, since the pandemic shadow overcame us, to support local farmers and food processors in my corner of rural South Central Wisconsin, even more than before. I give them my dollars and receive their products. But just as important, we exchange encouragement amid vast uncertainty.

The pandemic has brought into precise focus the vulnerabilities in our globalized, industrial food system. Everyone, all across the rural-to-urban continuum, has had to think anew about the sources and supply chains and stores that provide our daily bread—and vegetables and milk, meat, and potatoes. And the cries for justice, emanating from tragedy in the neighborhoods of Minneapolis, extending to the far ends of the earth, remind us that food justice and food sovereignty are essential parts, too, of the changes we must make. Our interconnected crises call us to come together, to bring health and wholeness to all our landscapes and waterways and communities—to *ourselves*.

My grocery run, though limited and local, strengthens connections between people and land that have been fading and fraying for decades. It nurtures, however inconspicuously, profound seeds of social change. Even under the darkest conditions, hope grows in all our gardens and pastures, vegetable plots and farmers markets, shops and kitchens. This hope is delicious.

Curt Meine is a conservation biologist, environmental historian, and writer based in Sauk County. He serves as senior fellow with the Aldo Leopold Foundation and the Center for Humans and Nature; as research associate with the International Crane Foundation; and as adjunct associate professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.