a cornucopia of sweets, including banana pudding, chess pie, red velvet cake, chocolate pie, fudge pie, chocolate mousse, and so on.

I should mention that reservations are vital at Miller's. The crowds can swell to rock-arena proportions, and if you fail to make a reservation you'll find yourself pacing the dusty sidewalks outside with complete strangers, for which you will have only yourself to blame.

Not long after our Miller's feast Dan was attacked by a Macedonian sheepdog in the employ of our kind bounders, the Dixon family. The beast was called "Mack," and according to the Dixon's bloodline can be traced to an ancient warrior class of canines owned by Alexander the Great, so he is predictably fierce and noble. The Dixon, Dan, and I were having cocktails on the patio when Mack approached Dan, gave his crocheted a snout, and instantly sensed something was amiss. A terrifying, primordial wall echoed from deep within that hellhound, and he leapt onto Dan like lightning, all fangs and burying root. It was a sight to behold, and the rest of us took it in with much granularity. Toasting his drink in the air, Dan screamed like a schoolgirl and turned to run, which is when Mack caught him on the arm with his beer-trap jaws. Luckily, Seher Dixon is a retired physician and was able to staunch the bleeding. Still, after much griping from Dan, we were obliged to leave the following morning.

So ended our culinary odyssey through the great state of Pennsylvania. I'd soon return to the northeast Babylon of New York City and Dan to his bootlegger's camp on the toxic banks of Lake Erie. We were both nearly ten pounds heavier. For the first time in my life I crooked my glasses. Though I'd failed miserably on the tackle, the food was all right (with the notable exception of my Grimace glass—I had surprisingly few regrets). Indeed, I felt incredibly grateful to have eaten so well and so abundantly in such a short time.

On our last night, as the crickets chirped outside and Dan, braving across the moon, slept the sleep of the recently numb, I lay awake for a long time thinking of the past week. Epicurus wrote that we should look for someone to eat and drink with before looking for something to eat and drink. I suppose there's some truth in that.

The village of Ithaca, New York, doesn't look much like a crucible of American agriculture. Home to the two-hundred-year-old Bucknell Mills buckwheat grinding plant ("Bucknell is Best," a row of peeling yellow grain silos informs visitors crossing a bridge to Main Street) and marked only occasionally by the defensive nostalgia of America's spurned rural heartland—Victoria, flag hanging gentry on sagging porches—the town, which disciplines the north shore of one of New York's Finger Lakes, mostly appears to be abandoning farming altogether. Buried in one four-story wall of the Bucknell mill is a twenty-eight-foot-high iron pancake griddle, black, flat, and taller than the bookcase across the street. A sign painted below explains, "This is the original griddle used to make the WORLD RECORD PANCAKE" at the annual Buckwell Harvest Festival—twenty-eight feet and one inch in diameter. But that was in 1987.

When I visited the village one autumn day in 2006, a National 4-H Week banner that was strung across Main Street looked forlorn and out of place. A new video game hall was opening below it. The sheets displayed behind the plate glass window at Long's Office Supplies carrieduserinfo titles such as Understanding Iraq and Take This Job and Ship It. How Corporate Greed and Brain Dead Politics Are
Selling Out America. Farmers talked to complained of having to raise illegal immigrants from Mexico to harvest their crops—local youths were detectives in the fields. When I walked into floyd’s Pub my first night in the village—down Main Street from the Brickell mill—I saw where the young people had gone. Students from nearby Finger Lakes Community College were packed inside, squeezing their way to the bar and filling from table to table with the exuberance of teenagers eager to break the bonds of rural life. "She keeps pushing and forgetting what she did," one girl said to another above the din. A boy in a back-to-front baseball cap and precociously saggy jeans approached two girls beneath an inflatable banner of Guinness beer suspended from the ceiling. "Are you just walking around and eating?" one of the girls asked, reaching out to touch the boy's shirt. "Yeah," he said. "It's good times. Good times." The rain, which had been gentle when I drove into the village, intensified, and a few of the students ran out into it, standing in the street with their arms extended, sweatshirts spotting, then soaking with water. And yet, though only 1.7 percent of Penn Yan’s 5,429 residents marked “farming, fishing and forestry” as their occupation in the most recent census, farming is on the rise here. And not just any farming. The farmers of Penn Yan—soldiers, teachers, housewives, men and women who actually send their kids to events like National 4-H Week—are quietly living out what may be the last, best hope for America’s tortured relationship with its own food. Dotted throughout the rolling hills and winding, treelined valleys of Wyoming County are about fifteen organic farms, many scattered across the hundreds of acres and producing sizable yields of commodity crops—corn, wheat, soy, and hay—more often associated with the Midwest and Great Plains. Most of those crops are processed at Lakeview Organic Grain, a mill started by a Peres Yan farming couple in 2001, which has become the hub of a functioning, medium-scale agricultural economy that manages to balance the sustainable imperatives of organic farming with the relentless pressures of America’s capitalist food system. Lakeview, New York’s only entirely organic grain mill, grinds more than two hundred tons of grain per week and sells it to organic dairies and livestock farms in New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Its operations are big, but too big. Each winter, when fields lie cold and fallow, Klaus and Mary-Howell Martens, who own Lakeview and farm fourteen hundred organic acres of their own, convene about one hundred organic farmers in the nearby city of Geneva for monthly meetings to swap expertise, introduce newcomers to organic regulations, and foster what has become a luxury on most of America’s mechanized, corporate, and subsidy-driven farms—community. Much has been written recently about the supreme difficulty of reforming the American diet. Not just experts such as Eric Schlosser’s Fast Food Nation, but more nuanced studies by writers as varied as New York University nutrition professor Marion Nestle and Mankato, Minn., journalist Michael Pollan, both of whom detail the seemingly interminable compromises built into every stage of the process by which America grows, buys, and eats its food. Pollan’s recent The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals even calls organic farming, that supposedly wholesome and counter-cultural alternative to America’s rural apocalypse, as agriglobalism as usual, with its pet neoskeptic Gene Kohn, founder of the Canaillan Penn organic fruit company, who sold out to General Mills and now drives a Lexus with license plates reading "ORGANIC."

In Penn Yan, however, the picture is a little different—and a little more hopeful. None of the farmers I met there shared a Lexus. They were too busy planting a chicken in the middle way between what Harvard professor Steven Shapin, writing last year in The New Yorker, called the “counterculture” of organic farming’s origins and the “bean-counter culture” of its present-day incarnation. That middle way is nothing complicated as a sharing back of America’s agricultural clock to a time twenty years ago when most American farms had adopted simple mechanization but not the engineered fertilizers, genetically modified seeds, and chemical pesticides that characterize modern agriglobalism—nor to mention flaws-free, jet transport across the country. In line with federal surveys showing that medium-sized farms are, in fact, more efficient than larger industrial counterparts, Mary-Howell Martens, speaking from behind the dusty counter of Lakeview Organic Grain, told me that Peres Yan’s agricultural experiment has, so far, succeeded brilliantly. Before local farmers went organic about a decade ago, Penn Yan was “a town with a bombastic center,” she said."

More to the point, farmer Larry Lewis, a friend of the Martens with whom I spent the better part of a day touring his roughly six hundred acres of organic corn, soy, wheat, and hay across organic red kidney beans, Lewis told me he was "poundmy head against the wall" as a conventional farmer—this from a man with farming "in my blood" who told me he began baling hay on his grandfather’s dying the day he was old enough to grasp a pitchfork. The mounting costs of chemical fertilizers, clothes seeking of pesticides, searching commodities markets, Cargill and other agribusiness brokers abandoning smaller, less efficient farms—Lewis said the pressures facing most American farmers threatened to drive him from his calling.

Then their first crop of corn came up. Organic produce, Lewis discovered, can sell for more than twice its conventional equivalent—and for Lewis, the organic prices and international competition, remain stable. The soil science Lewis had learned in college college roasting back as he gauged nutrient levels and contended natural acidity adjustments. The competitiveness of conventional farming—farmers hungry for land keeping an acquisition eye on struggling neighbors—expounded, replaced by the Martens and their family-run mill. A life radicalized by classic growth would meet "a life led by land. If there are no seeds, it's because you got out in time and set the cultivator right," Lewis said. It felt like childhood again, that "beautiful country farm," as he called it, of his grandfather’s. The day I met Lewis, we stood shortly before sunset on an alfalfa where he keeps his tractors and other equipment. Golden light bathed the slope below—the area surrounding Penn Yan undulates across a fan-like pattern of glaciers-carved ridges and valleys. Lewis surveyed some rows of corn, which, unlike conventional fields here of all but their designated crop, bobbed with engrossed and golden. "Now," he said, would be the moment to show the other side of Lewis. "Now I look to the beauty of gold," he said. "I'm doing what I want to do."

Pollan doesn’t profile many farmers like Lewis in his The Omnivore’s Dilemma. Neither does Shapin, whose New York essay, titled "Paradise Sold," concludes morosely that the cottage-gardener image of organic agriculture is a sham contributing a monkey gash at organic’s millions-of-dollars-per-year market. The fingers-pointing is understandable. America’s relationship to its food is weinier and more contradictory than ever, with gourmet chefs on television and Cheetos going all-natural as Americans get fatter, farms grow bigger, and agriglobalists hold on government food policies tighter. And, of course, with the Pacific and Shapin write, ultimately, from the perspective of their readers, people like them—middle-class professionals who interact with food at restaurants, in their kitchens, and on their plates—not on farms. Pollon’s book, after all, is a natural history of four more.

But if America is to change its eating habits—and Pollan is excellent at documenting the urgent need for such change—it’s farmers, not writers, who will have to lead the way. And so it is with Lewis that we turn to the real crucibles of American agriculture—places where farmers are figuring out how to grow food without selling their souls or jumping off the grid. In a New York Times Magazine article titled "Unhappy Flesh," Pollan offered some practical suggestions for bringing down the agriglobal empire—if not its foundations, then at least down to earth: "Don’t eat anything your great-great-grandmother wouldn’t recognize as food... Get out of the supermarket whenever possible..." Say, eat more lent. It’s good advice. But what Pollan doesn’t address is how to make Americans want to diet their diets back to a simpler way. Current approaches—mostly warnings of imminent bodily or enviroment catastrophe aren’t working. And so perhaps it is time to let the farmers try. Most Americans don’t know farmers, but they like them to the abstract. And maybe, if they heard about Penn Yan and learned that its future depended on what they ate, they would pay a little more attention when they go to the grocery store. Who knows? It may be that what Americans really need to eat more reasonably is an introduction to Larry Lewis. Lewis is a solid man of medium height with a face at once chonky and friendly. The day I met him, he was wearing jeans, a flannel shirt, and a tractor cap embossed with the Lakeview Organic Grain logo. His boots, black, crumpled, and muddy, sat beside the door of the big house he and his grandfather, Annie Niver, built by hand about five years ago. The house, at the end of a dirt drive, was decorated—country-casual, richly decorated in the tradition of antique farm gear and carp'esthaut panoramas. Egg baskets, glass milk bottles, toy tractors, tricycles, a jockey, a mechanical swing, a rack of toys, speed-limit sign, and Howdy Doody dolls lined walls and shelves hung from honey-stained ceiling ribbons. Yes, we offer you a man—coupled with a folded American flag—at the kitchen table and showed me his morning reading: agricultural newspapers with names like The Natural Farmer and Country Folks. The papers, he said, ran useful stories about field techniques, and classified ads with good equipment bargains. The phone rang, Lewis’s voice darkened as he talked. He called someone, his mother, who has diabetes. Lewis was trying to get her into a two-bedroom facility in Geneva—another expense. Annie works full time as a sheriff’s dispatcher in Penn Yan, and Lewis said it was only when he was officially certified organic in 1999—three years after that first crop of kidney beans, the amount of chemical-free time required for federal organic certification—that he began looking at a living as reliable as hers. "We’re separate as far as income," he said. "The farm is pretty much self-sustaining."

Lewis shuddered as he recalled his precarious days. Growing up in the 1980s in southwesten New York, he had acquired, seemingly from birth, a passionate love for
When, in 1966, his friend Klaus Musters suggested going organic, Lewis thought he was joking. "It used to be you had to be crazy or a hippie (to go) organic," Lewis said. But Klaus, who had become something of an organic proselytizer after suffering temporary paralysis in a pesticide accident, "kept at me," Lewis said, and he finally agreed to try. The result was a revelation—not simply in crops, but in Lewis's entire life as a farmer. After enduring a few seasons of trial—"What exactly are you growing on those strips?" skeptical neighbors asked when they saw weeds poking through Lewis's fields—Lewis found himself unexpectedly reliving his halcyon youth. "We do what our grandparents did before innovations in the 1940s and 1950s," he said of himself and the other organic farmers he began meeting. "You try to use those management practices, rotation to break weed cycles... If the plant is healthy, pests and bugs don't compete with it...It's all balance. We take soil samples, balance things. That's where the agricultural expertise comes in. Like most everything else, it's hands-on that really does it."

Lewis took me to Lakesview Organic Grain and talked of his pleasure in rolling crops to the-Martens, family whose kids were enrolled in Future Farmers of America—not the sharp-eyed bargain hunters from Cargill. He used words like "phenomenal" and "exciting" to describe his sudden ability to sell buckwheat for eight dollars a bushel—Beckett Mills, which buys only conventional grain, paid at most three dollars. He described his relief at no longer having to handle onerous, sweet-smelling pesticides and artificial fertilizers that literally burn soil away, leaving only a pure chemical substrate. And he spoke with wonder of the Martens' monthly meetings, the novelty of farmers sharing ideas and pooling resources instead of competitively eyeing each other's acreage. "You get to become part of a community," he said.

But, mostly, Lewis came back again and again to that idea of recapturing life on his grandfather's farm.

"Farming is sort of a simple way of life, a sustainable way of life," he said. Or, at least, it can be for organic farmers. "Conventional farming doesn't require as much thinking or work," he told me as we drove back north on a tree of his various fields. "You do a lot from your pickup truck. Now, with organic, you have to see weeds when they're tiny. So you have to be in the crop, one step ahead."

Lewis mixed that the real cost of the so-called Green Revolution (the introduction, in the early twentieth century, of technologically advanced farming methods that dramatically increased world food production) was not only the health risks posed by chemicals, but the loss of generations' worth of knowledge about soils, weeds, crop rotation, natural fertilizer—all the techniques passed down through farming families for growing food in cooperation, not competition, with the land.

Lewis was not describing some communal hippie paradise. The Dairymen's Diner, where I ate and where I met him with his friend, dairy farmer Guy Christiansen, featured a tacking John Deere clock and silent, round farmers hunched over plates of decidedly nonorganic ham and eggs, white bread. Lewis made vague references to his Republican political leanings and fretted about his retire- ment money. What he meant was that, as an organic farmer, he could again feel proud of, in control of, and, perhaps most important, interested in his work. After showing me the crumbling wooden barn where he keeps his equipment—various riveting seeders, cultivators, hay balers, and a thirty-year-old John Deere tractor with foot-pedal rubber tires—he marched me to a row of corn, where city dwellers rustled in a late-afternoon breeze. Grabbing a few heads of rugose—a pesky invader that grows wherever corn isn't thick enough to shade it out—he launched into a detailed explanation of soil nutrients, principly how much the rugose could leach away before seriously damaging the corn. His voice quickened, he pointed to a patch of dandelion and said it signaled a lack of potassium in the ground. "I might need to change the soil composition," he said, alluding to various natural additives organic farmers are allowed to use—gneiss for calcium, limestone to lower acidity. Then he pulled a few kernels from a cob of corn, handed one to me and told me to bite it. "That's how I tell when it's dry enough to harvest," he said.

When Lewis is ready to sell his grain, he takes it to Lakesview, which occupies a long, low-dung building beside a stretch of railroad tracks a few hundred yards from Main Street in Puea Yan. There, trucks back up to a loading dock and exchange bushels of corn, wheat, and soybeans for bags of ground grain and organic seeds. Inside, a wooden ceiling vaults over four rows of grain bags stacked about twenty feet high. On the day I visited, the small stuff was working without much conversation. Mary-Hollie Martens stood behind a counter in the office, answering the phone and fielding questions from arriving truck drivers. A seed specialist named Chuck Richtmyer inspected bags in one corner, while the foreman, Daniel Hoover, a local Mennonite, drove a fork lift. Cleaning virtually every surface was a fine, diaphanous layer of flour.
The company began almost by accident, Mary-Howell told me. In the 1990s, when she and Klaus were just getting their bearings as organic farmers, three dairies approached them with a problem. To qualify as organic, dairies must feed their cows either organically grown grass or pasture-grazed. "They said, 'You have grass. Could you make organic feed for us?' We said okay." Five years later, in 2005, the Martens had one hundred fifty customers, and decided to use their accumulated capital to buy a conventional grain mill that had recently gone bankrupt—a victim of consolidation and price fluctuation. "The Martens, eager to avoid that fate, vowed to run Lakeview like a co-op," Mary-Howell said. "Because we’re farmers, I knew what it’s like to be jocked around and not treated right." That means the Martens form personal relationships with customers, give fair and equal prices to the farmers they buy from, and aim, whenever possible, to keep their product "local. I feel like a bor-go-reign woman," Mary-Howell said.

The only flaw in this boisterous scene is its future. With demand for organic produce rising 20 percent a year, and national chains such as Wal-Mart and Whole Foods Market squeezing even more efficiency out of organic growers, medium-sized rural economies such as Penin Yan’s face pressure to join the "beau-coup culture" of large-scale organic production. So far, said Mary-Howell, Lakeview farmers have gotten along and found a refuge in their new calling because "the pie (of steadily rising sales) is big enough."—the market for organic produce has been growing 20 percent per year. Agribusiness giants, however, are not far away. Cargill, via one of its subsidiaries, entered the organic grain market on the East Coast in 2001, said Mary-Howell in a recent phone interview. So far, they have reached only a few of Lakeview’s customers—apparently "they didn’t feel there was enough margin" in a business still dominated by family owners. (Cargill spokesman declined to comment.) Still, the presence of big players, likely to increase as commodity prices skyrocket (organic corn alone more than doubled in the past year), is unsettling. "I’m seeing a tremendous amount of agitation among existing organic farmers," Mary-Howell said at Lakeview. "The big guys are a potential danger. How will we deal with that? I don’t entirely know.""A few months before visiting Penn Yan, I saw firsthand why Mary-Howell is so afraid. Reading a magazine story on the aftermath of a tornado, I visited conventional farmer Phil Hamburger, who, along with his wife, Barb, two of his four nearly-grown children, his brother, Eimer, and his parents, Harvey and Irene, farm two thousand acres of corn, wheat, and soy on a desolate expanse of South Dakota prairie. Though the Hamburger’s work as a family, their farm more resembles a medium-sized industry. The sprawling complex they call their "farmyard" features dozens of silos—some as tall as thirty-five feet—a pair of two-story galvanized metal storage sheds, a steel-making plant, semi-truck garages, and a workshop for repairing equipment. Phil told me it costs him nearly two million dollars to just keep each year’s crop in the ground. (Larry Lewis spends seventy thousand.) That figure includes seed, pesticide, fertilizer, fuel, grain handling, and land rental. Barb spends much of her time in an office in the house, sorting through claims to subsidize laws and keeping track of taxes and bank account on the computer. A five-foot-tall bookshelf outside the office is lined with binders labeled "Crop Protection Reference" and "P and B Hamburger Farm—Finance." Phil and his brother drive two green harvesters the size of dump trucks, which rent three hundred thousand dollars a piece and feature computer controls, air conditioning, and a glassed-in cab where Phil listens to Christian audio books while gazing up corn rows.

An enterprise so capital-intensive leaves no margin for error, Phil said. "We used to be able to make double our input costs," he told me as we drank coffee at the dining room table and looked out a sliding glass door toward his farm yard. "With six hundred acres we could make a living. Now, to be feasible, we need six thousand acres to make a living. The margins are thinner. You need bigger equipment to get the work done. You can’t find good help...If anything unexpected comes, it wipes you out. So you have to get bigger. Then, getting bigger, you still need government money. And so you keep growing. Older farmers quit. There aren’t as many young farmers. You can’t get in and get started."

Even with his large family, Phil said that at peak planting, spraying, and harvest times—spring to late fall—he works one hundred hours a week, up to eighteen hours a day. "It’s a lonely life, I said his father, who sat with an embarrassment about the bustling community he encountered when he arrived in South Dakota in 1939. Now, as farm tile and consensus, the land around the Hamburger’s home is nearly empty. The family drives Nifty-five miles to the nearest town, Gettysburg, to attend church. Their next-door neighbor is a mile away. When visitors approach, the phrase of dust rising from the road can be seen long before the engine is heard. While visiting, I stayed at a bed and breakfast near Gettysburg. When I arrived late on a cold March night, I found a group of insurance adjusters from Arkansas wandering the town in camouflage, filming rifles into the air. They were on vacation after a hectic fall and winter waiting Hurricane Katrina claims, and had come to South Dakota to hunt pheasants on land leased out by a nearby farmer—another bid for financial survival.

Over dinner, I asked Phil’s kids whether they planned to stay on the farm. Melody, who is twenty and was on spring vacation from college in Iowa, said she was leaning toward a career in education. Rachel, who is eighteen, talked of wanting to be a missionary. Charles, the youngest at seventeen, said that until recently everyone he had assumed he would take over the farm. He is a large, quiet boy who works hard and has mastered most of the equipment. But lately, he said, he had been dreaming of "doing other things. Playing football or driving a truck in frozen food." I would like to think that America’s agricultural future looks more like Penn Yan than Gettysburg, South Dakota. The numbers aren’t encouraging—go percent of organic production (which itself comprises less than half of a percent of all U.S. farmland) is bought by national wholesalers and supermarket chains, suggesting that even food conglomerates remain stubbornly addicted to the summer-salad-year, distance-independent abundance of industrial agriculture. I wonder, though, what would happen if those shoppers knew more intimately the effects their food choices have on farmers— not on some hypothetical health or environmental equilibrium, but on a real, live person, a neighbor. If American consumers knew the power they held over Larry Lewis or over Mary-Howell Martens’s three kids, ages ten to seventeen, who plan all still to stick with farming, would they buy that weird stuff their great-great-grandmother wouldn’t recognize? Would they tip service to workers such as "locally grown? Would they, in short, think of food primarily as a meal? Hard to say. What I do know is that, come the end of my day with Lewis, I drove to the farm of one of his neighbors, a Mennonite named Eddie Hrist. Eddie, his wife, and eight kids milk forty-eight cows and raise the organic grain to feed them on one hundred eighty acres they own and rent. When Lewis and I arrived, Eddie and one of his older sons were repairing a barn. They put down their hammers, and we chatted in the westering sun. "All the kids do their bit," Eddie said, as a few youngsters in traditional black and white suits and dresses scammed out of the barnhouse. Even "the little ones gather eggs. My oldest son is sixteen. He keeps the others out of mischief." Eddie told the familiar story of being chieftains (most Mennonite and Amish farmers, though forbidden certain technological advancements, do use both chemical pesticides and artificial fertilizers) and realizing he could make more money as an organic farmer. "It’s a more pleasant way of farming," he said. "Less tractor work. Less stressful...The cattle are in the field. You walk out, take the kids, there’s no farm machinery, no noise."

The mention of children prompted Lewis to talk about his own youngest son, Matthew, who had appeared to be on his way out of farming a few years previously when he took a job with a local sporting-goods manufacturer. Now, though, Matthew "is an crazy (about farming) as I am," said Lewis. The two have begun working together, and Matthew has gone part-time at the sporting-goods factory. "I’ll stick with it," Lewis said. "I want to make it so he can." We got back in the car and wound through Penn Yan’s rippling countryside to Lewis’s log house. We passed the shed where Lewis stores his seed, and he joked that, forbidden by organic regulations to use even chemical rat poison, he had to trust his cats to keep the seed from being eaten. As we parted, he was deep into an explanation of how a six-inch snow cover in March is perfect for insulating young roots that would otherwise be stressed by the freezing and thawing of oscillating spring weather. He recalled friends from college who had taken office jobs. "They’re complaining about having to go to work," he said. "Every day, I’m looking forward to getting up and getting things done."