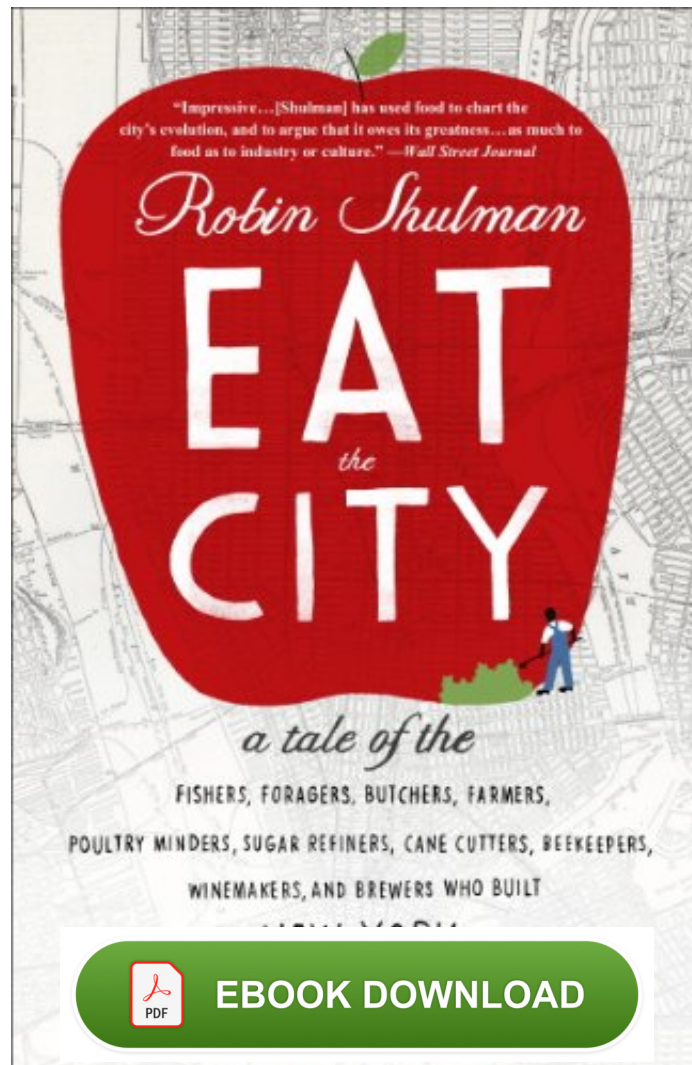


Eat the City: A Tale of the Fishers, Foragers, Butchers, Farmers, Poultry Minders, Sugar Refiners, Cane Cutters, Beekeepers, Winemakers, and Brewers Who Built New York

by

Robin Shulman



Synopsis

New York is not a city for growing and manufacturing food. It's a money and real estate city, with less naked earth and industry than high-rise glass and concrete. Yet in this intimate, visceral, and beautifully written book, Robin Shulman introduces the people of New York City - both past and present - who do grow vegetables, butcher meat, fish local waters, cut and refine sugar, keep bees for honey, brew beer, and make wine. In the most heavily built urban environment in the country, she shows an organic city full of intrepid and eccentric people who want to make things grow. What's more, Shulman artfully places today's urban food production in the context of hundreds of years of history, and traces how we got to where we are. In these pages meet Willie Morgan, a Harlem man who first grew his own vegetables in a vacant lot as a front for his gambling racket. And David Selig, a beekeeper in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn who found his bees making a mysteriously red honey. Get to know Yolene Joseph, who fishes crabs out of the waters off Coney Island to make curried stews for her family. Meet the creators of the sickly sweet Manischewitz wine, whose brand grew out of Prohibition; and Jacob Ruppert, who owned a beer empire on the Upper East Side, as well as the New York Yankees. *Eat the City* is about how the ability of cities to feed people has changed over time. Yet it is also, in a sense, the story of the things we long for in cities today: closer human connections, a tangible link to more basic processes, a way to shape more rounded lives, a sense of something pure. Of course, hundreds of years ago, most food and drink consumed by New Yorkers was grown and produced within what are now the five boroughs. Yet people rarely realize that long after New York became a dense urban agglomeration, innovators, traditionalists, migrants and immigrants continued to insist on producing their own food. This book shows the perils and benefits—and the ironies and humor—when city people involve themselves in making what they eat. Food, of course, is about hunger. We eat what we miss and what we want to become, the foods of our childhoods and the symbols of the lives we hope to lead. With wit and insight, *Eat the City* shows how in places like New York, people have always found ways to use their collective hunger to build their own kind of city. ROBIN SHULMAN is a writer and reporter whose work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Slate*, the *Guardian*, and many other publications. She lives in New York City.

Sort review

“Robin Shulman's must-read new book *Eat the City* features insight about how food and beverage production moved from the urban landscape of New York City to the farms and beyond, only to come back to places like Brooklyn and Manhattan in the past few years. She tells fascinating stories, and hones in on some of the current scene's livelier personalities, like Brooklyn artist-butcher Tom Mylan.” – Food Republic
“The author has employed her skills as a writer and journalist to pull off a rather impressive feat: She has used food to chart the city's

evolution, and to argue that it owes its greatness as an international crossroads, particularly in its early years, as much to food as to industry or culture...These days New York marks its greatness not so much by its industry or by the sweat of its brow, but as a center for finance and culture, and how much its penthouses fetch. However, amid its 90-story condos and three-star restaurants, we run the risk of forgetting on whose broad shoulders, and often punishing effort, we stand. That is, unless we read Ms. Shulman's book." - The Wall Street Journal

"Straightforward, but not overly earnest, and smartly layered, this well-researched social history is organized in seven chapters ordered like the courses of a meal... [Shulman] is particularly good at illustrating how big a part food played in the city's social history. From the sugar trade's role in making Manhattan the largest slave port in the nation to the role of refrigeration in building distance between food sources and consumers, Shulman is adept at shifting our perspective on the foods we eat." - Boston Globe

"[A] Deliciously engaging account of a journalist's odyssey through New York City's thriving organic farm culture...What makes Shulman's narrative so captivating is the way she emphasizes the relationship human beings have with an urban environment that at first glance is anything but farm-friendly. A feast for foodies of all persuasions." - Kirkus

"Fondly nostalgic, immensely useful...Shulman's playful mélange of history and journalism celebrates the city's return as a neighborhood food festival." - Publisher's Weekly

"The author masterfully traces the wonderful spectrum of the city's culinary geniuses going back a hundred years and moving into the present day to portray the men and women who bring select food to our tables." - New York Daily News

"Robin Shulman immerses herself in the heart of New York, finding hidden gardens, wineries, abattoirs, and apiaries in the most unexpected places. Through her personal stories, she convinces us that in order to live and eat in a city, we must understand where our food comes from and how it is made." - Alice Waters

"Eat the City is about the men and women who came to New York City--now and in the past--and planted gardens, harvested honey, made cheese, and brewed beer and made New York what it is today. Robin Shulman uses their stories to bring this rich history to life and to reflect on the forces that brought immigrants and their food traditions to this city. Not all of these stories have happy endings, but they inform, move, and inspire." --Marion Nestle, professor of nutrition, food studies, and public health at New York University and author of What to Eat

"Robin Shulman introduces us to today's trendy fooderati, and then reveals--through careful historical research--that growing food in the city isn't so new after all." --Novella Carpenter, author of Farm City

"Robin Shulman's Eat the City locates a new point on the urban grid: the intersection of the man-made city and the abundance of the natural world. This overlooked New York is home to rows of corn, collards and okra in formerly burnt-out lots, shady rooftop vineyards, and Brooklyn honeybees fed on industrial nectar, courtesy of the local Maraschino cherry plant. Laced with surprises, Eat the City describes the human impulse to harness nature and turn it into food, even in the most unlikely surroundings." -Jane Ziegelman, author of 97 Orchard

With beautiful detail, Shulman tells the tale of a city, however rich or poor, that has always wanted to eat well. From a Harlem numbers house that lured gamblers with city-grown produce to a hipster butcher

transforming a corner of Williamsburg, *Eat the City* reminds us that New York's true foodies live in every corner, in every class, of every borough. –Tracie McMillan, author of *The American Way of Eating*“Shulman’s brilliant, transformative book weaves history, journalism, and storytelling into a secret atlas of New York... A profound, surprising, and exquisitely written exploration of how food and its makers, even in the unlikeliest places, keep all of us human.” – Annia Ciezadlo, author of *Day of Honey*“Robin Shulman shows the farms beneath the feet of New Yorkers. Hers is an industrial, social, political, and of course culinary geography of the city, with finely observed portraits of the people, young and old, who are intent on following the footsteps of forebears they might not know they had--not just in farming, fishing, butchering, and brewing but in calling for social justice for everyone who produces food.” -- Corby Kummer, author of *The Joy of Coffee and The Pleasures of Slow Food*“A lovely, well written and fascinating account of people who built and continue to build New York through its food production, cultivation and creation... Shulman moves seemingly effortlessly between past and present in order to set the amazing stories of the people she writes about within an historical context. That is an amazingly difficult thing to do well.” – Suzanne Wasserman, Ph.D., Director, the Gotham Center for NYC History/ CUNY--This text refers to the hardcover edition.About the AuthorROBIN SHULMAN is a writer and reporter whose work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Slate*, the *Guardian*, and many other publications. She lives in New York City. -- This text refers to the hardcover edition.Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.1HONEY

Sundays in the summer, Andrew Cote likes to hive hop, collecting honey. Sometimes he takes the subway from his apartment on the Lower East Side, his smoker and his bag of hive tools banging against his thigh as he walks. But mostly he drives a white Toyota Tundra pickup abuzz with bees hovering over the truck bed, where their honey has been stashed. They will travel with the truck for hours, from one borough to another, seeking to reclaim what is theirs in a scene out of an urban Winnie-the-Pooh. Andrew curses his way through traffic, flips one-handed through a giant ring for keys to the next rooftop hive building, and parks wherever he can find a space. Much of city beekeeping is vertical work. Up a narrow stairway in the dingy darkness, carrying tools to hives on a roof in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge. Down six flights of stairs from rooftop hives on a different building on Second Avenue, balancing heavy, oozing frames of honey. Back outside, truck full of honey, when someone pauses and stares at the buzzing bees still lingering above the truck, Andrew says, “We’re out of here,” and guns the motor. When a cruiser slows down and a cop yells out the window, “Is that honey?” Andrew cheerfully calls, “Legal since April 2010! Want to try?” While hobbyist beekeepers usually maintain just a hive or two, Andrew practices a particularly muscular brand of urban beekeeping, managing forty hives on rooftops, terraces, and balconies, and in yards and gardens in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens. A fourth-generation beekeeper, Andrew is a kind of honey lord with a petty honey fiefdom, supervising a network of hundreds of novices he has taught and mentored in the city. He sells boxlike hives he makes himself, along with packages of bees as starter kits. At the New York City Beekeepers Association that he helped launch, he presides

over monthly meetings, which routinely draw the illuminati of the beekeeping world--great beekeepers, authors of books on honey, artists focused on bees. To hear Andrew tell it, honey-making is a hustle. It's nothing like producing wine or cheese, where you mix careful quantities of ingredients together, monitor temperatures and chemical processes, and tend a thing while it becomes something else. In beekeeping, your job is observation, fraud, and theft. You set up conditions (a good clean hive, water, a supply of nearby flowers) so the bees feel equipped to plan for the future. Sooner or later, your bees will fly forth and suck nectar from flowers, spit in enzymes that thicken and preserve it, and construct cells of wax in which to store it as food for the long winter. Driven by instinct that looks like artisanal zeal, they will use their tiny wings as fans to cool the wax in summer and warm it in fall. Many die. You, on the other hand, just pry open the lid of the hive, which the bees, perhaps foreseeing such crimes, have sealed shut with a sappy glue they extract from plants. You knock out the bees with a dose of smoke and seize their waxen provisions. And then you're out, with nary a sting. You've got honey. Of course, Andrew will tell you that in cities, beekeeping is more complicated. You've got to find a place to install a hive--perhaps some unused roof or flower-filled community garden--and lobby co-op boards and garden members to approve. You've got to make arrangements for access at least once every few weeks. You've got to carry around heavy protective clothing to keep from getting stung--many times--as a single bee stinging emits a scent that alerts other bees to join the attack. In a crowded city, you have to work especially hard to prevent a swarm, a hive reproduction technique whereby half the bees in a colony fly off to find a new home and cluster for hours or maybe days in some tree--or, in the case of New York, one of many tree-like structures, such as a traffic light or a street sign in front of the Bulgari jewelry store on Fifth Avenue. It looks like the stuff of horror films: a ball of 30,000 bees flying through the air making a noise like a buzz saw, Andrew will say. People get scared. Nearby businesses can't operate, and crowds gather to stare. A beekeeper can head this off by dividing the hive in two when it's particularly populous and active--but the timing has to be right. In case of error, Andrew and other experienced beekeepers set up a swarm hotline where anyone can leave a voice message that gets sent as a text alert to phones including Andrew's. He will grab his beekeeping gear and rush over. Like a hooded superhero on a utility ladder, he will trap the swarm and spirit the bees away to a new hive. New York City outlawed beekeeping in 1999, and for a decade afterward, a clandestine apiarist culture survived despite the risk of a \$2,000 fine for an illicit hive. People put up screens and walls and grew foliage to hide the hives in their gardens. On rooftops, they painted hives gray to look like air conditioning units, or red, like chimneys. After removing frames of honey, they wrapped them in garbage bags and sealed them with duct tape before carrying them, quietly buzzing, into public view. They hosted underground honey tastings and sold their wares in boutique groceries. At most, there were a few dozen beekeepers in the city, and the hobby seemed to attract lone eccentrics, such as a Brooklyn drag performer who sold honey under his female alias, and a man in the Bronx who lived in a rectory and had learned beekeeping from a Trappist monk. Finally when beekeeping became legal again in 2010, new

beekeepers emerged in force. Often they're in it for the honey. City honey is an edible record of available nectar in the urban landscape, and a discerning palate can see and taste the distinctive flavors of different neighborhoods. A complex and nuanced South Bronx honey comes from bees feasting on flora at the nearby botanical garden. A Manhattan East Village honey, pale with a minty taste from bees working the linden trees, has hints of apple, peach, and rose, from the many community gardens. A Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, honey is heavy from the Echinacea flowers of a local garden and from Prospect Park itself. In some neighborhoods, the honey is so sweet, it's overwhelming: sharp, almost acid. In others, it is light, high, citrusy, and tangy. Elsewhere it's musky and indistinct--or nutty, spicy, with a bitter aftertaste. Hives near one another generally produce similarly flavored honeys, so that if you were to map a particular city's honey flavors, you would see gradually shifting regions determined by prominent nearby flowers. It's even easier to track the changing flavors of honey throughout the season as various flowers bloom and fade. Early honey, from clover and the spring-flowering trees, is light in color and flavor, and the later stuff from goldenrod in the fall has a deep hue with a heavy taste. Some newer beekeepers have been moved to the hobby by tales of colony collapse disorder, the name for a phenomenon in which whole colonies of bees disappear. The cause has not yet been fully determined, but studies point toward systemic pesticides. Farmers and commercial beekeepers, whose bees pollinate agricultural crops, began to talk about a dearth of pollinators to produce fruits and vegetables across the country. Urban bees were less affected, and some city people began to tend their own hive in hopes that they could somehow bolster the species. A sense of crisis in beekeeping peaked just as New York City legalized the practice. Interest soared. Urban beekeepers all over the country do what Andrew does: They are swarm wranglers, bee dealers, hive inspectors, club leaders, beekeeping teachers, honey sellers. But most major cities that allow beekeeping have a long-standing institution with a stable community to manage problems. In Chicago, a nonprofit cooperative contracts with City Hall to manage the hives on its roof. In San Francisco and Seattle, volunteer organizations have collected swarms for decades. But in New York, all this is new, and Andrew Cote is often the one to educate, mediate, and trap wayward bees. The recent legalization of urban beekeeping unleashed a wave of pent^u up interest from aspiring beekeepers, fans of bees, and the media. These days, Andrew often works with a pack of acolytes in tow, a microphone clipped to his T^u shirt and a lens trained on his face. Andrew's own group for hobbyist beekeepers, the New York City Beekeepers Association, grew to 300 active members in just a few years following legalization. He alone trained 320 people in beekeeping in two years, while a competing beekeeping meet^u up group trained another 400. Perhaps New York has become the city with the most interest in urban beekeeping in the history of beekeeping in American cities. But bees are wild creatures that cannot be tamed, and that can create unforeseen problems--interpersonal problems that require diplomacy not generally associated with keepers of honeybees. Problems that are, so to speak, sticky. At thirty-nine years old, Andrew is fit, strong, and tightly strung. He's classically handsome enough that a modeling scout signed him up while he was working at his market honey stand,

and he ended up starring in a Goldman Sachs ad. He has a flirtatious sparkle in his eye, a quick grin, a quicker wit, a handy touch, a low tolerance for error, and moods that shift as quickly and totally as a sudden storm. He has worked as a community college professor of English but also spent time in Iraq. He doesn't like to talk about what he did there, but he came back in 2006 with post-traumatic stress disorder and Monday-afternoon appointments with a shrink. Now he seems to lack the self-corrective feature that makes human interaction bearable. He can be incredibly dedicated: When a bus hit his cargo van last spring while he was delivering bees, the bloodied Andrew, covered in broken glass and lying on a gurney by an ambulance, phoned other beekeepers to come pick up their packages. Yet he also punches people when he's mad. He tears up when he's sad. He writes vengeful emails to strangers. Fellow beekeeper David Selig says, "He's like an angry bee." One late-summer day in 2009, David Selig--shirtless, barefoot, hot--stepped out onto the deck off his bedroom, climbed a utility ladder up to the roof, coffee mug in hand, and tiptoed across the scalding silver surface to visit his bees. He had already collected early honey from two hives he had installed on his roof in the spring: It had been a pale tawny color, strained of all flavor but a newborn sweetness, like the first clover blossoms. But now, as he settled with his coffee, squatting near the entrance of the hive, he noticed something strange. The foragers flying back from gathering nectar were glowing in the late-afternoon light, incandescent, as though lit up by an internal red bulb. Something unusual had clearly affected his bees. David is a calm person: He's thoughtful, low-voiced, he is not rash. He finished his coffee, noting the disconcerting beauty of his red bees in the sun, like living, moving warning lights. Then he stepped back down the ladder and went inside to Google "red bees." The search turned up nothing much--Red Bee comics, Red Bee crafts, Red Bee Media. When he went back to the roof to check the hives, the bees no longer looked red, the honeycomb seemed fine, and he chose to assume that whatever had been amiss, had passed. David was in love with honey. Not just the sweetness, but the way it connects you with the place where you are, since bees, collecting nectar and pollen from flowers, skim what they need from any environment and transform it into something you can taste. When he traveled to Syria, Turkey, and Jamaica, he would taste the honey, seek out beekeepers, and find that often, through their bees, they noticed changes in botany and climate, industry and agriculture, that others did not. "I enjoy observing nature," David would say when he got stung and his skin swelled and reddened with a rush of blood. Bees had first fascinated him when he was a child helping to keep them during summers at his grandparents' farm in Ontario, Canada. More recently, David, a restaurateur with chains of successful eateries, had opened a kind of honey bar for wholesalers where people could sample single-varietal honeys on wooden blocks, such as wild lavender honey from Provence, fragrant and incredibly light and dry on the tongue. Ultimately, he sold the place after it was featured in a magazine and he was flooded with hundreds of orders a day. "Honey doesn't pour quickly," he said. "We just couldn't even keep up with orders." When he finally decided to buy his own house with his girlfriend, it seemed natural to ask Andrew Cote to provide materials for two white wood-frame hives for David to install on the rooftop. David didn't see a red bee again until the next year,

during his second summer in the house, when day after day the thermometer edged over 90 degrees. Beekeeping had just become legal, and others with new hives in the neighborhood were worried about the heat. David's girlfriend, Cecilia Dean, a fashion muse and editor of an avant-garde magazine, parked herself under the ceiling fan, the dog, Mott, lolled with his tongue out, the two cats barely moved, and David went to check on his charges on the roof. He stepped through the threshold of Cecilia's museum-like walk-in closet--packed with vintage Helmut Lang and Martin Margiela suits, custom-made gifts from Karl Lagerfeld and Marc Jacobs, spiky stilettos from Nicholas Kirkwood and thigh-high boots from Balenciaga--and onto the deck. He climbed the ladder to the roof, and as he sat with his soy latte to enjoy watching the bees, he noticed that they were again glowing red. He jammed scraps of wood and twine for burning into his beekeeper's smoker, a metal device like a bellows that breathes a cool, pleasant-smelling smoke that has a calming effect on bees. Then he banged away at the propolis, the sticky substance the bees use to close up the hive. He pried off the lid with a flat-headed tool, directed the smoke toward the bees within, and pulled out a frame from inside. Reassuringly, it was heaving with honey. But the substance looked unusually dark. And when he held it up to the morning sun, he saw that the honey was an untrue, electric shade somewhere between fuchsia and scarlet. He pulled out frame after frame of the second hive, only to find the same. And there were his bees, flying back to their hives, bright red lights themselves, to efficiently deposit the neon nectars of their labors, leaving blazing droplets like so many scattered pomegranate seeds on the white wood. "Then you freak out," David said. --This text refers to the hardcover edition. Read more

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Look inside the book

MORE PRAISE FOR EAT THE CITY“A buzzing, savory, lively world comes to life in Robin Shulman’s extensively researched *Eat the City*... The book provides what’s missing from much of the breathless media coverage of New York’s modern food artisans: culinary context... [It’s] history made delicious.”—Washington Post“A rather impressive feat: [Shulman] has used food to chart the city’s evolution, and to argue that it owes its greatness as an international crossroads, particularly in its early years, as much to food as to industry or culture ... We run the risk of forgetting on whose broad shoulders, and often punishing effort, we stand. That is, unless we read Ms. Shulman’s book.”—Wall Street Journal“The author masterfully traces the wonderful spectrum of the city’s culinary geniuses going back a hundred years and moving into the present day to portray the men and women who bring select food to our tables.”—New York Daily News“Smartly layered, this well-researched social history is organized in seven chapters ordered like the courses of a meal... [Shulman] is particularly good at illustrating how big a part food played in the city’s social history.”—Boston Globe“Robin Shulman’s must-read new book *Eat the City* features insight about how food and beverage production moved from the urban landscape of New York City to the farms and beyond, only to come back to places like Brooklyn and Manhattan in the past few years.... Fascinating.”—Food Republic“*In telling the stories of New Yorkers and our food through the centuries and looking to the future—stories by people from all over the world who now call this city home—Shulman serves her readers the nourishment of connection.*”—Nicole Reed, Food Systems Network NYC“Robin Shulman immerses herself in the heart of New York, finding hidden gardens, wineries, abattoirs, and apiaries in the most unexpected places. Through her personal stories, she convinces us that in order to live and eat in a city, we must understand where our food comes from and how it is made.”—Alice Waters“*Eat the City* is about the men and women who came to New York City—now and in the past—and planted gardens, harvested honey, made cheese, and brewed beer, and made New York what it is today. Robin Shulman uses their stories to bring this rich history to life.”—Marion Nestle, professor of nutrition, food studies, and public health at New York University and author of *What to Eat*“Robin Shulman introduces us to today’s trendy fooderati, and then reveals—through careful historical research—that growing food in the city isn’t so new after all.”—Novella Carpenter, author of *Farm City*“Robin Shulman’s *Eat the City* locates a new point on the urban grid: the intersection of the man-made city and the abundance of the natural world.... Laced with surprises, *Eat the City* describes the human impulse to harness nature and turn it into food, even in the most unlikely surroundings.”—Jane Ziegelman, author of *97 Orchard*“With beautiful detail, Shulman tells the tale of a city, however rich or poor, that has always wanted to eat well.... *Eat the City* reminds us that New York’s true foodies live in every corner, in every class, of every borough.”—Tracie McMillan, author of *The American Way of Eating*“A profound, surprising, and exquisitely written exploration of how food and its makers, even in the unlikeliest places, keep all of us human.”—Annia Ciezadlo, author of *Day of*

Honey“Robin Shulman shows the farms beneath the feet of New Yorkers.... Hers is an industrial, social, political, and of course culinary geography of the city, with finely observed portraits of the people, young and old, who are intent on following the footsteps of forebears they might not know they had.”—Corby Kummer, author of *The Joy of Coffee* and *The Pleasures of Slow Food*“A lovely, well-written, and fascinating account of people who built and continue to build New York through its food production, cultivation, and creation.”—Suzanne Wasserman, PhD, director, the GothamCenter for NYC History/CUNY“What makes Shulman’s narrative so captivating is the way she emphasizes the relationship human beings have with an urban environment that at first glance is anything but farm-friendly. A feast for foodies of all persuasions.”—Kirkus“Fondly nostalgic, immensely useful.... Shulman’s playful mélange of history and journalism celebrates the city’s return as a neighborhood food festival.”—Publishers Weekly

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For my mother, Barbara, a nourisher,and my father, Art, an improviser.And for my grandparents,Irv and Ruth, Sadie and Harry, and also Rose.

More grows in the garden than the gardener has sown.—AN OLD SAYINGTogether, as the architects of something perfectly ordinary—our own lives—we became builders of a city so big and various it is beyond knowing.—KATHARINE GREIDER

CONTENTS
CoverTitle
PageCopyrightDedicationEpigraphAUTHOR’S
NOTEMapsINTRODUCTION1 HONEY2 VEGETABLES3 MEAT4 SUGAR5 BEER6 FISH7
WINEEPILOGUEACKNOWLEDGMENTSNOTESAbout the Author

AUTHOR’S NOTEI began gathering material for this book in 2005, and worked intensively from January 2010 to December 2011. I was not present for all of the events I describe. Interviews, published and unpublished letters, journals, reports and minutes of meetings, newspaper and

magazine stories, census and other government records, maps, illustrations, talks, and historians' accounts all helped to reconstruct events that happened long ago. For more recent events, I also interviewed multiple participants, visited sites, and viewed television stories, photographs, videos, social-media sites, and blogs. One name in this book, a child's, has been changed to protect her privacy. Where a quote is not from my own interviews, I have included sources in the Notes at the end of the book. While conducting research, I interviewed hundreds of people and read hundreds of books. For complete information on sources, see my website, .

INTRODUCTION ONE DAY WHEN I was seventeen, I turned onto my Manhattan block to see a man sitting on my stoop, his stringy brown hair falling into his face as he leaned forward to focus on the needle he was sticking into his arm. He was blocking the entrance to my building. I slowed my pace, so he could finish before I arrived. "Um, excuse me," I said, pausing in front of the stoop. The man courteously took the syringe out of his bruised, punctured forearm and stood to the side. I turned my key in the lock, pushed inside, and pulled the door shut tight behind me. This was what my neighbors were complaining about at building meetings. This was the overflow from the drug mart on the vacant land next door. It was 1993, and I was new to New York, attending college, and living during the summer on Fourth Street between Avenues C and D. On my block in that far east of Manhattan, buildings were black with char, windows punched out, and sidewalks were tilted and overgrown with weeds. Vacant lots were piled with household detritus and scraps of wood and steel from tenements that had burned and been demolished. There was always a salesman standing in some shadow chanting the names of heroin brands like an incantation: "Roadrunner, Roadrunner, Roadrunner," or "Satan, Satan, Satan." Gunshots and sirens sounded almost every night. Video stores sold nothing but action and porn. Enormous portraits adorned with doves and flourishes were spray-painted onto brick walls to memorialize dead kids my own age. The action took place beneath my bedroom window, where the demolition of twelve-odd adjacent buildings had created a grassy plain, stretching the whole depth of the block from Fourth to Fifth Streets. I would peer out as people traded wads of cash for vials, or poked through the rubble before nodding off in the trash. Sometimes a regular would disappear, and I'd wonder if he or she was still alive. Kids in my building knew not to even look as they walked around grown women and men passed out still clutching a syringe on the sidewalk outside the vacant land. The kids certainly knew not to venture into the no-man's-land of a yard. Their childhood was unfathomably different from my own, in a small farming town where we picked wild blackberries and rhubarb and mint in the depths of unmowed backyards and swam in clay-bottomed ponds. Here in New York, I began to wonder how a whole society had allowed this wilderness of human neglect. But one day, I noticed a dozen of my neighbors at work, shoveling up the vacant land. Venturing into the yard, I smelled earth, along with stale, spilt beer, and felt the high grasses brush against my calves, prickling like needles. "We're going to clean the place up, fence it off, and plant it," said my neighbor, sweating and leaning on his rake. "Want to help?" I put on thick gloves to shovel loads of vials and syringes and broken glass into heavy-

duty green garbage bags. It took my neighbors all spring and most of the summer to clear the space. When clean, the landscape, with its frayed, overgrown grasses and enormous size, had a weirdly bucolic look, like an unevenly balding country heath. New people started to venture in—a lady knelt in the dirt to plant seedlings, little kids kicked around a luminous blue ball, and a group of guys with guitars and drums played bomba y plena late into the night, their songs carrying on the breeze and lulling me to sleep. There was something savory about a slow, hot midsummer evening when the kids ran through the garden long past dark while their parents laughed around a card table. In a place surrounded by violence, taking up space with regular life seemed like an act of defiance. Soon, I found myself waking up to the creaky call of a black-eyed, red-wattled rooster. I would see him strutting around the garden, his tough, reptilian talons navigating the broken glass around the central pathway and the soft black earth of the raised vegetable beds. My neighbors fed him kitchen scraps and regarded him lovingly—until one day he fell silent. “Chicken soup,” explained my seven-year-old neighbor, Carolina, cheerfully. Her dad had wrung the rooster’s neck and followed a family recipe, adding cilantro from the herb beds. “He was delicious,” she said. Only when Carolina pointed out that the rooster had never been a pet did I realize that most of the people I saw in the garden were not planting decorative flowers, but engaged in the serious work of tending vegetables and livestock. In a few years, the far east of Fourth Street had gone from buildings to prairie to a small working farm. All through the neighborhood, wherever people could find an empty patch of ground, they were planting tomatoes, squashes, and greens, raising chickens and rabbits and turkeys and ducks, living off the fat of the urban landscape. Just about every block had some kind of chicken, many of them strange, spiky-feathered exotics from Japan, their owners would tell you, or birds that laid blue or green eggs like Easter specials. The chicken keepers ranged from sentimentalists to casual slaughterers, variously interested in eggs, meat, cockfighting, and company. In the early 1990s, the Lower East Side was a free-for-all where you could do anything you wanted in a vacant lot, and it turned out that a lot of people wanted to produce their own food. The farming felt somehow like an antidote to the fires, the drugs, and the death that had come before. In a place that had seemed bent on self-destruction, people had figured out collective action to sustain themselves with something as elemental as food. It was like an old-fashioned morality play, the destroyers against the producers, where the producers win—with the rooster as the stand-in for the phoenix rising from the ashes. EVENTUALLY I left Fourth Street to work as a journalist in the Middle East. For years I trundled back and forth between various points in the U.S. and abroad, and in 2005, when I came back to New York for good, little was recognizable. Gardens had been bulldozed, vacant lots built into orderly new condos, murals painted over, gunshots stopped. Empty storefronts along Avenue C had turned into sweet little bistros and wine bars. Landlords were recruiting more high-rent professionals, and a lot of my former neighbors had moved away. Once or twice when I got out of the subway station and saw glimmering glass towers, I did a double take, thinking I’d exited at the wrong stop. Already dispirited from reporting on war, terrorism, and destruction, now I also felt unmoored in the place I had called home. Maybe, I

thought, I should literally plant roots. I started with tomatoes and cucumbers and basil in the garden on Fourth Street, which had survived after my neighbors fought to change its status to an official city parkland. Soon I realized I was more fascinated by the stories of the other gardeners than I was patient with the solitary labor of coaxing life from soil. A debate was raging over the latest batch of roosters in the garden. Newcomers complained to the city about the racket—one rooster seemed to think each bright light was a new dawn and crowed at every set of passing headlights, while the others would chime in when a car alarm went off or they heard the bass in a boom box. The roosters had their supporters. But a vocal new faction was convinced that the birds posed the threat of avian flu. Emails with the subject line “The Chicken Question” piled up in my inbox. Soon the roosters were hustled into a borrowed truck and dispatched to an upstate sanctuary. Yet elsewhere in the city, chickens were suddenly showing up as the backyard pets of young professionals. In one family I met in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn—a real estate agent and a college administrator with three kids—the woman of the house rose early in the morning, went out to the chicken coop, fed the birds, gathered their eggs, and sold a cartonful to anyone who came knocking in response to the sign in the window promising EGGS FOR SALE. The family kept four Rhode Island Reds, good sturdy American chickens, layers of eggs, survivors of winter, busy purveyors of white-meat flesh; two Golden Polish, birds with a feathery waterfall of bangs over their whole heads; two delicate little Egyptian Fayoumis, descended from the Nile Delta; and four French birds: two black-bodied, blue-legged Crèvecoeurs, and two Cuckoo Marans that laid chocolate-brown eggs. The man of the house took overly aggressive roosters to a nearby slaughterhouse and then cooked them on the grill. The family dreamed of expanding into a full-fledged urban egg farm, of coming home from the office to clean chicken shit. What was going on here? “It’s this new thing,” a friend told me knowingly. “I think it’s an urban back-to-the-land trend.” But I knew that producing food had already transformed at least one neighborhood in the 1990s: mine. And I wondered if it had happened before, throughout the city. I began to investigate. MORE than a century ago, far away in the little villages of eastern Europe, tired mothers crooned to their wakeful children the Sholom Aleichem lullaby: In America, there will be chicken soup in the middle of the week. They fulfilled that promise when they arrived in the newly constructed yet already crowded tenement buildings of my neighborhood, where they kept chickens, ducks, turkeys, and geese. There was squawking and clucking in hallways, apartments, basements, and narrow airshaft yards. It’s not hard to envision a mother walking up wood stairs in my building, carrying her young child past an occasional flapping and feathery flight to the windowsill. For how long has a rooster wakened the people of Fourth Street? A hundred years? Two hundred? How did history bring us to where we are? In an enormous, overdeveloped city with millions of citizens and hundreds of years of momentum, how do people mark the landscape with their own personal hunger? I decided to find out. I took the subway deep into the boroughs to meet people who grow vegetables and fruits and mushrooms, who fish and forage, who go clamming and trapping, who collect honey, who produce cheese and yogurt, who make beer, wine, hard liquor and liqueurs, who keep goats for milk, and quails, ducks, and

chickens for eggs, and who butcher city-grown rabbits, turkeys, roosters, and pigs. They invited me to rooftops and basements, rivers and fish tanks, fire escapes, window ledges, warehouses, packing plants, storefronts, breweries, wineries, and community farms. Some of them were misplaced rural folk dreaming farm dreams on the subway. They were next-generation foodies forever seeking a more complex and rustic thrill from the homemade. They were people of limited means looking to save or make money. They were eccentrics obsessed with process. They were sentimentalists chasing tradition; they were parents concerned with health. They were professional artisans, and they were manufacturers focusing on profit. They were philosopher-farmers trying to build a new American urban life. In the most heavily built urban environment in the country, they showed me an organic city full of intrepid people who want to make things grow. In libraries and archives and private homes, I paged through stacks of books, letters, journals, drawings, and photos related to the sugar trade in the 1700s, beer brewing in the 1800s, meatpacking in the 1900s. In a growing global metropolis, pumping out wealth, I began to piece together a picture of a hidden city where people concerned themselves with food and drink. Perhaps it's only natural that this behemoth of a port city early on became a center of commercial food manufacturing. At one time or another, the land that became New York City led national production of oysters, coffee, sugar, vegetables, milk, yogurt, ice cream, margarine, beer, and kosher wine. Long past the golden age of agriculture in New York, some urbanites continued to make their own basic foods. Homemade food appeared during times of economic, political, and cultural crisis. When people have lost their jobs or endured wars and prohibitions—in times of scarcity—they have been pressed into production. They have grown vegetables on the fire escape, kept rabbits for stews, and crushed grapes to make wine. They have foraged their own greens and berries in parks and brewed their own beer. Often they have been newcomers who insist on their own vision of the good life, in which food comes from trusted hands: their own or their neighbor's. Cities have resources that people can tap in surprising ways. Amid the concrete and glass and steel are untended bits of wildlife, where invasive Japanese knotweed can be gathered to use like rhubarb, beach plums can be picked by the water, tree ear fungus can be harvested for hot and sour soup, blackberries can be hunted in a shaded grove, and dandelion greens in the sun. Cities also have train depots and shipping docks, where grapes can be imported for making wine, hops and barley can be brought in for beer, and raw sugar for refining. Big warehouses and expansive rooftops provide space where people can innovate new ways of intensive farming. Unpoliced neighborhoods and genteel blocks will tolerate chickens; fish can be caught on piers and bridges and boats and in aquaponic systems and basement tanks. People will always find ways to summon these resources to survive and thrive. They will use the geography of the city, its soil, its water, its light, its space, its transportation connections, its human creativity and energy—and its hunger—to produce food. Look at old maps and you'll find food written all over the city in names that recall personal and local preoccupations. Parts of Harlem have been known as Goatsville and Pig's Alley. Hog Island, meanwhile, had been named by the Dutch who raised pigs there; Pigtown was an area in

the Flatbush section of Brooklyn where pigeon houses and chicken coops thrived as well as pigs; and Hog Town was a part of Midtown whose recidivist pig keepers resisted swine clearance efforts with guns. Various Bone Alleys grew up throughout the city near the homes of professional bone pickers; West Twelfth Street and West Thirty-Ninth Street were both once called Abattoir Place, after local businesses. On Skinner Street, now Cliff Street, butchers sold animal skeletons as well as hides still attached to horns and tails; people used the skulls to decorate their storefronts and carriages; and kids built animal-skin forts they would defend from other gangs. Pearl Street was named after the discarded oyster shells that littered it long ago. Sugar Loaf Street, today's Franklin Street, was named for a sugar house. On the Brooklyn waterfront, Java Street was named for the coffee unloaded from ships coming from the other side of the world. Mulberry Street, Cherry Street, Orchard Street, the Meatpacking District. Turtle Bay, where today you'd be hard-pressed to find turtle soup, and Coney Island, where few coney—rabbits—survive. The Bowery is named after Peter Stuyvesant's old Dutch farm, or bouwerij, that it once traversed. The first Europeans to land in what became New York Harbor found an eater's paradise: hillsides reddened with ripening strawberries; waters crowded with twelve-inch oysters and six-foot lobsters; walnut and chestnut forests and orchards of sweet apples and pears; skies darkened by throngs of blackbirds, quail, and partridges; grounds replete with gamboling deer, forty-pound wild turkeys, and Native American crops of squash, beans, and maize. For more than a hundred years after the Dutch settled Manhattan, Staten Island, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx in the 1600s, most everybody raised their own vegetables, pigs, and goats, and the occasional cow. Even after the English took over, many people still brewed their own beer, made their own wine, and tended beehives for honey. But by the early 1800s, new ideas of urbanity and sophistication were at odds with the presence of pigs, goats, and dirt plots of vegetables. New York could not be a world-class city and also collect fertilizer from a manure pit. The agricultural city became an industrial one; in 1865, Brooklyn had five hundred factories; by 1870, a thousand; by 1880, over five thousand. Suddenly, in a few quick decades at the end of the nineteenth century, the last of the farms became housing. The railroads had laid track for a national food network—no need to grow it all here. The subway and elevated trains allowed people to live farther from the city center, right on top of onetime crops. The idea of factory production became the norm, as sugar refineries, breweries, and wineries thrived throughout the city. Well-off city-born folk saw urban agricultural production as the sign of a dirty rube. New York was a food manufacturing city until after World War II, when planners began to view the city as too big, rich, and important to concern itself with such basic needs as food. The costs of land and labor rose and dirty industry was zoned out of city life. Food production receded from view. AS I continued to research this book, my conception of what I was writing changed. Taking the subway to meet people young and old, poor and rich, native-born and immigrant, I realized that I was uncovering an unseen city of thriving food production, full of practices that most New Yorkers don't share and aren't even aware exist. Unbeknownst to many chroniclers of the city, these practices have continued over time. I began to see how the history

of food is geography, immigration, culture, urban planning, science, technology, education, health, real estate, economics: the history of the city itself. This book is about all of those things, but it is most of all about how people express and share the impulse to create and sustain. People know this city for its ostentatious displays, its speed of life and change, its ability to tear things down and build back up. I was more interested in the intimate, homely city where food creates community, as among a few people netting tiny silvered fish near the mouth of the Bronx River, or founding a newfangled, old-style butcher shop where the butchers show the customers how to enjoy unusual cuts of meat. Food, of course, is about hunger. We eat what we miss and what we want to become, the foods of our childhoods and the symbols of the lives we hope to lead. And so many people continue to labor in a sometimes hostile environment to create something small, pure, odd, personal, transitory: food.

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What people say about this book

Jane Greensmith, "Convergence of Food, History, Gardening, and Evolution of Community. I love to visit New York and I love to read about food, gardening, and history. This book was a great combination of all four interests and the stories and people Shulman dug up were interesting and inspiring in various ways, though I definitely enjoyed some chapters more than others. My favorites were the chapters on honey/beekeeping, meat processing, vegetable gardening, and beer making, though the historical aspects of the sugar chapter rendered it worthy of inclusion. I really found interesting is the rules and regulations that evolve as a city/society's values ebb and flow. Beekeeping, for example, was in the not too distant past outlawed in the city, but now it is allowed again. People have converted vacant lots to vegetable patches during lean, leave-the-city times, and those same lots are now being swallowed by urban renewal. I also really liked reading about how various waves of immigrants worked to recreate the food from their homeland and youth, and how they worked in the different aspects of the food industry over the centuries that New York has been around. I'm visiting NYC again this spring and this book gave me a whole new set of places to check out, and a new perspective on the city that can only enhance my enjoyment of it."

A. Hall, "A great look at a hidden subculture. This book is an easy, interesting and highly entertaining read of how people who live in the modern city are continuing its agricultural roots in so many unexpected ways. These people are following traditions that most of us are unaware of like urban beekeeping, and farming in abandoned lots that go back to the founding of New York City. Robin Shulman makes these traditions come alive in the tales of the people who live by gradually taking their hobbies to the next level and becoming the gems of their neighborhoods. Their stories show that the urban population is not as disconnected from its environment as many people think. and even making simple choices can help them survive for a completely selfish reason: access to good, cheap, minimally processed food."

Genuinelimitation, "incredibly enjoyable read. i am not from new york, nor have i ever visited, and yet i found this an incredibly interesting read. filled with history along with modern "interpretations" of how people are creating their own localvore foodstream. Very inspiring. if you are interested in food and production of all types of food, this is a great book. i'd like ms. shulman to travel across the country and do this for other cities as well!"

mils, "Beautifully written. This book will be of interest to everybody interested in the history of, and the place of cities in, food production--well beyond aficionados of New York. It is beautifully written. Its vivid imagery will stick with you long after you close this book's cover. Built around a series of protagonists, it draws you in as a work of fiction."

PD, "Fun and informative read. Fun and informative read. Goes back and forth in history and the

present day with great clarity and imagination. I often think about these stories as I venture through different neighborhoods of New York. I actually came across Robin Shulman's writing about the topic of education. I blog link lead me to her work as a creative writer, too!"

Julie W, "Going to NY - a must-read!. Wonderful story about a side of New York that most don't know about."

Thomas Daley, "Fascinating. The Author knows her stuff. A top notch read on the history of food in New City and surrounding Burroughs. I was amazed that there is a growing number of contemporary roof gardens and urban growers. There are even some city slicker real free range chickens that end up being a chicken in every pot."

Marta, "Una inspiración. Los casos prácticos de este libro inspiran a cualquier profesional del sector y es un gran libro para iniciarse en el movimiento slow food."

The book by Robin Shulman has a rating of 5 out of 4.3. 39 people have provided feedback.

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