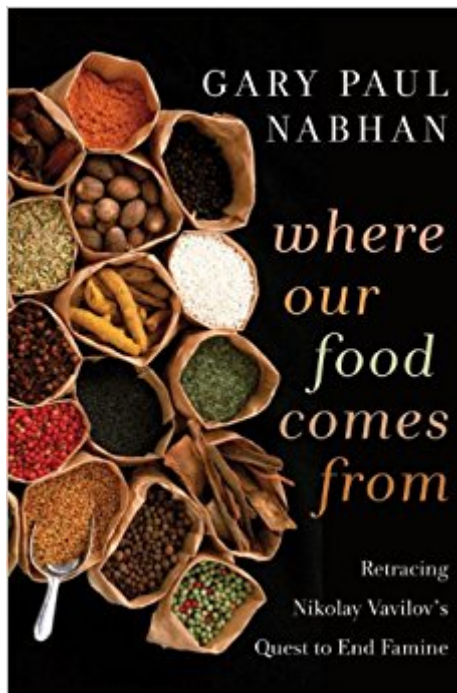




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# Where Our Food Comes From: Retracing Nikolay Vavilov's Quest To End Famine



## Synopsis

The future of our food depends on tiny seeds in orchards and fields the world over. In 1943, one of the first to recognize this fact, the great botanist Nikolay Vavilov, lay dying of starvation in a Soviet prison. But in the years before Stalin jailed him as a scapegoat for the country's famines, Vavilov had traveled over five continents, collecting hundreds of thousands of seeds in an effort to outline the ancient centers of agricultural diversity and guard against widespread hunger. Now, another remarkable scientist and vivid storyteller has retraced his footsteps. In *Where Our Food Comes From*, Gary Paul Nabhan weaves together Vavilov's extraordinary story with his own expeditions to Earth's richest agricultural landscapes and the cultures that tend them. Retracing Vavilov's path from Mexico and the Colombian to the glaciers of the Pamirs in Tajikistan, he draws a vibrant portrait of changes that have occurred since Vavilov's time and why they matter. In his travels, Nabhan shows how climate change, free trade policies, genetic engineering, and loss of traditional knowledge are threatening our food supply. Through discussions with local farmers, visits to local outdoor markets, and comparison of his own observations in eleven countries to those recorded in Vavilov's journals and photos, Nabhan reveals just how much diversity has already been lost. But he also shows what resilient farmers and scientists in many regions are doing to save the remaining living riches of our world. It is a cruel irony that Vavilov, a man who spent his life working to foster nutrition, ultimately died from lack of it. In telling his story, *Where Our Food Comes From* brings to life the intricate relationships among culture, politics, the land, and the future of the world's food.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Nine Must-Read Books" (on Eating Well) "Mixing the compulsively readable insights of a well-researched biography with the painstaking details of a scientific treatise, Nabhan offers a historical and contemporary framework for determining the viability of sustainable agriculture." (Booklist) "A blend of travelogue and biography, Nabhan's book is a sobering reminder that while food is necessary for our survival, it is not always easy to come by, nor is access to food completely under our control." (Bloomsbury Review)"

Gary Paul Nabhan is a world-renowned ethnobiologist, conservationist, and essayist. The author of *Why Some Like It Hot*, *Coming Home to Eat*, and many other books and articles, he has been honored with a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship and The John Burroughs Medal for nature writing. Founder and facilitator of the Renewing America's Food Traditions collaborative, he is currently a Research Social Scientist at the Southwest Center at the University of Arizona. See [www.garynabhan.com](http://www.garynabhan.com) to track his lecture and photo exhibit schedules.

This is a fascinating read and is for anyone moved to educate themselves on the preservation of the diversity of our food sources. What is compelling is the tribute and tracking of the intrepid Nickolay Vavilov who in Russia in the 1920s served his country and humankind by ethnobotanical field studies of the preservation of seed on 5 continents. His ironic death at the hands of Stalin for not staving off the starvation of the Russian masses is a travesty and tragedy and a harsh lesson not only politics, but ecology and botany. Gary Nabhan traces the history and work of this great Russian way-shower and points out the superb quest for preserving diversity from the hands of mono-cropping capitalist giants. It is not a political rant, as much as a sober tour of the greatest hotspots of remaining diversity, and a marvelous examination of seeds and culture as they pertain to landraces. If ever there is a precursor to taste of place and preservation of culture, it lies in the secrets revealed in this book. Terroir is not just seed and climate but the peoples and their linguistics and rituals around growing their plants, naming them and the rituals of preparing them. I personally feel this is a foundational book for the burgeoning seed library movement. It is also one of many greats by Nabhan who writes beautifully and understands the material so well. He is doing much for the revivification of our good sense and ecological wellbeing. After all we are the first generation ever that has been well and truly dislocated from their food sources.

While making sense of the spread of agriculture, our exploring writer Gary Paul Nabhan comes across melting glaciers in the Tajikistan Pamir mountains, near Afghanistan's Hindu Kush mountains. Other chapters explore Mediterranean Po River flood lands, ancient Levant's Mediterranean shores to Mesopotamia's Indian Ocean Tigris and Euphrates River banks, North African mountain and desert orchards, Khazak steppe land orchards, and even a 1930 Russian foodie lecturer, who was visiting the USA. This adds to books about Native American agriculture, and it extends books about (Ceylon = ) Shrilanka, Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia's Spice Islands. Have a good appetite!

For those who picked up this book thinking it was another timely tome taking advantage of the "locivore" movement, you will be disappointed. This book is much more than that and I would have gladly given it 4.5 stars if I could have, having only a couple of reservations about it. The core of the story is about the life and travels of the great Russian plant pathologist and geneticist Nikolay Vavilov. Vavilov is known for developing the theory that certain areas of the globe represent the centers of biological diversity for many of our agricultural crops and domesticated animals. These areas remain important as sources of great biological diversity not only for the wild species that still grow in the area, but also the many domesticated varieties, landraces, grown by the indigenous farmers. Vavilov also proposed that many areas of great biological diversity would occur concurrently with areas that had many ecological niches (due to changes in elevation, soil quality, moisture availability) in close association. The author, Gary Paul Nabhan an ethnobotanist and nutritional ecologist, retraces some of the collection trips made by Vavilov to assess the current conditions of those areas to see if they are still practicing their local forms of agriculture, utilizing their native crops and if the natural ecosystems that harbor the wild ancestors of the crop species are still intact. Over and over, the author stresses the need to preserve these areas as sources for genetic diversity which might be needed to develop new cultivated varieties. He also stresses how the indigenous people need to be encouraged to continue their traditional forms of agriculture as means of preserving their culture, so they can continue to be stewards of the local biodiversity and as a means to protect their food supply. These recurring themes will be familiar to those who might have read "Why Some Like It Hot: Foods, Genes and Cultural Diversity" by the same author, a book which focuses on how many cultures and their foods have evolved and adapted together. My only reservation in recommending the book is it seems at times to be a bit preachy and to rely on rhetoric to persuade the reader to the point of view that modern, industrial agriculture is far inferior to the

methods used by indigenous peoples for thousands of years to domesticate their crops and feed themselves. Should you happen to be employed in the seed industry, or even be one of the architects of modern agriculture (a plant breeder), you might want to brace yourself for a bit of abuse from the authors. In the foreword to the book Ken Wilson, the Executive Director of the Christensen Fund, writes, "That greater effectiveness in plant breeding comes from allowing all knowledge to be applied to the problem we know from masses of experience(both positive and negative). The fact that other approaches still get the majority of funding is because of private interests, and sometimes because of the vanities and narrowness of training and perspective of the actors." Nabhan writes in his section on the native farmers of the Sierra Madre Mountains in Mexico, "...the notion that there might be one superior maize cultivar that will meet all community needs is considered to be a folly among indigenous folk of the sierras; nevertheless it remains the pipe dream of some plant breeders." And in the epilogue Nabhan makes his strongest statement in favor of traditional farming methods, "Moreover, the corporate and academic plant breeders who are the most common recipients of seeds from those repositories typically do work that is a poor substitute for that done on-farm by "vernacular plant breeders"--traditional farmers." So, if you are a professional plant breeder be prepared to be referred to as vain, narrow-minded and poorly trained by the authors of this book.

Love it

A wonderful book filled with facts and stories about the truth of our current food supply. A definite must read for anyone who is interested in Nutrition, healthy living or a healthy planet.

Absolutely great book that expanded both my understanding of the role of genetic diversity in crop production and the unrealized influence politics has on global food security.

I already wrote one a couple of days ago. Valuable book for it's history of food/seed conservation and for understanding what's at stake with all the troubles in the Fertile Crescent and feeding all the migrants from Asia and Africa. This book is a MUST for all libraries.

top notch survey of Nikolay Vavilov's worldwide exploration of the sources of our food and some of the modern problems with modern seed sources.

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