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# MINUTES

with **Michael Perry**



*Michael Perry* is the author of several bestselling memoirs including *Coop: A Year of Poultry, Pigs and Parenting*, a humorous rendition of living in a rickety farmhouse in rural Wisconsin with thirty-seven overgrown acres, a dozen chickens, two pigs and a baby on the way.

Perry was raised on a small dairy farm and worked on a ranch in Wyoming for five summers. His skills include running both forklifts and pitchforks, operating a backhoe, milking cows in the dark and, of course, raising pigs. I caught up with him at the Wisconsin Local Food Summit in Eau Claire where we had a lively discussion about what pigs eat, organic farming, and – in an ironic turnabout – being bitten in the ass by pigs.

### Q. Why pigs?

I just plain like having pigs.

In my book I wrote how the very first afternoon we had them, I was up in my office over the garage and the farm – fallow for years – seemed somehow energized, as if the presence of those two animals gave the land a purpose again. I don't mean to get carried away, but the farmstead really felt different, even with the pigs out of sight.

I feel good when I expand their paddock and watch them shove their noses into fresh dirt, rooting around

just like they were engineered to do. They're protein plows.

For us, the "local food" element is secondary. I grew up eating local food. So I don't think so much in terms of a "movement." Rather, our raising the pigs is a natural response to a natural opportunity. Much the same as how this spring and summer we are foregoing the pigs so that we can do some fencing and re-introduce grazing animals to this little patch.

### Q. How many pigs have you raised?

We had two pigs the first year, and the second following year we doubled our operation. I used to make jokes about corporate farming and trying to increase our profit base. This is our third year of raising pigs, and we have four again this year.

### Q. What do you feed them?

We have all this land that's not been farmed, so we planted certain crops that would feed both ourselves and the pigs. One year we had sweetcorn that we planted right next to the pig pen,

and when we'd had all that we wanted, we let the pigs at it. We have also fed the pigs Jerusalem artichokes and rape (aka canola), which we planted next to the pigs as well. (Our chickens love the rape too, by the way.)

I do have a pig feeder to buy feed mix, and I have it available to them, although if we give them lots of fresh food, they'll simply top off on feed.

We also take goat milk that we receive from a friend of ours who milks goats, and we feed the pigs the milk mixed with buns from a local bakery. For ten dollars I get a pickup load full of hot dog buns.

That pretty much represents how we do things: middle of the road. We're not cutting edge. We're not doing things organically.

We do tell people who come to visit the farm what we feed the pigs, and that the meat isn't organic. Our customers are more interested in the sustainability of local food production than purchasing organic meat – they care about the fact that the pigs come from our yard... from someone they know.

**Q. You mention that last year, your pigs would not eat anything. Can you tell me a little more about that?**

They wouldn't eat anything I fed them! It was really disappointing.

I had beginner's luck the first year. The pigs ate everything, even nettles, although after a certain point they got finicky about them – I think because they get fibrous. But I was so proud of myself! These pigs would eat anything! I cut grapevines we had everywhere; they devoured the grapevines... The second year was pretty much the same.

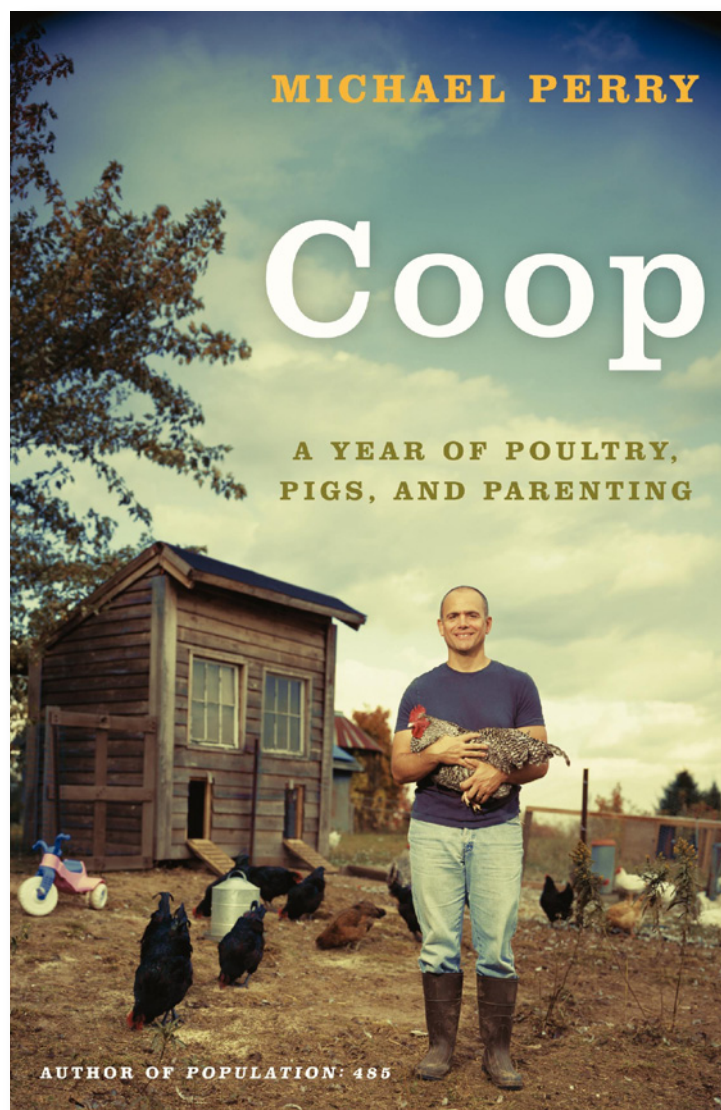
But this year, the pigs would turn up their nose, and I could never figure it out. At first, I thought they weren't feeling well. Then I thought it was because I was letting them have too many treats like hot dog buns and goat milk. I was always trying different things.

I'd be hardcore with them too. They were eating all the feed and not eating the free stuff, so I just took away the feed. We planted a whole bunch of potatoes, extra potatoes, it was cheap to grow a lot of them. And we turned them onto the potatoes. They dug up all the potatoes but they wouldn't eat them!

We had apple trees and I thought there was free food everywhere, but they wouldn't eat the apples! I tried boiling them and they would kind of eat them when I boiled them. The problem with that solution is that I would have to take fallen apples, put them in a big tub and use electricity to boil them because they wouldn't eat the apples...

One day a pig was standing there with a big red apple in his mouth and I just thought, "Hold that thought."

They were consistently persnickety. I've never seen it before.



**Q. What do you think people who eat pork should know about pigs?**

You shouldn't feel bad about eating a pig, because a pig will happily eat you. They'll tear you up.

The first day we got our pigs, my daughter was with me and they're scurrying around and she goes, "Oh they're so cute! I'm gonna name them. I'm gonna call that one Wilbur, and that one's Cocklebur!"

**"You shouldn't feel bad about eating a pig, because a pig will happily eat you. They'll tear you up."**

And I said, "Okay, but you know, they're cute little things now, but we are raising them to eat them." And she said, "I know, I know," and I thought, *I hope she does.*

Two weeks later, our city relatives came to visit and they went out to the pigpen and I went to the slop bucket and my daughter was already down there and she said, "Yes, that one's Wilbur and that one's Cockerbur but in October, that one's Ham and that one's Bacon." She definitely got the idea.

We had them and they were cute and my daughter liked them... So I call my brother who has raised pigs many times and I said, "I have a problem. The pigs are pretty cute and fun to watch and I don't know if I could butcher them." My brother responds

feeling badly, because I was raised that you don't shoot something unless you eat them. But I was also taught never to eat a rabbit if the ground isn't frozen, because of diseases like tularemia. So I fed the pigs the rabbits and they just chewed them up – they just tore them apart.

And then I thought, is it bad to feed the pigs raw meat? What if they get some weird disease? Could I try to sell them by saying, "Stick a fork in our rabbit-fed pork"?

**Q. Any favourite recipes?**

I don't have a favorite pork recipe, but one of my favorite very-local foods is Italian sausage made from pork and venison - both raised within walking distance of the house.

Mind you, if I mentioned a co-op and wanting to be organic to my NASCAR-loving brother-in-law, he'd not only say no, he'd not want to be associated with that. Not everyone embraces organic food.

But when my brother-in-law and I talk about it, he says, "I just want to know where the bacon came from. I wanna know where my eggs came from." When a guy like that, who would never consider himself a part of any movement, has thought about where his food comes from, that's heartening.

I'm hesitant to consider myself part of any movement because I'm certainly no leader in this respect. I get my food six ways to Sunday.

So I'm not necessarily organic, but local (as in from the local commu-

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by saying, "By the time they're big enough to butcher, you won't feel that way anymore."

He was right, pigs are incredibly aggressive; they try to bump you down, they try to bite you...

We just had a woman near here who was knocked down and savaged by her pigs and couldn't get up. They were tearing her apart, but luckily her neighbours heard her and came and intervened. I got bit in the ass once while wrestling a pig. Pigs are omnivorous.

We were overrun with rabbits one year, and I was shooting rabbits and

**Q. Would you be organic if money were no object?**

Well, that's hard to answer, because money is an object. If you want to be realistic, you do have to talk about money. I will admit that I am a middle of the road guy. I can't do it all.

My own father was pretty much a standard dairy farmer until his 60s and then got certified as an organic farmer, and this worked out very nicely. I have another friend who's a very successful organic farmer, not a huge farm but he has a fairly large one.

nity as well as our back yard) food is definitely an ever-growing part of our diet, you bet. And commerce as well. Three times this week my wife used our eggs to barter: once for raw milk, once for some hardware, and once for help with chores.

I am very heartened by the local food thing. What's nice is that we're even talking about it and thinking about it, and it has created a thoughtfulness and an awareness about food.