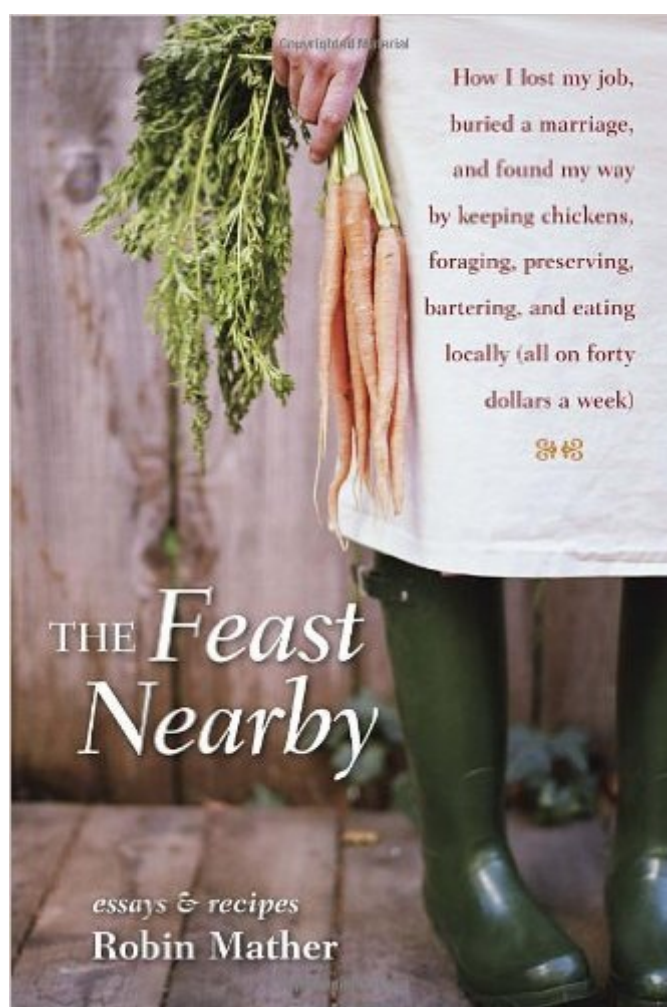


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# The Feast Nearby: How I Lost My Job, Buried A Marriage, And Found My Way By Keeping Chickens, Foraging, Preserving, Bartering, And Eating Locally (all On \$40 A Week)



## Synopsis

Within a single week in 2009, food journalist Robin Mather found herself on the threshold of a divorce and laid off from her job at the Chicago Tribune. Forced into a radical life change, she returned to her native rural Michigan. There she learned to live on a limited budget while remaining true to her culinary principles of eating well and as locally as possible. In *The Feast Nearby*, Mather chronicles her year-long project: preparing and consuming three home-cooked, totally seasonal, and local meals a day--all on forty dollars a week. With insight and humor, Mather explores the confusion and needful compromises in eating locally. She examines why local often trumps organic, and wonders why the USDA recommends white bread, powdered milk, and instant orange drinks as part of its low-cost food budget program. Through local eating, Mather forges connections with the farmers, vendors, and growers who provide her with sustenance. She becomes more closely attuned to the nuances of each season, inhabiting her little corner of the world more fully, and building a life richer than she imagined it could be. *The Feast Nearby* celebrates small pleasures: home-roasted coffee, a pantry stocked with home-canned green beans and homemade preserves, and the contented clucking of laying hens in the backyard. Mather also draws on her rich culinary knowledge to present nearly one hundred seasonal recipes that are inspiring, enticing, and economical--cooking goals that don't always overlap--such as Pickled Asparagus with Lemon, Tarragon, and Garlic; Cider-Braised Pork Loin with Apples and Onions; and Cardamom-Coffee Toffee Bars. Mather's poignant, reflective narrative shares encouraging advice for aspiring locavores everywhere, and combines the virtues of kitchen thrift with the pleasures of cooking--and eating--well.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I just finished this book after receiving it the day after it was released, and my only complaint is that it wasn't longer! I would love to linger with this author a while more. Ms. Mather's story was moving and inspiring, and I really finished feeling that I could move towards a goal of buying my food more sustainably using the book as a guide. Along with the autobiographical essays, there are delicious sounding recipes (I can't wait to start making them!) and practical wisdom offered about how to put food by in more unusual ways than the strawberry jam we're all used to (although there is a recipe for strawberry jam as well). I also love that the author's tone was not at all self-congratulatory; rather, the author reminds us that this is actually the way people used to live, in a time before huge supermarkets where out of season produce is available year round and when people were more resourceful.

I must admit that I am very familiar with Robin Mather, who worked at the Detroit News at a time when I was a brand new wife trying to figure out what to do with a kitchen and a husband. An article she wrote about making a vegetable soup out of bits of things in her refrigerator and larder gave me the courage to make a soup from scratch, it was entirely successful. That soup was my epiphany and now I am a very good cook. I thank Robin for that. This lovely book contains more of the same from Robin Mather, with a heartbreaking and ultimately triumphant story to round out the carefully thought out recipes that accompany each chapter. I plan on using it as a template for the rest of the year, and armed with the knowledge Robin gives on shopping and technique, I can try to cook seasonally. Robin Mather, along with being a great cook, is a very good writer, graceful and deliberate with her words. Reading this book is like having a relaxed conversation with your (much smarter and more articulate) good friend. She makes a gentle point about what we are doing to ourselves with our over-indulged palates when there are wonderful things to savor with every month. Rural Michigan must seem like a winter wasteland for fresh produce, Robin proves this wrong. I am glad Robin emerged from her terrible horrible year successfully, and am looking forward to reading more (and more) from this wonderful writer. Buy this book, buy this book for your foodie friends. (Not really Robert S. Ingalls but his happily cooking wife Barbara)

The subtitle of Robin Mather's *The Feast Nearby* is a mouthful (pun intended), but it sums the book up nicely: "How I lost my job, buried a marriage, and found my way to keeping chickens, foraging,

preserving, bartering, and eating locally (all on forty dollars a week)."Robin Mather is a seasoned food writer and editor, having written 30 years for papers such as Chicago Tribune and The Detroit News and now at Mother Earth News. The Feast Nearby is her second book; the first, published in 1995, Garden of Unearthly Delight: Bioengineering and the Future of Food, perhaps before its time, discussing the two sides of eating locally or eating genetically modified foods. The book caught my attention for several reasons. I have been eating predominantly locally grown, organic foods for some years now, and find myself as enthused about this food adventure today as I was when I first started. More so. I still can't believe what I've been missing most of my life in terms of culinary joy. But I was also intrigued because the cottage to which Mathers moved was in the neighborhood where I'd lived once--near Delton, in Michigan's Barry County. I was also curious about Mather's claim to eat local and organic foods on \$40 a week. Not that I am not already a believer. I don't spend much either, and I don't even can and preserve, but I do hear that complaint more often than I can count--that eating organic is too expensive. I'm still baffled by that. I spend less on groceries today than I did when I bought my food at the supermarket, packaged and wrapped. Cooking from scratch is almost always less expensive. Add to that the joys of cooking with friends and family in the kitchen and at the table and, well, you get the idea of real value for your food dollar. One might say that people tend to compare apples to oranges when they talk about cost. As Mather so well illustrates in her book, eating this way doesn't have to cost more. It tends to cost less. What does change, however, is one's eating habits. For me, this happened quite naturally once I started buying more of my food at farmers markets or even directly from the farmer, right on the farm. It became a new lifestyle, one that I enjoy immensely. It involves community, friendships, the building of enjoyable relationships that revolve around food ... and who doesn't know that when you throw a good party, more times than not, everyone ends up in the kitchen? Mather's lifestyle change and food adventure evolve from what must have surely been a week from hell. As so many journalists, she was laid off from her newspaper job. That's bad enough, but this happened within days of hearing from her 12-year husband that he wanted a divorce. Ouch and ouch. Whether Mather really is such a trooper or she just keeps it to a low simmer, but her book does not show much anguish or turmoil at such a double whammy. This isn't a book about shedding tears or general introspection. She simply packs up her dog, Boon, and her bird, Pippin (later to be joined by cat, Guff), and moves to the summer cottage in southwest Michigan the married couple had owned but the now single woman makes a permanent residence. Time to set up a budget. Mather does what she does best: she shops for good food on a smart dollar, getting to know the locals in the process. As those who eat organic food and shop locally know, you soon learn to change how you eat, planning your

menus around what is available when, rather than buying the items to meet the menu. One eats in season, and science is beginning to show that this may prove to be best for our health--and our wallet. Mather is a good cook, and the 150 or so recipes she intersperses between her seasonal essays are good recipes. That is, I haven't tried them yet, but I plan to, and they were simple enough that I could read them with enjoyment, almost as if part of the preceding essay, a continuation of her story. They mostly use local foods, yet include a pinch of this or a dollop of that, bringing them a touch of the gourmet. For those who live in the area described, as I do, I especially enjoyed reading about local markets. In fact, as I write this, my plan for the approaching weekend is to find the local butcher shop she describes, Geuke's Market in Middleville, Michigan, and stock up my own freezer. Reading about it once again made me realize why so many are so enthused about local markets. When she described the food available there, she also described the owner, Don Geuke, and the first seed of a food relationship is sown. That's something you never experience in the supermarket. For those seeking a gritty story about a woman handling life upheaval, this isn't it. Mather's style is gentle storytelling, and she doesn't go deep. Her way is more to skim the fat off the surface and make a fine presentation, leave the rest up to you. The reader doesn't develop an intimate relationship with this author, but that may not have been her intent. Save the intimate relationship for reader and dish. This is a blend of cozy essay and cookbook, a nurturing nudge toward considering a more sensible and more sustainable lifestyle--and leave the excuses about financial constraints behind. If we are a society that has forgotten how to cook, or how to keep a kitchen and a well-stocked pantry, Mather will be just the spice you need. Pull your chair to the table, read and eat the many flavors you've been missing.

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