

RUTH
TRUSTS
LAND.
TRUSTS
RIGHT

REICHL
THE
IT
HER
BACK.

One of the contemporary food world's most eminent voices has walked us through decades of unfamiliar territory and showed us a culinary world far beyond our own table. Now the memorist, critic, editor and holder of six James Beard awards takes our food chain all the way down to its roots. By JANET MERCEL Photographed by SHANNON GREER



Ruth wears a Helmut Lang grey
moto vest over her own white tee

Ruth wears Ann Demeulemeester blazer
Comme des Garçons button up
AG jeans, Miyake sneakers



RUTH REICHL IS LOOKING AT MY TATTOOS. Her eyes flit to my arm ink halfway through our first conversation, and the opportunity is too kismet for me to pass up. I point out “Song of Songs,” a reference to the Old Testament’s Book of Solomon inscripted on my skin for the better part of a decade. I’m not particularly religious but the words are a permanent reminder that, when overpowered by the emotional senses—romantic love, sex, rage—the basic comforts of food, earth and home are grounding.

I know it means something to Reichl, too, because the most famous passage gave her the title of one of her many best selling memoirs, *Comfort Me with Apples*. The biblical story features a woman who finds pride and beauty in working with her hands, tending her vineyard and caring for the soil and grapes. She turns the labor into a sensuous game with her lover, in a very pre-industrial age when practical, non-wage earning work gave people a deep sense of contentment. Reichl knows something about that, too.

In the early 1970s, after leaving New York, (and her apartment on the still derelict Bowery where she gave cooking lessons to a Warhol Superstar) but before returning to her home city twenty years later as the tide-turning *New York Times* restaurant critic, she contributed her part to revolutionizing food culture in California. In the early days, she co-worked at the pioneering farm to table restaurant collective, The Swallow, while living in a Berkeley commune. Governed by a fierce resistance to commercial agribusiness, she and her cohabitants willingly grocery shopped in dumpsters as the ultimate exercise in non-waste.

Those idealistic years still seep hugely into Reichl’s work to this day, and after that, as a restaurant critic and food editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, she learned never to be afraid of making high profile enemies of the establishment. At the *NYT* in the 1990s, her reviews championed Thai noodle joints, Korean barbeque and Japanese omakase, enraging culinary gatekeepers who screamed “off with her head!” in protest to their unsolicited cultural awakening. (Don’t worry, she also logged plenty of hours at the Lutèces and Le Cirques of this world, and isn’t above giving Daniel Bouloud four stars when it’s fair.) During her ten year tenure as the last editor in chief of *Gourmet*, she published incendiary pieces by writers like David Foster Wallace and Junot Díaz, forcing a media nation to accept that food writing isn’t about food—it’s about humanities, politics, psychology, economics, civil rights and health care (and food.) And perhaps most provokingly of all at the time, she featured cupcakes on the cover, broadening the reach of the revered magazine to a new legion of foodies.

Maybe no one but Reichl has been able to appreciate the cordoned enclave of the epicurean elite, while also opening access to the people, in quite the way she has. And the more she tells me about her current projects, I realize that after fifty years of challenging the status quo, her ability to reach across the socioeconomic aisle may be more valuable than ever.

“I used to say we could just ‘vote with our dollars by shopping

ethically,’” Reichl says, “but I’ve changed my attitude about that over the years, especially in the last two. It is a systemic government problem and it’s just not that simple.” In March 2020, she began connecting with food professionals of every stripe, Zooming six hours a day, every day, with chefs, farmers, fisherman, cheesemongers- every kind of producer all over the country and beyond. Someone, she says, had to keep a record of what was happening in the supply chain.

“I started by talking with chefs. People are interested in chefs, they’re very vocal and the connection point to the public. But I very quickly turned to farmers. They were so much more interesting. I talked to everyone, from very conventional ones in Iowa to a poster child for regenerative practices in Georgia.” After more than two years gathering the perspective of vendors and laborers, Reichl is in the editing process of a documentary with filmmaker Laura Gabbert, who directed *City of Gold*, the chronicle of the late Pulitzer Prize-winning restaurant critic, Reichl’s friend and contemporary, Jonathan Gold.

Her interest in land preservation hearkens back to the Berkeley days. Surrounded by California visionaries, Reichl developed lifelong kinships with fellow icons like chefs Alice Waters and Nancy Silverton, a trio of early female food influencers who have been reimagining the public’s idea of sustainable restaurateuring for decades. But in 2002, while editor of *Gourmet*, she published an article about land trusts for farmland on both coasts, a safeguard generally reserved for public spaces and parks. The Hudson Valley’s trust efforts were vastly out of proportion to the land itself, given that the area was developed agriculturally a century longer than California, with many holdings family owned for generations.

It touched a nerve in Reichl, who’s been in Spencertown, twenty minutes outside Hudson and less than ten from Chatham, for thirty years. It did in me also, reading it two decades later. The three upstate farms in the piece are in my hometown. I grew up on those properties, shopped their produce with my mother, went to the same school as the farmers’ kids. I’ve always heard about local owners’ land-rich-cash-poor struggles with development and community bureaucracy. I never knew that strategies for multiple revenue streams were a source of embarrassment for some of them, like grand estates in Great Britain’s crumbled postwar economy, forced to charge ticket holders for tours of their homes just to pay the land taxes. “Entertainment farming,” like Pick Your Own Apples, cider donuts and hayrides, anything to sustain cash flow. But for some farmers, it takes attention away from what they’d rather be doing- farming.

“Farmers are astonishing to me,” Reichl says. “Americans do not understand what a difficult life it is.” Longstanding relationships with local growers and producers have ramped up her extremely vocal advocacy of a living wage for farmers and farm workers. She talks frequently on how we need to respect the people raising our food with the same honors as those preparing it. Why is there no James Beard award for producers? It may start with an interest in food, she says, but it always goes back to the land.

When *Gourmet* unexpectedly shuttered in 2009, Reichl retreated and home base became the upstate house, itself an ode to her “view lust.” The mile long driveway leads to a plateau of verdant land with its own microclimate, abutting the Hudson River. “The sun could be shining half a mile away and it will be snowing at our house,” she says, which was inspired by architect William Kesling’s 1936 modernist masterpiece, The Beery House in West Hollywood. (The link between Reichl’s east and west coast roots is unbreakable.) The “impervious” serpentine stone counters she

“FARMERS ARE ASTONISHING TO ME. AMERICANS DO NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT A DIFFICULT LIFE IT IS”

installed flow into the landscape beyond the glass, creating the illusion that she and her husband live in one big, green box of light. She describes the design of the kitchen when we first meet, jumping up to demonstrate that the distance of the sink to the stove is exactly within her arm’s length for maximum functionality.

It is here Reichl lives her small town, “Jane Austen life,” where the postmaster can deliver mail to locals without the need of a surname, and where she has carefully cultivated a loyalty to community vendors. She has her favorites, with the throughline that they’re all deeply attached to origins and regional food security. “The marketplaces around here are some of the best I’ve ever seen,” she says.

But while I have one of the world’s greatest contemporary food critics in front of me, I want to talk about restaurants. When she does go out, she goes to Rivertown Lodge, in Hudson, and GioBatta Alimentari in Tivoli. I tell her how, at least ten years ago, GioBatta’s Francesco Buitoni came by a yard sale at my parents’ property and bought my grandfather’s old mortar and pestles and woodblocks. (I always wondered what culinary fate awaited them.) “He was one of the first to be doing farm-to-table before there was a term for it. They wanted to be able to serve local food; that was a very new idea at the time. I love the fact he’s still doing it. You know he’s pasta royalty, right?” Reichl asks me. (I’ll let Google fill you in on that one.)

Because Reichl loves a side of education with her meal, she is drawn to places with larger messaging. She has enormous regard for chef Dan Barber at the two-starred Michelin restaurant and farm, Blue Hill at Stone Barns, where a meal includes a tour of the gardens and grounds where the majority of the menu is harvested. “He thinks of the restaurant as a teaching institution. Dan has the best food mind of anyone I’ve ever spoken to.” It was Barber who looked around his kitchen, with its produce and animals raised as

close to zero waste as possible, and acknowledged they were going through hundreds of pounds a week of “dead product,” aka wheat flour. Hence Barber Wheat, the whole grain variety he developed that grows on premises. Reichl tells me about Wild Hive Farm in Clinton Corners. The beekeepers have been producing honey for thirty years, and evolved into a grain operation that serves as a model for wheat producers as far as Turin, Italy. Local terroir is no longer the domain of grape growing, but a considered element crossing into crop management of all kinds.

These are the kinds of conversations Reichl spends her time having. The kind that led to her documentary, and to policy people in Washington, the ones who draft and pass agriculture legislature throughout America, which led to the washing away of any vestige of naïveté she may still have held about crafting a more sustainable world. “Every farmer in this country goes begging and groveling to the USDA to obtain their annual loan, and wonders all year if they can pay it back. It takes three to five years to transition to organic processes. It makes it very difficult to advance.”

“I didn’t know any of this ten years ago,” she says. “The importance of building up your land instead of depleting it. The need for land trusts and conservancies is one option for economic viability, and is even bigger now. We used to think just going to your local greenmarket was enough.” While all these efforts may be in the name of preservation, they’re also in the service of something Reichl believes many Americans in the grip of industrial food production have forgotten about—taste.

One clear economic incentive for farmers to go organic, she explains, is that they can get more for their product at market. She looks almost as though she could weep when describing the difference between a commercially raised strawberry—hard, white in the middle, big as a baby’s fist and tasting of nothing—with the flavor and aroma of a deep red, teeny-sized local berry.

As a teenager, I was sent one day to pick a bucket of blueberries at one of the local farms down the road from our house. (For me, very much a non-event.) A group of tourists from the city were picking nearby in the field and one of them shrieked, panicked, “How do I know which ones I should be picking?” With a complete lack of irony, his companion answered, “I guess just take the ones that are bigger and blue, like they look in the carton at the store.” I felt bad for those people, so disconnected from their food that they didn’t know the difference between ripe and unripe. That was more than twenty years ago, and people like Reichl have done their damndest to make the passage of food into pop culture more emollient, and to educate the public about the people and places behind what they consume. To make it known that eating, as she says, is the ultimate ethical act, and that no one need ever again be terrified by a blueberry bush.

Photographer SHANNON GREER

Creative Director NHI MUNDY

Stylist ISE WHITE

Hair/Beauty REBECCA ALEXANDRA

Photo Assistant SOPHIE DISCH

Ruth wears Todd Oldham robe
Yves St. Laurent silk shirt, AG jeans

