

# A Conversation with Tamar Haspel about **TO BOLDLY GROW**

**How did your life change when you decided to move from Manhattan to Cape Cod, and when did you decide to write a book about it?**

It was a full-out lifestyle U-turn. All of a sudden, we could do all kinds of things city life didn't offer—gardening, fishing, foraging, and also not worrying about whether you're making too much noise and disturbing your neighbors.

All of that (except the noise-making part) made me start looking at food differently, which in turn made me think my husband, Kevin, and I could manage to eat one food a day that we grow or gather, hunt or fish. It started off as something between a lark and a project, but it got more compelling as we got deeper into it.

I wrote about it as we went along, but it became a book when I realized that the project had changed me in some fundamental ways.

**How do you define “first-hand food” in your own words?**

It's completely straightforward: any food you get with your own two hands, whether you grow it (tomatoes, but also livestock), forage it (mushrooms!), hunt it (for us, that's venison), or fish it (which we spend an ungodly amount of time doing).

**You and your husband, Kevin, have taken on some wild projects, like making sea salt, smoking fish, and catching lobsters. What are some of the most delicious things you've eaten since starting this food journey?**

It's such a long list! At the top, I'd have to put fish. I didn't realize how big the difference was between fish you buy (even at the very best markets) and fish you catch. A black sea bass or a fluke right out of the water is a beautiful thing. But there are also wild mushrooms, homegrown tomatoes, and of course those lobsters.

***To Boldly Grow* is about food, but it's also about nudging the edge of your comfort zone. What are some of the most challenging, and rewarding, things you've accomplished (or failed spectacularly at)?**

This was the most surprising part of the entire undertaking—that it turned out to be more about the doing than the food. Our project kept Kevin and me on the steep part of the learning curve for many years, and it was satisfying and confidence building to be constantly acquiring new skills at a time when—ahem—we were at an age where you can start to go downhill.

That said, the single hardest thing I've done, hands down, is kill an animal I'm going to eat. That was also the most rewarding, precisely because it was the hardest. It was also the most important because now, after having killed many different kinds of animals, and eaten them all, I never eat meat without thinking of the animal it was. Slaughtering your own food connects you, viscerally, to the idea that food has to come from somewhere.

**In many ways, *To Boldly Grow* is a love letter—to your husband, to your community, and to the earth itself. Did you set out to write a love letter, and if not, were you surprised by the book once you'd finished writing it?**

That is such a great question, and the answer is no, I didn't set out to write a love letter. I set out to write about food and our adventures procuring it. But so much happened along the way, and the project turned out to be about a lot more than just growing shiitakes or building a chicken coop. Kevin and I embarked on this

together, and we learned side by side—about each other, as well as about gleaning dinner from the world around us. It turned out to be a joyful, positive way for us to connect both to the people who make up our community and to each other. And, yes, that surprised me—and it's one of the things that made the experience so compelling.

**You've written about food for 25 years, most recently in the award-winning *Washington Post* column "Unearthed." How was writing a book different from or similar to writing journalism? What themes, if any, resonate across all your work?**

The biggest difference is that *To Boldly Grow* is deeply personal. It feels like it's just inexorably about *me*. And Kevin, of course. But I wrote it because (like all memoir writers, I suspect), I hope there's a universal in there, something that will resonate with people and make them look at their own lives a little bit differently. Journalism is the opposite; I try to (mostly) factor my own experience out and look at the world as objectively as I can, given my inevitable human biases and foibles. There are common threads, though. I try to zero in on what's positive in the world and bring it to readers with enthusiasm and, on a good day, a little humor. And, of course, it's all about food.

**Do you have any advice for readers on how to start a first-hand food lifestyle? What would you say to someone who thinks they don't have a green thumb?**

For starters, don't think of it as a lifestyle! Most people already have a lifestyle, and the thought of changing it is pretty daunting. It's easy to think of all this as going hand in hand with a granola-crunching, Birkenstock-wearing worldview, or as a prepper hedge-against-Armageddon project. But it's neither—it's just something positive and constructive that ordinary people can do. You don't have to turn your life upside down. Just pick a small project that appeals to you—could be as simple as a windowsill herb garden—and see where it takes you. Think of it as an adventure, an experiment, a flier. If it doesn't work out, nobody's going to die on the table. You never know what will call to you until you try it.

**What message do you hope readers ultimately take away from your book?**

I think people want to eat better, and they also want to be better. Delving into first-hand food is a small, positive, adventurous step in that direction.

**If you could relocate to anywhere in the world and start a first-hand food journey there, where would you go? What would you love to grow/gather/hunt that you can't in Cape Cod?**

Kevin and I have this talk all the time! And our top criterion is that it be someplace different from the places we came from. The fun in all this is trying new projects and solving new problems. Although I'll add that I would dearly love a climate more friendly to fruit trees.

**What's next for you?**

I don't know yet. This book was over a decade in the making, and I have no idea what the next decade will bring. But writing *To Boldly Grow* helped me land on what's really important to me about my work: I want to bring joy, and a modicum of good sense, back to our collective relationship with food.

### Discussion Questions

1. *To Boldly Grow* is both a memoir and a how-to guide about the meals we grow, fish, or even hunt from the world around us. What drew you to this book?
2. What was your favorite chapter or passage in the book, and why?
3. What level of experience would you say you had with “first-hand food” before you picked up *To Boldly Grow*? How about after?
4. What has been your relationship with food, and do you think it has changed now that you’ve read *To Boldly Grow*? If so, how?
5. What is a favorite meal of yours to make, and do you look at that preparation process differently now? If so, how?
6. Was there something in *To Boldly Grow* that you were surprised to learn? If so, what was it and why was it surprising?
7. Have you ever failed spectacularly at something? If so, share that experience and what you learned from it.
8. Tamar and her husband made a big lifestyle change when they moved from Manhattan to Cape Cod. Have you ever made a change in your life similar to Tamar’s? What was that experience like, and what did you learn?
9. What was the biggest lesson you took away from reading this book?
10. What is the first step you plan to take with regard to “first-hand food” after reading *To Boldly Grow*?