The scythe is a difficult tool to use well. The classic accessory of the Grim Reaper, a scythe is about the length of a rake, with a handle at the top, another grip halfway down its wooden span, and a wide stretch of iron sickle at the end. To take down a plot of wheat, the user stands with feet planted apart and, hands tight on each wooden clasp, turns swiftly at the waist, keeping the blade close to the ground. The stalks fall in a wave, and then the mower steps forward and swings again, over and over through a field of grain.

Presumably, the scythe is a well-designed tool—otherwise it wouldn’t have been the harvester of choice for millions of people over the centuries. When the scythe is used as intended, the cutting motion should be graceful. The twist of the body and the turn of the scythe become almost sublime, as when in Anna Karenina Levin goes to harvest with his serfs and discovers in the repetitious work “moments of oblivion…the scythe itself his whole body, so unconscious and full of life.”

But for a novice twenty-first-century user who has never seen it done before—who doesn’t even know anyone who has—mowing with a long-handled scythe isn’t so easy. The waist pivot feels clumsy, the movement of the blade seems weird, and the grass falls in a mess every which way. Done poorly, it’s a chiropractor’s worst nightmare.

The difficulty of perfecting a scythe sweep was the first hard lesson of my wheat experience. The best laid plans of mice and men…indeed. I had planted wheat simply out of curiosity, to see what it would be like to cut, thresh, and winnow my own grain and to learn how to mill my own flour. The educational farm where I spent two summers is an organic fruit and vegetable operation. We grow dozens of varieties of apples, a rainbow of peppers, and all sorts of lettuces and tomatoes. But we’re not in the business of growing grains. The one hundred families in our Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program and the folks who come to our twice-weekly market stand are certainly appreciative of the fresh veggies we provide. We don’t, however, give them the very staff of life.

We don’t even grow grain for ourselves. Each week the farm bakes twenty loaves of bread—a thick, dark, sour rye. The organic flour, though, comes from China and so do all of the dry beans.

In this, we aren’t unusual among farms our size. While small growers have been able to thrive in the organic mixed-vegetable sector, there are hardly any small farms remaining that produce grain. The cultivation of wheat, rice, silage corn, oats, and dry beans is dominated by giant growers with thousands of acres. This is in part the natural consequence of the complexities of grain harvesting. All of the sowing, cutting, mowing, threshing, and winnowing makes most sense if done on a large, automated scale, with giant combines the size of McMansions. Cultivating wheat by hand is unknown in the industrialized world, nothing more than the memories of a dying generation of old-timers.

So what would it take to do it the old-fashioned way, how it has always been done in human history, since the dawn of the Neolithic revolution?

It takes quite a lot, I was to find. Our farm manager and I had planted the grain back in the fall, on a cold day just before Thanksgiving, right as the long season of California rains began. Now it was June, and the waist-high wheat, once a lush green, had faded to gold. Growing the wheat had been as easy as watching it get taller. But I knew the hand harvesting was going to be a chore, and so I had organized a group of farm apprentices, their friends, and spouses to do it all together—a community endeavor, just as in centuries past.

We were blessed with ideal weather. The sky was perfectly clear, blue skies above the blonde sweep of wheat. The crew—a band of aspiring young farmers and other industrial society skeptics—was as excited as I was for the novel experience. The thick stand of wheat had raised expectations for a large harvest, and as I laid out the plan for the day, the team gathered around enthusiastically.

But things quickly went wrong. Everyone had problems mastering the scythe; although we all gave it a try, no
one could quite figure out how best to work the thing. Frustrated, we turned to some Japanese hand sickles loaned by a farmer who lives up the coast. The Japanese sickle is much smaller, an eight-inch serrated blade on a short pine handle. Made for cutting rice stalks, the Asian tool proved just as useful on wheat. It was straightforward work: grab a bunch of wheat in your left hand, twist, and then quickly saw through with the knife. The job went smoothly, though the repetitive stooping was back breaking. Meanwhile, the European scythe lay cast aside on the ground, the novelty Smith & Hawken had probably meant it for.

The heat rising, we bent, cut, piled, and bent, cut, and piled again. Since we didn’t have enough hand sickles for everyone, some of the crew busied themselves with tying the wheat into *stooks*, or bundles. Standing on end, the wheat bundles were picturesque. But a few people began to complain of hay-fever rashes on their arms, the itching consequence of hugging giant sprays of wheat to tie them up.

Though we tried to work in an organized fashion, the field was in chaos. Wheat was falling all over the place. Several bundles had the seed heads facing both up and down. Big heaps of cut grain lay in disarray. Fumbling for a better method, someone asked if anyone had seen a photo, or an Old Masters painting perhaps, that showed what a peasant-mown field of wheat was supposed to look like.

We all stopped. At that moment—when we found ourselves relying on the musty halls of museums for clues on how to feed ourselves—it became clear just how far we had come from our food.

It’s a distance that is measured in ignorance or, perhaps more accurately, forgetfulness. For the knowledge of how to harvest wheat used to be as simple as common sense. Through the alchemy of a petroleum-based food system, the once mundane has become arcane. Something that used to be ordinary, growing wheat, is now a secret to be rediscovered—or reclaimed.

We could feel that ignorance now, as we realized with something of a shock that the mowing, hot and tiring in itself, was just the beginning. This wasn’t like lettuce harvesting, where all you do is cut and run. We still had the threshing to do, the crucial step of separating the seed head from the stalk.

*Above: By June, the waist-high wheat, once a lush green, had faded to gold and was ready for harvesting.*
*Photograph by Andrea Tencer © 2006*
Which also proved a challenge. Ten seconds into the threshing demonstration the flail I had built split right in half. This really wasn’t so surprising, since it was a badly rigged construction of bamboo, scrap wood, and nylon cord that I had reengineered from an illustration on the cover of a book of Wendell Berry poems. With my homemade thresher busted, we set up another system that consisted of a pair of pallets leaning up against two irrigation pipe racks. We arranged the wheat into bouquets—all of the heads at roughly the same height—and then whipped the hell out of them against the wood slats. Every smash down the pallets blasted some wheat berries out of their coatings and onto a tarp spread below. We found a washboard method to be most effective, and after three or four whips along the pallet, all you had left in your hand was a bunch of naked stalks.

With a few mounds of threshed wheat piling up, we decided to try our hands at winnowing. In the old etchings, you see the peasants gathered around a big cloth, throwing the seed into the air and letting the wind blow away the chaff. We tried this with our plastic tarp—and once again ran into trouble. The very first toss of wheat sent a stream of good berries straight over our heads. The hard-earned harvest scattered across the onion field. Not good.

So we tried something else. A pair of folks began pouring the berries from one five-gallon bucket into another, one person carefully tipping the plastic pail at shoulder height while the other fanned the stream with a piece of cardboard. Amazingly, it worked. The heavier berries rumbled into the bottom of the bucket, and the lighter seed coatings, the chaff, wafted away in the wind. It took about ten meticulous pours to get a clean bit of wheat.

The afternoon was waning and people were tired, so we decided to wrap it up for the day. Everyone gathered around to inspect the fruits of our labor. The harvest was gorgeous—a full bucket of plump, golden kernels, heavy by the handful. Proud of our effort, we hauled the pail down to the shed to weigh our work. The scale evened out at forty pounds. There were grins all around—until we did the math. It had taken a crew of eight people about five hours for that modest sum. There were still many stacks of unthreshed wheat piled in the field, and we hadn’t even thought about the time it would take to mill the wheat into flour for baking.

With the calculation of the sweat required to buy our sustenance, the final hard lesson sunk in: It does not come cheap or easy, the real price of earning our daily bread.