

Explore with a Localvore

by Shannon Brescher Shea



Bright red apples peek out from ribbed bushel baskets. Knobby potatoes, of more colors than I thought were possible, maintain their precarious stacked position. The smells of fresh baked goods waft through the air, tempting my nose. Samples of yogurt and cheese await my eager tastebuds. Am I in the newest grocery superstore? No, not even the best supermarket could provide the sunshine warming my back. Rather, I am wandering through my local farmers' market, just one of the many venues to buy local food.

I am a localvore, a picky eater with a purpose who has made a commitment to eat food grown and produced within my area. Through my decision to eat locally, I've discovered that local food has a variety of benefits to myself, my community, and the environment.

For most of human history, people had a close connection with their source of food. If the person did not grow their produce and grain themselves, they bought it from a neighbor. However, when agriculture embraced the Industrial Revolution, refrigeration, transportation, and mass production made it far more difficult to know our food's background. Although there are definite advantages of this system—such as the ability to eat bananas in chilly New York—it has also decreased our familiarity with our food. At the modern grocery store, we are lucky if there is a sticker identifying our fruit's or vegetable's country of origin. In contrast, the local food movement focuses on retrieving that lost knowledge, reconnecting us to the source of what we eat.

Although the idea of eating locally seems simple, researchers have developed the concept of “food miles” to compare “local” and “conventional” foods. For a single piece of produce, food miles measure how far the fruit or vegetable has traveled from where it was grown to where a consumer purchases it. According to a 1996 report, the average piece of produce travels well over 1,500 miles—or the distance between Buffalo, New York

and Denver, Colorado—to our stores. Imported produce, which constitutes about 20 percent of supermarket fruits and vegetables, is responsible for a large portion of this mileage. The average American meal includes at least five ingredients produced outside of the U.S.

However, these miles add up even more quickly when you consider products with multiple ingredients. Even a simple bowl of raisin bran includes wheat, raisins, wheat bran, sugar, corn syrup, salt, flavoring and a variety of vitamins and minerals. Many products require processing at a number of locations, so your food may have taken a multi-stop journey before reaching you.

Overall, the concept of food miles is useful shorthand for considering our food's origins. For example, a study by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University found that conventional produce traveled 27 times further than the same locally-sourced fruits and vegetables!

Like any traveler, produce must undergo preparation for its long journeys. These trips, whether by truck, plane or boat, require that the food is sturdy enough to stand up to the demands of time and transport. Unfortunately, many of the methods industrial agriculture uses to prepare food compromise its taste and quality. For example, most conventionally farmed tomatoes are picked green, so they can cope

with rougher handling and transportation. To give the tomatoes their red color, producers must expose them to ethylene gas during processing. Because they are often picked before they ripen, they generally don't taste as good.

In contrast, local food has often been picked only a few days earlier, just upon ripening. As it does not

Gardeners may even be able to pick up some tips to improve their own harvest! Local eating also provides a multitude of opportunities for children to learn more about nature, agriculture, nutrition and ecology. Some farms even have arrangements where consumers can help plant and harvest in exchange for a discount on the final product.

constitutes 11 percent of the energy used within the entire food system. Trucking vegetables across the country produces at least five times more carbon emissions than transportation of local crops. Produce flown in from other countries is even more damaging, as airplanes have much higher carbon emissions than other transit. These

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experience the same stresses, the produce can be fresher. For these reasons, most local eaters say that their prime motivation for eating locally is the foods' freshness, superior taste, and higher quality. In fact, some of the world's best-known chefs have returned to promoting the idea of local, seasonal food, including Emeril Lagasse and Jamie Oliver.

In addition, local eaters appreciate the ability to learn more about their food than they would be able to at a supermarket. Recent food safety concerns have exposed how little we know about our food's production and processing. Knowing the exact source of your food means that producers have a higher accountability for food safety. For meat, smaller herds at small farms are less likely to suffer disease outbreaks than large groups kept in industrial facilities. Buying directly from the farmer also allows the buyer to ask questions about farming methods. In a survey, 72 percent of all consumers wanted to know more about the pesticides used on produce. Buyers can also ask about their labor and animal husbandry practices.

Opportunities for learning about your food abound when you can speak face-to-face to the person who grew it. Personally, I appreciate local eating for its ability to forge a connection between the farmer and myself. I like discovering what is in season and how the crops are grown.

In reestablishing their connection to farming, local eaters also come to appreciate the environmental impacts of modern agriculture. Food transportation, whether by driving, shipping or flying, consumes a tremendous amount of fossil fuels. Transport alone

carbon emissions heavily contribute to climate change, which poses a significant threat to future crop production.

All of this transportation results in hidden costs to society, concealed by the prices of industrial agriculture. Although they do not show



Craig Walsh

Meat and dairy produced and purchased locally carry much less risk of disease, mostly due to smaller herd sizes.



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up on the food's price tag, society does pay for them in a number of ways. These costs include money to repair roads damaged by large trucks, remediate damaged ecosystems, and treat people suffering from respiratory diseases. If all of these costs were translated into currency, according to a U.K. study, the external costs for road transportation alone would raise the price of food by around six percent! However, some of these costs are becoming more apparent to consumers, as the price of gasoline continues to climb.

Buying food locally reduces the cost to society and supports your community's economy. Historically an agricultural state, New York still has a number of small farms.

However, these farmers often struggle because of the large investments and yields required for participation in the supermarket supply chain. But when you buy directly from farmers, they gather a much higher percentage of the profit than if the exchange went through an intermediary. In addition, local farmers often employ other local people, keeping the money you spend within the community. One Canadian study estimated that the farms that participated in one province's farmers' markets employed 24,000 people.

The economic benefits of local eating extend beyond the farms themselves. Every dollar spent directly buying from a farmer brings twice as much economic wealth to

Connect to Nature

New York Farmers' Markets:
www.nyfarmersmarket.com

The original "locavores" in San Francisco: www.locavores.com

The 100-Mile Diet Challenge:
www.100milediet.org

Information on Community Supported Agriculture and more:
www.localharvest.org

Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture: www.leopold.iastate.edu

Plenty by Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon, reviewed elsewhere this issue
The Omnivore's Dilemma and *In Defense of Food* by Michael Pollan
Animal, Vegetable, Miracle by Barbara Kingsolver



June is the month for strawberries in New York State. What better way to spend an afternoon than out in the sunshine picking fresh berries with friends and family?

the community than buying from a national or international store that would invest elsewhere. Farmers' markets even draw people from within and outside of the community to nearby businesses. In surveys, about 50 percent of consumers at farmers' markets said they shop in other stores as well.

The opportunities for eating locally are greater than ever before, and are constantly expanding. Farms in New York offer a huge bounty of fruits, vegetables, dairy, meat, and even grains to the interested consumer. One of the most popular locations for local buying is

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the farmers' market. Although some allow crafters and other vendors to participate, most markets consist of local growers and farmers selling goods directly to consumers. Currently, there are 4,000 markets in the United States, and more than 325 in New York alone.

Another option for consumers to pursue is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). In CSA programs, consumers buy a "share" of one farm, just as one might buy stock in a company. They pay the farmer a specific amount of money at the beginning of the year, lessening

the farmer's risk, and in return, receive a portion of the harvest throughout the season.

Other possibilities allow local eaters to dirty their own hands. You-pick farms and orchards are still scattered throughout New York, especially during the apple-picking season. Growing your own food, whether in your backyard or a community garden, provides a direct connection to the land. In addition, hunting and fishing often serve as sources of local food. People who hunt and fish locally enjoy the reward of hearty meals of fresh fish or game acquired with little environmental impact.

Eating locally isn't the sole solution to our industrial system's problems. However, its benefits to our local communities, economy and environment offer great potential to make our eating habits truly sustainable. Above all, eating a meal made from local, fresh, seasonal ingredients provides a sense of wonder and connectedness unavailable from any grocery store.

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