

Eat Local

Good for Your Health, Good for Your Community

In a world where the average U.S. food product travels 1,500 to 2,500 miles before reaching our dinner tables,¹ it is easy to lose touch with the origins of our food. Fortunately, people everywhere are embracing the local food movement. They are gaining access to healthful, tasty foods, preventing environmental degradation, and helping their communities to prosper.

The Fallacies of Industrial Agriculture

The conventional wisdom about the U.S. food supply is that industrial agriculture has given us a wide variety of food at a low cost. Unfortunately, the variety tends to come more from artificial flavoring and packaging than diversity of ingredients.² As for the price, when you take all the hidden costs of agribusiness into account, it is not so inexpensive, after all.

Industrial agriculture is not as efficient as it seems. To go from farmer to consumer, food travels over many miles and through many hands. With each step of manufacturing, packaging, marketing, and distribution, more of the money consumers pay for food is diverted away from U.S. farmers.

Meanwhile, in developing countries, free trade agreements are forcing farmers to adapt to an industrial model of agriculture so that they can produce food for export to the United States and Europe. This model challenges local food security and displaces countless people from farming for themselves.³

So, who actually benefits from industrial agriculture? The only true financial beneficiaries are the massive conglomerates that act as middlemen between farmers and consumers.⁴

A Sustainable Agricultural Solution: Food Sovereignty

The term food sovereignty was coined by a global network of family farmers called Via Campesina at the 1996

World Food Summit. In short, it means that consumers should have the right to healthy and desirable food items, producers should have the right to grow what they want to grow, and local food systems should be valued over international interests. A great way to promote food sovereignty is to support local and regional farmers.

Locally Produced Food Benefits the Economy, Farmers, Your Pocketbook, and the Environment

“Buying local” reinvigorates local economies by keeping money re-circulating through the community, creating new jobs, and boosting farmers’ incomes. Within the system of industrial agriculture, chain supermarkets are people’s primary access to healthful foods. In many urban areas, supermarkets first pushed out independently run markets and then abandoned the community for more lucrative suburban markets, leaving residents with no other option than convenience stores and fast food chains.⁵

Even in neighborhoods where well-stocked supermarkets abound, the market is characterized by outside corporations that sell food from around the globe. Instead of re-circulating throughout the community and bolstering the local economy, the majority of the food dollar ends up



Photo by John Boyd.



in distant hands. In 1910, locally owned markets helped to keep 40 percent of the money consumers spent on food within the farmer's own community. In 1997 only about 7 percent of the food dollar remained in the community.⁶

In communities across America and around the world, farmers have been forced out of business. There were 6.8 million farms operating in the United States in 1935. By 1964 there were fewer than half that many, and in 1997 there were fewer than 1.9 million.⁷ Those remaining have been pressured to grow single crops that can be sold outside of the community to a major manufacturer.

Today farmers receive an average of less than 10 cents of every dollar spent on food. The rest of the money goes to processing, packing, and distribution. At farmers markets, on the other hand, 90 percent of the profits go straight to the farmers.⁸

Buying local cuts out the need for middleman, and eliminates the costs of food associated with packaging and distribution. One survey showed that local food sold through a delivery scheme cost an average of 30 to 40 percent less than similar foods purchased in supermarkets.⁹

The environment pays a heavy price for industrial agriculture. After factoring in the air pollution released during food transport and the environmental degradation resulting from large scale farms relying on chemically intensive methods to grow a limited number of commodity crops, such as soybeans, corn, or wheat, the purported benefits of our industrial, factory farming system quickly fade away.¹⁰ Industrial agriculture generally takes place far away from the eventual consumers' kitchens, so the food miles rack up between farm and plate. With each mile, environmentally damaging greenhouse gases are released. Because the lack of biodiversity on industrial farms makes them susceptible to a variety of blights, they require dangerous levels of fertilizers, pesticides, and other chemical inputs.¹¹



Buying local foods also gives consumers more say in what types of foods are available to them. Instead of having products mandated by multinational corporations, communities can choose to produce foods that are regionally and culturally desirable.

When food does not have to travel far from farm to plate, it can be harvested at the peak of ripeness. Produce that has a long journey ahead of it is generally picked before it is fully matured. Commercial tomatoes, for instance, often are harvested when they are still green and then ripened through controlled exposure to ethylene gas.¹²

Eating local is fun, too. According to Homegrown, a report on local eating by Brian Halweil, sociologists say that people have 10 times more conversations in farmers markets than at grocery stores.¹³ Make friends with farmers and you can build community and your knowledge about where your food is coming from and how the farmers grew it.

How To Help

To support local agriculture, visit the nearest farmers market or join a CSA. Community Supported Agriculture takes place on farms that offer seasonal shares in their harvests. You pay up front, and then receive a weekly box of freshly picked produce. To locate a CSA in your region, go to www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml. To search for farmers markets, go to www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/map.htm. You can also ask local grocery stores and restaurants if they carry any local foods. If they do not, tell them they should.

An important part of eating locally is tailoring your diet to eating foods that are seasonally available. Visit Sustainable Table's website to find out what foods are in season in your area: www.sustainabletable.org/shop/eatseasonal/.

So just how local does local food have to be? Two hardy Canadians started the 100-mile diet, in which participants eat only foods from within 100 miles. To take the 100-mile challenge, go to www.100milediet.org.



Buying Local in the Agribusiness Heartland: One Community's Step Toward More Sustainable Agriculture

Factory farm-packed Iowa may be abounding with industrial agriculture, but Woodbury County has taken several innovative steps to encourage local food. In June 2005, the county instituted an Organics Conversion Policy that rewards farmers with a \$50,000 tax rebate for converting to organic methods. The policy was introduced by Robert Marqusee, an official who persuaded the county to create the position he now holds: Director of Rural Economic Development.

“There is an inherent discrimination against the small farm,” Marqusee says. “It isn’t seen as a business.” To persuade farmers to use organic methods, he came up with the Local Food Purchase Policy, instituted in January 2006, which requires all county departments to purchase organic food from within a 100-mile radius. “Farmers were saying ‘where am I going to sell it?’ I had to create an immediate market.”

Since the policy went into effect, Woodbury County has seen the establishment of a certified organic farming program at the local community college, the creation of an organic exchange board that connects farmers and landowners, and the opening of the Woodbury food market to local goods. In addition, farmers’ incomes have increased, new non-traditional jobs have been created, and more farm acres have converted to organic methods. A new \$40 million organic soybean processing plant will give farmers who together grow soybeans on 272,000 acres in the region incentive to switch to organic practices.¹⁴

Woodbury County also boasts the Floyd Boulevard Local Foods Market in Sioux City, which sells and serves foods from within a 100-mile radius at a natural foods market, farmers market, and restaurant.

Endnotes

- ¹ Halweil, Brian. “Home Grown: The Case for Local Food in a Global Market.” *Worldwatch*, Washington, DC, November 2002, p. 6.
- ² *Ibid*, p. 15.
- ³ *Ibid*, p. 12-14.
- ⁴ *Ibid*, p. 7, 10,15.
- ⁵ Halweil, op.cit., p. 36.
- ⁶ Halweil, op.cit., p. 23-24.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, p. 7.
- ⁸ Spector, Rebecca. “Fully integrated food systems: regaining connections between farmers and consumers.” In *The Fatal Harvest Reader: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture*, Andrew Kimbrell (Ed). pp. 288-294. (Washington: Island Press, 2002).
- ⁹ Halweil, op. cit., p. 64.
- ¹⁰ Halweil, op. cit., p. 10.
- ¹¹ Norberg-Hodge, Helena et. al. *Bringing the Food Economy Home*. (Bloomfield, CT: Kumerian Press, ISEC, 2002), p. 37-38.
- ¹² Brown, Reggie. Personal Interview. Manager of the Florida Tomato Growers Committee. July 30, 2007.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, pp. 12-13.
- ¹⁴ Marqusee, Robert. Personal Interview. Director of Rural Economic Development, Woodbury County, Iowa. August 6, 2007.

For more information:

web: www.foodandwaterwatch.org
email: foodandwater@fwwatch.org
phone: (202) 683-2500

Copyright © November 2007 Food & Water Watch