

Omnivore, Carnivore, Herbivore ... Locavore?

The Benefits of Eating Locally Grown Foods

By Brook Scronce, ND

My grandparents lived and worked on a farm as I was growing up in North Carolina. When we visited from the “big city”, we ate beef that my grandfather raised on a pasture next door and vegetables that my grandmother grew outside the kitchen. Standing in the garden choosing which produce to eat led to meals that tasted so much better than the frozen, canned, or fast foods I was accustomed to. The beauty of these self-sufficient, environmentally sustainable meals was lost on me at that time. Only now, years later and many miles away, do I recognize the true value of eating directly off the farm.

In the United States, food travels an average of 1500 miles from farm to table. The transport of food, as well as the processing, packaging, and refrigeration required to keep the food fresh during travel, uses tremendous amounts of fossil fuels and produces 37% of the greenhouse gases that are poisoning the planet. That’s a huge “carbon footprint”. Eating food grown closer to home is one simple way to reduce pollution and our reliance on non-renewable resources. With our current agricultural system, each American citizen consumes about 400 gallons of oil every year. If each of us ate just one meal per week composed of locally and organically raised meats and produce, we would reduce the country’s consumption of oil by 1.1 million barrels every week. Small changes really can make a difference!

Foods sold locally tend to come from smaller farms that aren’t part of the national mass-production agricultural system. Consequently, because they are not blindly focused on huge yields, these farms are more likely to use environmentally sustainable and organic practices. Organic farming improves the nutrient quality of the soil and avoids air and water pollution by practicing crop rotation and using cover crops, manure-based fertilizers, biological pest controls, and old-fashioned weeding. In contrast, conventional agriculture relies on mono-cropping to produce large amounts of one crop season after season. The soil becomes depleted of certain nutrients over time and chemical fertilizers are required to maintain crop production. Approximately 50 million tons of commercial fertilizer are used each year. This creates an additional drain on fossil fuels, the source of most of these fertilizers, and produces even more greenhouse gases. Mono-cropping within the conventional agricultural system also relies heavily on chemical pest controls because these depleted soil ecosystems easily succumb to pest outbreaks. In 1999, 985 million pounds of pesticides were used. These chemicals end up in the water supply and create more strain on the environment.

Conventional agriculture’s reliance on mono-cropping has done more than threaten the environment. It has also resulted in the loss of numerous plant species. Most of the produce varieties sold in stores today are bred for their uniform appearance and tolerance for mechanized harvesting, packaging, and hard travel. Farmers are compelled to grow what the market demands and flavorful varieties are discarded to focus on a few grown for transport and food processing. The US consumer eats less than 1% of the vegetable varieties that were grown a century ago. Local and organic farms are working to reverse this trend by focusing on heirloom species and growing a variety of produce rather than one or two cash crops.

Not only are locally and organically produced foods better for the environment; they are healthier for your body and they taste better. Better soil management techniques enhance the vitamin and mineral content of organic produce. When compared to conventionally grown vegetables, organic lettuce has 29% more magnesium, organic spinach has 52% more vitamin C, and organic cabbage has 41% more iron. Organic produce is grown without chemical pesticides so the plants have to defend themselves. They produce more phytochemicals, nutrients such as carotenoids and polyphenols, which prevent pest infestation and improve our health when we eat them. Whether grown conventionally or organically, plants achieve higher nutrient levels when allowed to ripen before harvesting and begin to lose nutrients as soon as they are picked. A lot of conventionally grown produce is harvested early so that it will be ripe after it is stored and travels long distances. This produce never achieves maximal nutrient levels and loses even more while sitting in a warehouse or a refrigerated truck moving cross country. Local produce is harvested at the right time and travels a shorter distance to the consumer, so it has significantly higher nutrient levels when consumed. It's a difference you can taste.

There are many ways to buy locally grown foods. Farmer's markets, roadside stands, U-pick operations, buying clubs, and community supported agriculture (CSAs) allow for direct purchasing from the farmer. Local foods can also be found in smaller grocery stores, like Marlene's, and even some national chains. Encourage your store to stock local foods and ensure that proper labeling indicates which products are local and/or organic. When you buy locally, you stimulate the local economy. Purchasing local foods rather than relying on national chains generates three times as much money for the community. In addition, choosing locally produced foods promotes fairer wages for those who grow our food. In the conventional system, farmers receive 20 cents of every food dollar while 80 cents goes to packaging, transport, distribution, and waste management. You can use your voice and your wallet to help change the current food system in America.

I know that some people will complain that eating locally and organically is more expensive than eating within the conventional food system. This argument only holds if you don't consider the hidden costs of most of the foods available at the mega-mart. Saving money has become an acceptable defense for our country's toxic agricultural and eating habits. Most of our food dollars are spent on inexpensive processed foods with little nutritional value. As our consumption of these "cheap" foods has increased, the rates of diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and obesity have soared. Currently, one of every three health care dollars spent in the US is paying for damage from poor eating habits. That cost certainly doesn't appear on your grocery bill. Nor does the bill reflect the cost of fossil fuel depletion, greenhouse gas production, chemical clean-up, pesticide and fertilizer exposure, or the loss of nutrient rich soil and plant species. When you consider all of these factors, conventionally produced foods that are processed, packaged, and shipped throughout the country are, in fact, extraordinarily expensive. When you buy local and organic, you may pay slightly more upfront, but at least you know what you are paying for: great tasting and healthy food that doesn't harm the planet.