

Buy local... but ignore the "locavores" nonsense



You can't open the food section of your newspaper these days without another sermon on the virtues of eating local. The eulogy takes as self-evident the moral superiority of the gospel of locavorism: relocalizing the food supply promotes

sustainability because it reduces the fossil fuel needed to deliver the food.

Buying local makes a good deal of sense when the natural conditions support the seasonal production of good, fresh local food. Who wouldn't buy our local asparagus in June and fresh sweet corn and tomatoes in August? Indeed, we always have. Canadians have always supported roadside stands of blueberries and local fruits and vegetables; we have always loved our local fish and local summer and autumn farmers' markets.

What is new is the pretentious elevation of this simple idea by the chattering culinary class to the status of a comprehensive creed, which, they assert, can make a major contribution to a more sustainable food system. Locavores focus on the concept of the food mile to condemn the current system of globalized trade. They dream of a return to an earlier time when the food supply wasn't controlled by big bad agribusiness.

The locavores' philosophy is misguided because it rests on several faulty assumptions. The first is that the energy used in transportation (the food mile) is the largest factor in terms of fossil fuel use. It is not. Countless life cycle assessments have concluded that the energy used in production, processing and preparing of food far outweighs the energy used in transportation. Studies vary, but the average contribution of transportation seems to be about 11 per cent. So, for example, it is four times more energy-efficient for London, U.K. consumers to buy grass-fed lamb imported by ship from New Zealand than it is to buy grain-fed lamb raised locally. Winter tomatoes from

Spain use far less energy than homegrown British tomatoes grown in energy intensive hothouses. Local is not necessarily greener.

With their simplistic focus on food miles, locavores ignore other factors of sustainability. I was in a very chic restaurant in Tucson, Ariz. where the smug chef righteously proclaimed that all his ingredients were locally grown. He was quite offended when I asked him about the environmental and other costs of importing all that fresh water to grow that food in the Arizona desert. And how is it more sustainable to deny developing countries the opportunity to export their tropical fruits and vegetables?

The dreams of the locavores are unrealistic and unachievable for most parts of the world. No region in this country could even begin to provide the broad range of food products that we need to meet our nutritional requirements. The cruel reality of geography means that localism is not viable for most products in most parts of Canada for most of the year.

Fortunately, the locavore fad is primarily restricted to the foodie elite and others who suffer from anti-corporate angst. The vast majority of Canadians are grateful to go into their local supermarkets and buy food from all over the world with variety and prices no one could have imagined even a decade ago — and buy local in the summer when it makes sense.

I do not deny that we need to reform our food production practices. Getting to a system of sustainable global food production is one of the 21st century's defining challenges as we get closer to a planet with nine billion people. Locavores, however well intentioned, undermine the quest for more sustainable agriculture by, among other things, focusing on a very minor link in the food chain. ■

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