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La Vida Local

Does eating Minnesota-grown food truly benefit the planet and the local economy? One man finds such claims difficult to swallow.

By Greg Breining



Photo by Shannon Brady (Illustration)

than 150 miles. Recently, local food has even been the subject of several books, such as *Plenty* by a Canadian couple who tried a “100-mile diet” for a year.

To begin our experiment, Susan and I visited Mississippi Market, a co-op grocer that promotes local food and is close to our home in St. Paul. (To drive farther than a couple of miles to buy “local” seemed contradictory.) We decided to limit ourselves to foods produced within 100 miles of the Twin Cities, but soon realized some compromises were in order. Any Minnesotan can eat local in summer or fall, when the stalls at the farmers’ market overflow with produce. But the pickings are slim in January. So we redrew the line, at roughly 200 miles from home. That allowed plenty of choices: cream from Cedar

The Sunbutter was disappointing. The mashed-up North Dakota sunflower seeds and sugar dripped off the knife—ugly brown and too sweet. I would have preferred peanut butter.

But I was trying to “eat local”—in the parlance of the moment, subsisting on foods grown and processed close to home. I was planning to stick to the diet of a *locavore* for two weeks to find out what was available, to learn what I would have to give up, and to examine why anyone would really want to make such a commitment. My wife, Susan, an adventurous chef and fan of fresh, whole foods, would help select our menu and do most of the cooking.

Eating local is hardly a new idea: Alice Waters opened Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California, in 1971, with a menu emphasizing ingredients purchased from local farmers. Today, co-ops paste local-food stickers on goods. Some even post food-miles—the distance that products travel from farm to fork. At Google headquarters in California, none of the produce served in the cafeteria travels more

Summit Farm in New Prague, apples from Whitewater Valley Orchard in St. Charles, breakfast sausage from Pastures A Plenty in Kerkhoven. We reached a bit farther for a few items—jam made from blueberries gathered on the Red Lake reservation, and pasta from North Dakota wheat. Some items, such as La Perla tortillas, were locally made, but the origin of their ingredients was unknown. The Guatemalan Peace Coffee traveled a long way, but who could resist the righteousness of organic, shade-grown, farmer-friendly, fair-trade coffee delivered to the co-op by bicycle?

The two-week experiment began. Breakfasts were easy, and not much different from what I usually ate: oatmeal and cream, with maple sugar and (nonlocal) salt. Eggs from cage-free hens, topped with shallots and micro-greens (beets, arugula, endive, chard). Sausage from pasture-raised hogs. Lunches relied on locally baked bread and crisp Keepsake apples.

For our first supper, Susan roasted a free-range chicken with shallots and garlic. The casserole paired wild rice with a Hen of the Woods mushroom that was the size of a soccer ball (we'd picked it on a hike the previous fall). The "cheese squash" she prepared looked like a flattened pumpkin the color of cheap car upholstery. But it cooked up tender, if a little stringy, sweetened with maple sugar. To drink, I grabbed a dark cherry stout brewed by a friend.

Our meals weren't cheap. We could have saved money by bargain-hunting at a big box. But a fresh loaf from a local bakery tastes better than Wonder Bread, and our free-range chicken was more flavorful than most grocery-store birds. When I compared the prices we paid with those of nonlocal products, I discovered we spent a bit more. But often local and nonlocal goods cost about the same.

It was great eating, but I still struggled to understand why I should make "local" a criterion for choosing food. I grasped why you'd prefer products that were fresh, organic, in-season, or certified as environmentally friendly. I could see why you'd buy from your friend the farmer down the road, eat from your garden, or fish or hunt for your own sustenance. I even understood promoting Minnesota food—if you're a Minnesota farmer.

Sure, plenty of great food grew within a couple hundred miles of my home and was available even in winter. But why forgo lettuce from California or limes from Florida? Why should I, as a consumer, choose local over nonlocal foods?

A century ago, Minneapolis mills ground enough flour in a day to bake 12 million loaves. Trains carried sacks to Eastern cities, and much of Minnesota's flour was shipped abroad. Since then, the distances that food travels have risen wildly. A 2001 report by researchers at Iowa State University found that, on average, an item of fresh produce travels more than 1,500 miles. The ingredients in strawberry yogurt journey more than 2,200 miles before reaching store shelves.

The trucks, planes, and ships that carry our food burn fossil fuels, depleting the world's oil reserves and contributing to pollution and global warming. Certainly, I could be persuaded to eat locally if doing so would help reduce the carbon footprint of my meals.

But when shipping is done in bulk, transportation costs are fairly small, according to calculations by the Iowa State researchers. A fully loaded 18-wheeler carrying produce from California to Minnesota consumes about a quart of fuel per 25-pound load. By contrast, if I make a special trip to the St. Paul Farmers' Market in my Honda Civic to buy local food I can't get at Cub Foods, I also burn a quart of gas. Trifling decisions about when and how we shop can also affect energy usage.

Now imagine the scene at the market: Proud producers with fruits and veggies—and behind them, their pickups and vans. That’s a lot of farmers logging lots of miles to get small loads from farm to market. “It may be more efficient, if you look at pounds transported, to send a semi-truck load of lettuce or celery from the Salinas Valley in California to Minneapolis, say, than it is for a little farmer to drive his pickup truck in,” says Ben Senauer, a professor of applied economics and former co-director of the Food Industry Center at the University of Minnesota. “We have an extremely efficient distribution system in this country.”

The most important thing to consider is the full-cycle carbon footprint, Senauer says. “How’s that product produced? How much fertilizer is being used? What kind of packaging does it have? Was it refrigerated? All this is using fossil fuel,” he explains. “And then, of course, the most wasteful thing of all is to let it rot. If you throw it out because you left it in the refrigerator too long, that is really wasteful.”

Local food is fresher, say boosters, and more nutritious. It’s hard to argue that point when gardens are exploding and farmers’ markets are in full swing. But how fresh is any food in midwinter, local or otherwise? The cheese squash that Susan and I ate had been stored since autumn. The honey and jam had been packed in jars months ago. The pasta from North Dakota wheat wasn’t going to be any less nutritious if we let it sit another week.

It’s true that the nutrients in fruits and vegetables begin to degrade as soon as the plant is harvested. Some, such as vitamin C and folate (a water-soluble B vitamin), break down quickly, especially in heat. But it’s not at all clear that going local is the key to finding freshness, vitamins, and minerals, says Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition, food studies, and public health at New York University. More important than the time or distance traveled, Nestle says, is the “cold chain” between harvest and table. “I’ve been in vegetable packing plants in California,” Nestle says. “They’re freezing. You have to wear heavy clothes in them.” The refrigeration retards spoilage, nutrient breakdown, and the growth of microorganisms.

In other words, where produce came from matters less than how it was transported and treated, Nestle says. Think of a sidewalk market in New York. “Boxes sit out on the sidewalk for hours in the middle of summer,” Nestle says. It doesn’t matter if the apples came from New Jersey or Washington or China—without refrigeration, the nutrients will dissipate. “There’s no stocking room, no place to put anything away.” Sounds like a farmers’ market on a hot day, doesn’t it?

Still, provided the food hasn’t spoiled, nutritional value will remain, Nestle says. “It will still be edible. The differences will be small.”

I had my favorites. I liked the Beauty Heart radishes (dubbed watermelon radishes because of their green exteriors and shocking red insides) and the tangy Stravecchio cheese, both from Wisconsin. And I loved the grass-fed round steak from Thousand Hills Cattle Company in Cannon Falls, mainly for the way Susan prepared it—marinated in (nonlocal) soy sauce, honey, garlic, shallots, and locally grown Thai peppers, and then pan-seared.

Not only was I satisfying my own appetite with these wonderful local foods, but if I were to believe the claims made for buying local, I was also supporting family farmers. But was it more important to me to

support a Minnesota farmer than, say, a migrant worker and his family in California? Or a trucker hauling goods on I-80? Or my friend Gene, who works at Rainbow Foods?

Pro-local literature also told me that buying from nearby farmers helps build a strong local economy—even if I have to pay extra. By this logic, the money I spent with local producers eddied about in the local economy for several transactions, benefiting my neighbors and, not incidentally, enriching myself. Thus, I stood to gain, even if I got less for my dollar. This entry from a blog promoting local food was typical: “We must be willing to pay a small price premium for the overwhelming benefit of keeping money circulating in the local community rather than shunting most of it off to a corporate office out of state.”

Even assuming that I and my neighbors are more deserving than, say, farmers in Texas or business owners in Chicago, is spending local really the way to build a local economy? I was suspicious on a number of counts. For one, our economy is not very local anymore. If I give a buck to Farmer Jones for a bag of sweet corn, where does it go? For gas, for utilities, for his mortgage. It flies out of the local community pretty fast. We here in Minnesota are, after all, net exporters of food. What if the rest of the nation rejected our products in favor of local goods?

I asked Arthur J. Rolnick, senior vice president and director of research at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis: Does paying a bit more for local products really contribute to prosperity, local or otherwise?

“From a particular producer’s point of view, it might look like that makes some economic sense—the more people who buy my product here, the more successful I am, the more people I can hire,” Rolnick says. “[But] it’s just bad economics. We know that economic trade is a cornerstone to any successful economy. So, for example, if buying local was good for St. Paul, I assume buying local is good for Minneapolis. So all the agricultural goods we sell overseas, if *they* start buying local, we can’t sell them over there.

“If you look at the big picture, trade is the key,” says Rolnick. “If people bought higher price goods here and stopped buying in Wisconsin, or China, in the big picture you would actually see economic stagnation.”

During our experiment, Susan and I argued. We even fought. (Food is a passionate business.) Our fights came down to this: First, that I was pig-headed and argumentative. (These were not new discoveries.) Second, Susan said, I was ignoring the fact that “local” is really a code word for a lot of other values—high-quality food, small farms, animal welfare, environmental stewardship. “It isn’t just about local food,” she said.

Local food proponents often say that buying local helps you to know the farmer, how he treats his animals, how he cares for the land. But is that realistic? A local farm isn’t necessarily a well-managed one. Walk along any farmland stream in Minnesota and before long you’re likely to see eroded banks where cows have grazed too long, and murky water that’s cloudy with pesticide runoff from corn and soybean fields.

I tend to put more trust in food that is certified. In our stash of local groceries, several items were certified by the Food Alliance Midwest, so I called the St. Paul office to find out what the seals meant. “We define sustainability in a broad way,” alliance director Jim Ennis told me. The organization consulted with universities in Minnesota, Oregon, and Washington to develop standards for farms and

ranches that include: providing safe and fair working conditions for employees, treating animals humanely, reducing pesticide use, conserving soil and water, and protecting wildlife habitat. Those are all things that I can endorse. They are values for which I would pay extra. But that certification has little to do with “local.”

My most favorite meal began with a deer I shot last fall. The venison was local food of the highest order, procured just three miles from our cabin—though its “localness” diminished steadily as it traveled 150 miles to our St. Paul home. Susan sautéed cubes of the meat with bacon, shallot, garlic, local mushrooms, and then braised it with wine from Saint Croix Vineyards. The side dish was polenta of local corn meal. Fried cabbage, green beans, and red pepper with garlic and shallots rounded out the meal.

After two weeks, the experiment ended. As foods from all over the world began to replace the locally grown items in our cupboards, I drew two conclusions: First, eating local, even in the dead of winter, was both feasible and enjoyable. Second, it still didn’t make sense to pass up nonlocal foods.

I had come to appreciate the miracle of a distribution system that wraps the world, offering me a pear from China or a tangerine from Spain, like a kiss of summer, even as snow blankets my yard.

I would make a point of looking for local food for only one reason, and it had nothing to do with food miles, the local economy, or the family farm. “It’s cultural. It’s psychological,” Ben Senauer told me. “We want to connect with our food. It’s not just another industrial product. It’s something we put in our bodies.”

For those very reasons, I expect Susan and I will continue to buy pork from the hog farm we pass as we drive to our cabin. I enjoy watching the free-range pigs jostle at the trough, like the squealers on my grandfather’s farm a half-century ago. We’ll continue to burn extra gas to run to the farmers’ market—because we like to see the produce of the moment, fresh-picked and just trucked into the city (no matter how inefficiently). And this fall, I will lug my rifle to the woods again, because I love to hunt. I don’t mind the killing, and I have come to find satisfaction in carving, wrapping, and packing the red muscle—meat whose provenance I understand.

None of this guarantees that my food will be tastier, more nutritious, or better for the local economy and the planet. But I like the sense of reaching toward the source of my food, whether it is on a local farm or deep in the woods or at a busy market. To do so gives me pleasure. That is the best reason, and as far as I can tell, the only reason, to eat local.

Greg Breining is a frequent contributor to Minnesota Monthly.