

My Top Ten Reasons for Eating Localⁱⁱ

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Some people seem perfectly happy with foods they find in the supermarkets and franchise restaurants of our increasingly global, industrial food system. But, a lot of us are not. A growing body of statistics is indicating that people increasingly want to *eat local*; they want to buy food from people they know and can trust. Recent surveys have shown:^{ii[iii]}

- Seventy-three percent of Americans want to know whether food is grown or produced locally or regionally.
- Seventy-five percent of consumers, in seven Midwestern states and in Boston and Seattle areas, give top priority to produce “grown locally by family farmers.”
- Seventy percent of households, in Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri, and Wisconsin, indicate it is very or extremely important to support local family farms by eating locally grown foods.
- Shoppers who buy “natural” foods overwhelmingly choose freshness as their number-one value.

Increasingly, people are acting on their preferences for local eating, as evidenced by a doubling of number of farmers’ markets in less than ten years, persistent growth in number of CSAs, and growing number of independent restaurants and food stores relying on local foods for their market advantage. Why are more people choosing to eat local? Everyone has his or her personal reasons, of course, but I developed my “Top Ten List,” primarily for the benefit of those who may feel a bit intimidated by those who consider choosing to eat local a bit strange.

I chose to rank my list from the least important to most important reasons. Others obviously would rank them differently, but my ranking reflects my belief that the roots of change in Americans’ food preferences go far deeper than food quality or safety. I believe that buying more food locally could be an important step toward solving some deep-rooted problems of the American food system, and ultimately, of American society.

10. **Eating local eliminates the middlemen.** Transportation, energy, packing, advertising, and middlemen profits account for about 25-percent of total food cost, all of which can be greatly reduced by eating local. However, local farmers generally cannot afford to operate on as small a margin of return to their land, labor, and management as can large-scale, global, industrial operations. In addition, industrial producers externalize some of their production costs by exploiting nature and society. So, local foods may not be cheaper, but eating local certainly reduces the negative social and ecological consequences of our food choices.

9. **Eating local saves transportation costs.** Recent estimates indicate that the average fresh food item travels 1,500 miles from production to final purchase.^{iii[iii]} Transportation costs amounts to only about four-percent of food costs, but this

doesn't count the cost of publicly funded infrastructure. In addition, energy for transportation is virtually all derived from non-renewable fossil fuels and transportation is a major source of air pollution. By eating local we can make a significant contribution to social and ecological sustainability through our personal statement in favor of reducing our dependence on non-renewable energy and protecting the natural environment.

8. **Eating local improves food quality.** Local foods can be fresher, more flavorful, and nutritious than can fresh foods shipped in from distant locations. According to most surveys, this reason would top most lists of those who choose to eat locally. In addition to the obvious advantage in freshness, growers who produce for local customers need not give priority to harvesting, packing, shipping, and shelf life qualities, but instead can select, grow, and harvest crops to ensure peak qualities of freshness, nutrition, and taste. Eating local also encourages eating seasonally, in harmony with the natural energy of a particular place, which is becoming an important dimension of quality for many of us.
7. **Eating local makes at-home eating worth the time and effort.** Preparing local foods, which typically are raw or minimally processed, requires additional time and effort. But, the superior natural quality of local foods allows almost anyone to prepare really good foods at home. Good local foods taste good naturally, with little added seasoning and little cooking or slow cooking, which requires little attention. Home preparation of raw foods also saves money, compared with convenience foods, which makes good food affordable for almost anyone, regardless of income, who can and will prepare food from scratch. Preparing and eating meals at home also provides opportunities for families to share quality time together in creative, productive, and rewarding activities, which contribute to stronger families, communities, and societies.
6. **Eating local provides more meaningful food choices.** Americans often brag about the incredible range of choices that consumers have in the modern supermarket today. In many respects, however, food choices are severely limited. Virtually all of food items in supermarkets today are produced using the same mass-production, industrial methods, with the same negative social and ecological consequences. In addition, the variety in foods today is largely cosmetic and superficial, contrived to create the illusion of diversity and choice where none actually exists. By eating local, food buyers can get the food they individually prefer by choosing from foods that are authentically different, not just in physical qualities, but also in terms of the ecological and social consequences of how they are produced.
5. **Eating local contributes to the local economy.** American farmers, on average, receive only about 20 cents of each dollar spent for food, the rest going for processing, transportation, packing, and other marketing costs. Farmers who sell food direct to local customers, however, receive the full retail value, a dollar for each food dollar spent. Of course, each dollar not spent at a local supermarket or eating establishment, detracts from the local economy. But, the local *food* economy still

gains about three dollars for each dollar lost when food shoppers choose to buy from local farmers. In addition, farmers who produce for local markets receive a larger proportion of the total as a return for their labor, management, and entrepreneurship because they contribute a larger proportion to the production process. They also tend to spend locally, both for their personal and farming needs, which contribute still more to the local economy. Eating local is good for the local economy.

4. **Eating local helps save farmland.** More than one million acres of U.S. farmland is lost each year to residential and commercial development. We are still as dependent upon the land for our very survival today as when all people were hunters and gatherers, and future generations will be no less dependent than we are today. Our dependencies are more complex and less direct, but certainly are no less critical. Eating local creates economic opportunities for caring farmers to care for and retain control of their land, while valuing their neighbors as customers. Farms that don't impose environmental and social costs on their neighbors can be very desirable places to live on and to live around. Eating local may allow new residential communities to be established *on* farms, with residences strategically placed to retain the best land in farming. New sustainable communities could be built around common interests in good food and good lifestyles.
3. **Eating local allows people to reconnect.** The industrial food system was built upon a foundation of impersonal, economic relationships among farmers, food processors, food distributors, and consumers. Relationships had to be made impartial and impersonal to gain economic efficiency. As a result, however, many people today have no meaningful understanding of where their food comes from or how it is produced. By eating local, people are able to reconnect with local farmers, and through local farmers, reconnect with the earth. Many people first begin to understand a need to reconnect when they develop personal relationships with their farmers and personal knowledge of their farms. We cannot build a sustainable food system until people develop a deep understanding of their dependency upon each other and upon the earth. Thus, in my opinion, reconnecting is one of the most important reasons for eating local.
2. **Eating local restores integrity to the food system.** A sustainable food system must be built upon a foundation of personal integrity. When people eat locally, farmers form relationships with customers who care about the social and ecological consequences of how their food is produced – not just lower price, more convenience. Those who eat locally form relationships with farmers who care about their land, their neighbors, and their customers – not just about maximizing profits. Such relationships become relationships of trust and integrity, based on honesty, fairness, compassion, responsibility, and respect. Eating local provides people with an opportunity not only to reconnect personally, but also, to restore integrity to our relationships with each other and with the earth. In today's society, there can be fewer if any higher priorities.

1. **Eating local helps build a sustainable society.** The growing problems that confront today's food system are but reflections of deeper problems within the whole of American society. We are degrading the ecological integrity of the earth and the social integrity of our society in our pursuit of narrow, individual economic self-interests. Some may argue that Americans will never agree on the principles that define the integrity of our relationships. However, such arguments mistake values for principles. I believe virtually all Americans agree that people should be honest, fair, compassionate, responsible, and respectful.^{iv[iv]} Who among us really believes it to be right and good to be dishonest, unfair, uncaring, irresponsible, and disrespectful? Relationships of integrity are essential for sustainability, not just for our food system, but also for the whole of our society and the future of humanity. There can be no higher reason for eating local than helping to restore integrity to our society.

^{i[i]} "Sustaining People through Agriculture series," Small Farm Today Magazine, Missouri Farm Publications, Clark, MO. July August, 2005.

^{ii[ii]} Diane Conners, "Hunger Grows for Locally Grown Food: *Restaurants, grocery stores discovering a tasty advantage*, published by Great Lakes Bulletin News Service, 3/30/2005.

^{iii[iii]} Rich Pirog, "Food Miles: A Simple Metaphor to Contrast Local and Global Food Systems," in *Hunger and Environmental Nutrition*, American Dietetic Association, also available from Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at <http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/pubs/staff/ppp/index.htm>

^{iv[iv]} These five principles are advocated by the *Institute for Global Ethics*, website <http://www.globalethics.org/>.