



Organic vs. Local

Karen Lehman and Julie Ristau Utne Reader

To buy local or to buy organic? We increasingly face that question when we try to make conscious choices about our food--at least those of us lucky enough to live near a farmers' market, a natural foods store, or a grocery chain catering to people with significant disposable income. People tend to buy organic for health reasons: personal health (no pesticides or artificial additives), the health of the environment (fewer toxins and better farming practices), and the health of farmworkers in the fields (who are spared pesticide sprays). The introduction of biotech foods into America's food supply is boosting the ranks of organic buyers, because buying organic is the only way to be sure to get foods free of genetically modified organisms.

But when we buy local food, we are supporting community health: a network of farmers, food processors, and fellow customers who live and work in our community, our regional landscape, and our local economy. Personal health also factors in, since local food is fresher. And the health of the environment is at stake: Local foods do not generate the same pollution and waste the same energy as foods that are trucked, shipped, or flown in from far away. If this food is sustainably--or organically--grown, we increase the chances that we are protecting our wildlife habitats, our waterways, and workers who are also our neighbors.

It's getting harder to have it all. At one time, producers of local food and producers of organic food were one and the same. Today, organics have gone global. The produce in natural foods stores is as likely to come from a multinational corporation as conventional produce, and to have traveled just as many miles. In the past year, Pillsbury and other corporate food giants have acquired a number of familiar organic brands. Large California-based organic fruit and vegetable suppliers are squeezing organic and sustainable family farmers out of their own local markets to such an extent that some question the long-term viability of homegrown organic farms. In the August/September 2000 issue of the Wedge Co-op Newsletter from the Wedge Community Co-op in

Minneapolis, David Washburn, a Minnesota organic farmer, explains how these producers gain a distinct financial advantage because of their size and the fact that they can grow crops on their land almost 12 months a year. 'The consumer has the ultimate say whether local, seasonal farming continues or goes the way of the corner store,' he writes.

At Rebekah's restaurant in rural Plainview, Minnesota (population 3,000), there's a quiet revolution taking place, one homemade chicken pot pie at a time. The buffalo served in savory sandwiches travels less than 50 miles on its journey from paddock to processing plant to reach Rebekah's oven. The chickens are raised in a neighboring valley and processed at a nearby on-farm facility. The butter ('not a stick of margarine on the premises,' declares the menu) comes from the town's co-op dairy. And the tomatoes in the soups come from local farmers' summer harvest.

As a result of buying local, the menu at Rebekah's changes throughout the year. 'There are reasons to eat food with the seasons,' asserts Diane Lutzke, Rebekah's co-founder and cook ('not a chef,' she says, 'a cook--someone who cooks!'). 'Take the root vegetables in the fall. They have nutrients that we need at that time of year. When you store them in a root cellar, they've begun to dry out a little by late winter. That makes the flavors more intense for the February stews. In spring, the greens come up first, and they act like a tonic. Then in summer, the vegetables are juicy and full of water that helps cool you.'

The restaurant not only buys local, but also makes a point to buy organic foods when they're available. Sounds right, doesn't it? If the choice is between local and organic, we'd like both, please.

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