



# LA VIDA LOCAL!

**Modern shoppers are turning away from the supermarket mentality and back to their roots—local farmers and local food.**

**BY MELISSA KVIDAHL**

**I**t can be argued that the world is shrinking by the minute. With the dawn of the internet, handheld technologies and sprawling intercontinental corporations, the click of a mouse and the touch of an iPhone are quickly replacing the human-to-human connections of yesteryear.

And with this, comes the globalization of the food market—and not just the conventional food market. In one trip, shoppers can purchase organic coffee beans from Colombia, Jersey tomatoes and Florida oranges. With this change, even the most committed eco-shoppers are encountering a new conundrum: is it better to buy an organic option from a distant location or an uncertified option locally?

It's almost obvious that a fruit picked locally will likely be fresher longer, endure less traveling and subsequent bruising, and therefore taste better. Not

to mention, organic shoppers tend to be committed to eco-friendliness and will accordingly be swayed by the local produce's smaller carbon footprint. On the other hand, there's the belief that organic food is simply healthier for the consumer and the ecosystem because it doesn't contain pesticides.

But retailers and local food activists raise an important question that will quiet any organic versus local debate: who is to say that the locally grown uncertified food isn't grown in an organic manner?

According to Samuel Fromartz in his book *Organic, Inc.: Natural Foods and How They Grow*, farmers whose target consumers live locally tend to opt out of USDA Organic certification for a number of reasons. "Many farmers grouse about the costs of this regime, largely in the form of record keeping. Some farmers complain the paperwork keeps them busy two hours a day, while other say they can't afford the cost of getting cer-

tified, which runs to several hundred dollars," he said in his book, citing statistics from a USDA survey revealing that only half of all organic farmers at farmers markets are certified. "Smaller farmers do appear to be opting out of certification in increasing numbers, since it does little to enhance their direct sales if they can otherwise convince their customers that they are organic."

These same farmers are most likely to use catch phrases such as "no spray" or "good bugs at work here" because they cannot by law use the word "organic" without being certified if they sell more than \$5,000 annually, Fromartz said. "These farms are also likely avoiding wholesale channels, where their goods would be identified as conventional," he added.

## **Connecting Communities**

So, if not certification, what does the local farmer have in his arsenal that the



national organic farmer does not? The answer is surprisingly simple: good old-fashioned one-on-one communication with his or her customer. When the farm-to-fork road is short (literally), farming practices can be discussed personally between grower and buyer, therefore eliminating the need for USDA Organic certification in many small-scale local farms. And even if farms are selling in bulk to local retailers, the lines of communication are still very open for shoppers, retailers and farmers to engage in a dialogue about food that in many ways overrides any need for outside governmental regulation.

Lisa Delina, vice president of grocery at the five stores in the Mom's Organic Market chain headquartered in Rockville, MD, stocks only local organic produce, eliminating the local versus organic debate in that category, but noted that the same isn't true for local meats.

"We can't only carry certified organic meat—but that's a little different [than produce] because at least in this area, that has to do with the fact that there isn't a certifying plant that is organic," she said. "But farmers raise organically even though the meat can't get produced in an organic plant."

In Mom's Organic Market, shoppers will find local fare with ease, knowing that all products marked as local with the store's signature sign are grown or produced within the Chesapeake Bay watershed, or within 200 miles.

Emmy Davis, owner of Berkshire's Green Grocer, an organic food store located in Lee, MA, offers produce from local farmers in addition to local honey, maple syrup, cheese, milk, butter, eggs, meat, bread, pizza, coffee, loose leaf teas and more. "Some farmers are not certified organic, but grow organically," she agreed. "It is an expensive process for a small farmer to go through."

To make up for the lack of certification, Davis puts a personal touch (and her own seal of approval, which ranks high in the minds of trusting customers) on the products with write-ups about the local vendor alongside the food. This creates a sense of not only literal proximity to where the food is grown, but a sense of connectedness to the farmer.

Mark Squire, president of Fairfax, CA-based Good Earth Natural Foods, features products with point-of-purchase signage. "We also print the miles from farm to the store on all our produce items," he added. "Our customers love the produce 'miles' feature and frequently praise us for this."

Because of the diminishing local versus organic debate, local produce and other goods are gaining headway over

sourced organic products with growing numbers of self-identified locavores, or people committed to eating locally. "Locavore" was even New Oxford American Dictionary's 2007 Word of the Year—an honor bestowed on a new word, debated and chosen, made to reflect the ethos of the year and its lasting potential as a word of cultural significance and use.

But this is not to say that organic and local trends are somehow rivals in the quest for healthy, responsible eating. "We are constantly trying to educate consumers about the benefits of organic/GMO-free and local. The two principles belong together," explained Squire. "Those that see them as conflicting or competing in the marketplace are missing the fundamental driving force for both. In the short run, consumers may be confused—'Do I buy local or organic?'—in the long run, educated consumers will be insisting on both."

### Planting the Seeds of Interest

According to a Mintel survey released March of this year, the question among consumers isn't "local or organic," it is "local or other." Though the nostalgic, perhaps romantic idea of purchasing food from the local farmer down the road has given way to an informed, realistic desire rooted in downsizing oil consumption and reducing our carbon footprint while helping our own communities, Mintel reported that buying local still has many fans to earn in America and the locavore has a way to go before it is a real driving force in the market.

According to Mintel's consumer survey on local shopping, just one in six adults (17 percent) buys local products and services as often as possible. Most Americans fall into the "aspirational local" category (those who want to purchase local foods but don't know where to find them) or "no local" category (those who don't care at all where their food and services come from). Mintel

found that 30 percent of respondents were "aspirational locals," while over a quarter (27 percent) were "no locals."

But this doesn't necessarily spell bad news for retailers. "Interest in local products is just getting started," pointed out MaryJo Marks, natural and organic category specialist at United Natural Foods (UNFI, Dayville, CT), a wholesale distributor to the natural and organic products industry, who said that these numbers reflect a growing niche in its relative infancy rather than a category lacking interest potential. "We think it will continue into the future as consumers choose to gain back their community and support their towns, their local economy and local producers."

"We found that although the 'buy local' mantra has gotten strong media coverage and government support, most Americans haven't yet incorporated it into their lifestyles," agreed Krista Faron, senior analyst at Mintel.

"Nonetheless, local products offer unique benefits and are more accessible than ever before, so we think the local movement has relevance with today's consumer."

Indeed, the local movement's relevance is highlighted by the fact that locavores are willing to pay a premium, regardless of the economy, to stick to their ideals. Especially since local food tends to be more expensive than mainstream food (local farmers often produce smaller quantities than corporate food factories), this research comes when needed most—when people are tightening their purse strings and clipping coupons at warp speed.

A study appearing in the May 2008 issue of the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* found that the average supermarket shopper is willing to pay a premium price for locally produced foods, and shoppers at farm markets are willing to pay almost twice as much extra as retail grocery shoppers for the same locally produced foods.



Local produce at Good Earth Natural Foods.

# LOCAL!

The survey presented shoppers with two product options: both were baskets of strawberries, but they were presented in 80 combinations of price, farm location, freshness guarantee and farm type. Researchers were then able to pinpoint exactly what causes a person to pick one basket of strawberries over another. "Basically what made the biggest difference was local production," concluded Marvin Batte, co-author of the study and professor of agricultural, environmental and development economics at Ohio State University.

The average retail shopper was willing to pay 48 cents more for strawberries produced locally, and shoppers at farm markets were willing to pay 92 cents extra. With the base price for a quart of berries priced at \$3, this means that farm market shoppers were willing to pay almost a third more if they knew that the produce was local.

In an interesting twist, the researchers named one fictional berry producer "Fred's" and the other "Berries Inc." Shoppers in grocery stores were willing to pay 17 cents extra for a quart of berries from Fred's fictional farm and farm market shoppers were willing to pay 42 cents more for the supposed small-farm produce.

## Viral Awareness

While statistics don't lie, it's arguably much more interesting to go out into the field (no pun intended) and see how people are really reacting to and spreading the word about the benefits of buying local. Perhaps ironically, locavore grassroots movements are using modern technology and large internet communities to spread the word about the arguably old-fashioned, small-town notion of local eating.

In an effort to make a personal lifestyle change and also to quell or validate common beliefs about committing to a local diet, Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon decided to test run the local lifestyle with a one-year pledge to eat locally. Their trials, tribulations and ultimate victories are documented in their book, *Plenty: Eating Locally on the 100-Mile Diet*, and online at their popular website, [www.100milediet.org](http://www.100milediet.org), where visitors can find their own 100 mile radius by simply typing in their current location. For retailers, this might be a good suggestion to offer customers just beginning a locavore diet.

But why 100 miles? "It's an easy way to start thinking local. A 100-mile radius is large enough to reach beyond a big city and small enough to feel truly local," said the authors on their website. "And it rolls off the tongue more

easily than the 160-Kilometre Diet."

Once locavores in training find their inspiration and motivation, the real work starts. Scanning the internet or otherwise searching for local farmers markets might seem daunting, since most small farms do not maintain websites or advertise. LocalHarvest ([www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org)) does the legwork for local shoppers and retailers looking for contacts, compiling a definitive and reliable "living" public nationwide directory of small farms, farmers markets and other local food sources to simplify the process. It even features a search engine to help visitors to the site find products from family farms, local sources of sustainably grown food and a means by which to establish direct contact with small farms in their local area. Indeed, this can be used by shoppers, but can also prove helpful to retailers looking to begin a working relationship with local growers. In this way, the website is using that which might be seen as a roadblock in face-to-face communication (the anonymous internet) to foster and encourage community—a tactic used heavily in the locavore movement.

According to the website, LocalHarvest was founded in 1998, and is now the No. 1 informational resource

for the buy local movement and the top place on the internet where people find information on direct marketing family farms. The website boasts about 17,000 members, and is growing by about 20 new members every day, with about 3.5 million page views monthly, it said.

Taking another approach, the Locavore for iPhone application released February 20, 2009 collects data from a variety of sources to present to its user which foods are in season and available locally. The application will detect which state the user is currently in, identify food that is in season near that user, show which foods are coming soon in season near the user, locate farm markets in the user's area and allow the user to browse 234 fruits and vegetables to see where they are currently growing. It even links to articles on Wikipedia and Epicurious for recipes and background information about each fruit or vegetable.

Though perhaps ironic, the internet is quickly becoming the No. 1 tool for people looking to bring their eating habits a little bit closer to home, exchange recipes and share tips. And the benefits don't stop at those just for consumers. Retailers who break into the local market can expect great benefits as well, but not without some challenges.

"Retailers have to understand that true support of local product costs more money operationally, that often retail pricing is dictated by the fact that it costs more to produce smaller quantities, and they must decide that the extra cost and marketing is something that they truly want to do," offered Art Ames, general manager of Berkshire Co-op Market in Great Barrington, MA. "If a retailer is looking toward more than a financial bottom line and truly wants to be a positive influence in the community, then selling local is the ideal conduit to ensuring it can happen."

Other local retailers agree—though more costly, the benefits of selling local outweigh the risks.

"It is definitely a benefit to sell locally," agreed Davis of Berkshire's Green Grocer. "You build great connections with the local people, you get fresh local produce and you contribute to being green and giving back to the community around you."

"What buying locally offers is a connected symbiosis of community, environment and food," concluded David Evans, president and owner of Marin Sun Farms Butcher Shop in Pointe Reyes Station, CA. "They become apparently seamless when you adapt to buying local. It is a very rewarding process to engage in." 🍎

## Attention, Retailers! TOP REASONS TO GO LOCAL

- 1. Reduce Your Carbon Footprint:** Obviously, the trip from farm to fork produces fewer greenhouse gas emissions when you can drive to the farm yourself.
- 2. Sell Fresher, Healthier Food:** After harvest, local foods have spent less time in the back of an 18-wheeler and more time in your shoppers' kitchens.
- 3. Stimulate the Local Economy:** By buying from local farmers, your shoppers' money goes back into the local marketplace, rather than cross-country.
- 4. Know What You're Selling:** Retailers that buy locally connect with farmers, learn about their practices and can relay this information to shoppers.
- 5. Preserve Open Land:** Buying from local farmers ensures that the picturesque fields of crops you pass each day will be financially viable enough to stick around for future generations.

