

## **The Food Less Traveled**

By Kay Bushnell

Should we care how far our food has traveled? In his report, "Checking the Food Odometer: Comparing food miles for local versus conventional produce sales to Iowa institutions," R. Pirog concludes that for the environmentally conscious consumer the real focus should be on identifying foods that use the fewest resources to reach the dinner table. Certainly the conservation-minded consumer's most important decision by far is a commitment to resource-conserving plant-based foods (grains, legumes, vegetables, fruits, and nuts.) A natural extension of this commitment is to choose locally grown, seasonal, organic plant-based foods.

In early April I asked the produce manager where the organic zucchini I had been purchasing was grown. His answer stunned me. I expected him to say, "In greenhouses," or perhaps in some warm interior valley. When he said, "Chile," I realized that I had been too trusting. "What about the organic pears?" I continued. "Argentina," he replied. I thought to myself, "Argentina! That's about six thousand miles from here!" As an advocate of buying seasonal, local, organic produce I did not want to purchase foods transported such long distances. Our conversation reminded me that this is the age of globalization. Food, even organic food, is now a global commodity.

In Worldwatch Paper #163 (Nov. 2002) Brian Halweil says that the tonnage of food shipped between nations has grown fourfold since 1961. Halweil accuses the long-distance food system of running roughshod over local cuisines and agriculture, as well as consuming staggering amounts of fuel, generating greenhouse gases, and eroding the pleasures of face-to-face interactions around food. He mentions that there is a growing interest in a young, but surging local foods movement. Consumers are becoming keenly aware of the importance of consuming clean, wholesome, and fresh food.

Not that many years ago there were months in which the selection of vegetables and fruits in markets was somewhat limited. One seldom saw fresh berries and other summer fruits and vegetables during the winter months unless they were grown in greenhouses. Now shoppers who enter markets at any time of the year encounter a cornucopia of fruits and vegetables from all parts of the world.

In addition to making their appearances out of season, many of these fruits and vegetables carry the label "organic," which adds another dimension of concern to shoppers. To what extent can shoppers trust that foods arriving from distant shores are truly organic? Are organic foods from foreign countries grown with the same standards as those grown in the United States?

Much food sold at supermarkets today is shipped, trucked, flown and transported by rail an average of 1500-2000 miles before it reaches our tables. According to FoodRoutes Network ([www.foodroutes.org](http://www.foodroutes.org)) whose motto is "Buy fresh, buy local," fruits and vegetables shipped from distant American states spend 7-14 days in transit before

arriving in supermarkets. Transporting gas-guzzling food requires vast amounts of fossil fuel, which upon combustion releases CO<sub>2</sub>, sulfur dioxide, particulate matter and other pollutants into the atmosphere, resulting in global climate change, acid rain, smog, and air pollution. The dependence of today's much-traveled food on fossil fuel is just one of its problems. The plastics and paper industries provide the packaging that gives travel-weary vegetables and fruits a fresh appearance longer than they normally would have. We have all seen produce, even some that is labeled "organic," packed on Styrofoam trays and sealed tightly with clear plastic that can be a challenge to reuse or recycle.

While there are some tropical foods such as bananas that may always be grown far away, there are many foods, such as tomatoes, that are grown locally in season. Some critics of the "buy local" movement contend that it is better to import tomatoes from afar in the off-season than to grow them in hothouses, which use light and heat to create a tomato-growing environment. Advocates of the "buy local and seasonal" philosophy counter that one really doesn't need to eat fresh tomatoes in the dead of winter. By waiting through the winter months until they can be grown locally, we may find that we have a greater appreciation for fresh, vine-ripened tomatoes when they arrive from nearby farms or our own gardens.

The environmental concerns of the global food market are reason enough to buy food grown as close to our homes as possible. In addition, fresh, locally grown food is nutritionally superior to long-distance food. Dr. Colin Campbell, Professor of Nutritional Biochemistry at Cornell University says in *Pathway to Better Health*, "...the shorter the time between picking and eating [fruits and vegetables] the more nutrients the food retains." Pleasure is a major reason to choose local food. Who can adequately describe the taste of a sweet, juicy strawberry that was picked just hours ago at peak ripeness, or the velvety mild flavor of tender winter greens fresh from the field? Eating locally grown foods in season is ideal for those who love to eat.

Here are some ways to enjoy local, seasonal foods.

- 1) Build your diet around them.
- 2) Encourage restaurant chefs to buy food locally.
- 3) Visit a local farm that welcomes visitors.
- 4) Host a party that features local, seasonal foods.
- 5) Grow vegetables, fruits and nuts in your garden.
- 6) Shop at farmers markets and markets that sell locally grown foods, or subscribe to a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project.
- 7) Ask the produce manager to label foods to show where they were grown.

Find a farmers market near you:

[www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets](http://www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets) or <http://www.cafarmersmarkets.com>

Subscribe to a nearby Community Supported Agriculture project and receive deliveries of fresh produce in season:

[www.localharvest.org/csa](http://www.localharvest.org/csa)

Take organic gardening classes:

Common Ground Organic Garden Supply and Education Center (650) 493-6072  
[www.commongroundinpaloalto.org](http://www.commongroundinpaloalto.org)