

WHY LOCAL?

by Kezia Bacon-Bernstein



Photograph taken at Soule Homestead Education Center

Eating locally grown food is becoming more relevant to the residents of Southeastern Massachusetts. We have an extensive array of farms, orchards, vineyards and cranberry bogs right in our back yard, and we're seeking them out in greater numbers. The popularity of farmers markets is on the rise, and we're purchasing local produce, eggs, milk, bread, meat and plenty more at farm stands, Pick Your Own venues and specialty stores. Plus, a number of area chefs are seeking out local foods for their restaurant tables.

What's good about local food? Where can we get it? Why should we eat it?

LOCAL IS FRESHER

"What our customers get is a thousand miles fresher than what you find at a supermarket. That's one of the main reasons the Fruit Center Marketplace in Milton and Hingham stocks local foods," says marketing director Michael Dwyer.

Locally grown produce doesn't have to cross the country by plane or truck or sit in cold storage for days. Most often it is picked within 24 hours of when it is sold to you, which is significantly shorter than what you'll find in the average grocery store.

Because local food doesn't have to travel as far, it can be harvested at its peak. A peach picked in Bridgewater this morning and sold at a farmers market this afternoon can be ripe to bursting. A peach picked in Georgia, trucked to the airport, flown to a produce

distributor in Boston, then transported to your local store is just not the same: it has to be picked sooner and less ripe in order to survive the long journey.

LOCAL TASTES BETTER—AND IT'S HEALTHIER

According to the FDA, some of the vitamins in fresh produce are depleted 50% or more within a week or two of being harvested. This means a tomato from Middleboro will give you significantly more nutrients than one from New Jersey.

You're also lessening the risk of contamination. When you buy local, your food travels a much shorter route from the farm to the table. Thus it's easier to track potential problems. "There is a certain comfort in knowing where your food comes from. All those recalls really make you think about who's handling your food," says John Hornstra, fourth-generation owner of Hornstra Farms in Hingham. "We firmly believe in supporting agriculture in the Northeast, so we have better control over what we're eating," says his sister and co-worker Alison. "Knowing the source of our food, protecting the food supply, making sure that we have local land open to grow food on in the future."

By shopping at farm stands or farmers markets, you're more apt to know what you're eating. "People like to see where their food came from, to actually talk to the farmer, to find out how the food was grown, if it was sprayed with something," explains Karen Biagini, co-manager of the Marshfield Farmers' Market. Rehoboth resident Prudence Stoddard says she feels good knowing where her food is coming from.

IT'S BETTER FOR THE LOCAL ECONOMY

Buying local helps keep money in our communities. When you buy lettuce from Carver instead of California, your money goes right back into the local economy, supporting the value of our real estate, the maintenance of infrastructure like roads and bridges, the quality of our schools

The influx of big box stores just off the highways has put the pinch on many of the smaller, family-run businesses of South-eastern Massachusetts. As a result, our downtown areas — take Plymouth for example — have seen better days, but this summer, Plymouth has received a boost in the form of a Saturday farmers market on the Courthouse Green. “People were eager to come. Right out of the gate they were here, walking downtown and checking it out,” says market manager Barbara Anglin. “It reminds people that there is a heart in the center in their town. It helps them to remember and appreciate that there is commerce going on here.”

“Farmers markets are a proven tool to do that,” says Anglin, citing a nationwide study. “For every dollar spent in a farmers market in a downtown district, four more dollars are spent in that district.” A British study discovered that money spent on local food was twice as likely to be reinvested in the area than money spent at a supermarket chain.

BUYING LOCAL SUPPORTS OUR FARMERS

Nationwide, farmers on average receive only 20 cents of each food dollar — the rest covers costs like transportation, processing, packaging, refrigeration and marketing. But if they sell directly to the consumer, they receive much more. So when you buy produce or eggs from the farm stand or the farmers market, you're helping the farmer get the full retail value for her food. Even if you're buying it from a store, it still helps the farmer because you're choosing her lettuce over the lettuce from California.

“The interest now in local growers — it's really nice to see,” says Donna Blischke of Web of Life Organic farm in Carver, who offers seedlings, produce and eggs, as well as chicken and turkey.

Marlon Garcia, produce manager for Whole Foods Market in Hingham, says that it is company policy at Whole Foods for produce buyers to pay a little bit more for local food. Especially in the summer, “we can pay the farmers 10-15% more than we do for the stuff from California or other countries. It's more expensive for us, but we do it to support the farmers.”

Why should we support local farmers? For one thing, farms provide jobs. Furthermore, the taxes towns collect from agricultural development actually earn communities 70 cents on the dollar. Compare that to residential development, which costs a community \$1.25 per dollar earned. When we support farmers, it gives them an economic incentive against selling their land to the highest bidder, which in turn helps us to preserve open space. “It's more power for all of us,” explains Anglin.

IT'S BETTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

According to Rich Pirog of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, the average fresh food item on our dinner table travels 1500 miles to get there. Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and other best-selling books on food, elaborates on this point. “It takes seven to ten calories of fossil fuel energy to deliver one calorie of food energy to an American plate,” he writes. “Only a fifth (of that energy) . . . is consumed on the farm; the rest is spent processing the food and moving it around.”

This massive consumption of fossil fuel for the sake of feeding ourselves takes a huge toll on our environmental resources — and it is largely unnecessary. While we may not choose to source all of our food locally, even committing to buy 10 percent of what we eat from within a 100-mile radius could drastically reduce our nation's reliance on fossil fuel. A study in Iowa found that a regional diet consumed 17 times less oil and gas than a typical diet based on food shipped across the country.

“We just can't have strawberries in the middle of winter from Chile — it isn't sustainable,” explains Margie Baldwin, co-owner of Mattapoisett's How on Earth, a store that sells only local products. “We are used to having what we want when we want, and that doesn't work anymore.” We're not only paying the price through the challenges associated with global warming, we're getting poorer quality food. “You can buy strawberries in the grocery store in winter but they don't taste like strawberries,” says Karen Biagini. “They're just these big red things.”

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Maintaining local crops also makes us less susceptible to diseases and natural disasters. “The important thing is that there be multiple food chains, so that when any one of them fails — when the oil runs out, when mad cow or other food-borne diseases become epidemic, when the pesticides no longer work, when drought strikes and plagues come and soils blow away — we’ll still have a way to feed ourselves,” writes Pollan.

LOCAL VS. ORGANIC

People who are conscientious about what they eat often wonder which is better: locally grown food or organic. “Organic” means the produce grown without the use of pesticides or synthetic fertilizers, and the animals are raised without growth hormones or antibiotics. People choose it to avoid the threat of what may result from consuming such chemicals. These days, however, organics are often grown on giant factory farms, usually on the West Coast, and thus rely on a huge outlay of energy in order to reach our dinner plates. In addition, they require packaging and refrigeration, so the cost to the planet is high.

The best solution would be to choose local produce that is organically grown. Often a local farm is already using organic methods but hasn’t gone through the complicated process of obtaining organic certification. And even if it’s not organic, a small farm is probably less aggressive about using chemicals than its factory-size counterpart.

LOCAL FOOD IS SOCIAL

Nearly everyone I spoke with for this article — growers, chefs, store managers and consumers — seemed to agree on a single point. Buying local helps to build community. “It’s neighborly,” says Lorrie Gampp of Summer Dreams Farm in Marshfield. Going to the farm stand and chatting with the grower, running into a friend at the farmers market, striking up a conversation with a stranger at the You Pick It raspberry farm . . . we’re creating social ties that only strengthen our communities. “You meet up with people that you haven’t seen in a while, and that makes you feel good,” says Debbie Lenahan of Norwell.

Buying local encourages you to try something new. At the farm stand, you may find an item you haven’t tried before — squash flowers or mustard greens, bite-size plums or purslane. Local growers may offer more variety, too. Talk with the growers, they are often willing to try out a new type of lettuce, for example, when a grocery store won’t because the demand isn’t there. “We offer 14 varieties of heirloom tomatoes,” Gampp says.

LOCAL CAN SAVE YOU MONEY

“I price everything I have at or below grocery store organic prices. Some are one-third the grocery store price,” says Gampp. Because costs such as cross-country transportation are not a factor, local food is often less expensive than what you find in the supermarket.



Photographed at
Round the Bend Farm, Dartmouth

“We’re eliminating the middleman,” says Biagini. Blueberries at Tree Berry farm in Norwell this summer were \$2.60 per pound to pick your own. They averaged around \$2.99 per pint at the grocery store.

But saving money is not really what it’s about. “It’s about superior nutrition, superior freshness, and if it costs a few pennies more, I think it’s worth it,” Biagini continues. The farmers have to support themselves and justify the work involved in transforming dry seeds into fresh produce. “Even if you do pay a premium, when you get home, everything you bought is good. The berries on the bottom of the carton are as good as the ones on the top,” says Linda O’Callahan of Marshfield. “It’s a better value because you’re getting everything you pay for — nothing has to go into the compost.”

BUT CAN WE DO IT YEAR-ROUND?

One of the major challenges of eating local is what to do in the winter when nothing much grows here. The first step is to buy extra when a certain food is in season. You can freeze strawberries or make jam. You can turn an abundance of tomatoes into sauces and salsas. You can make pesto or pickles or fruit leather and stock it all away for the colder months. If you’re not adept in the kitchen, you can look to local growers, like Web of Life or C.N. Smith Farm in East Bridgewater, who have done it for you, supplementing their produce offerings with homemade goods like these.

Another step is simply to be conscious about the foods you choose. Can you hold off on apples from New Zealand next summer and wait for the local ones to come through in September?

WHERE TO FIND IT

In the summer and fall, local foods are available nearly everywhere. Most towns host at least one farm stand, and Pick Your Own berry farms and orchards are scattered throughout the region. Even a standard supermarket stocks some locally grown produce in July and August.

In 2008 there were ten weekly farmers markets in Plymouth County and thirteen in Bristol County. From Attleboro to Dartmouth, Brockton to Fairhaven, Hingham to Plymouth, you could find an outdoor market any day of the week from June to October. What could you find there? Fresh-picked produce to be sure, but also eggs, baked goods, homemade condiments, seedlings, even lobster.

Produce buyer Pietra Hotokka of Good Health Natural Foods in Quincy and Hanover says her stores carry local produce when it’s available. “All of our lettuces are from Happy Valley Organics (of South Deerfield, MA),” she says. “Our blueberries come from Prospect Hill Farm in Plympton.”

Whole Foods Market in Hingham boasts a relatively high percentage of local produce. “August and September are the most local,

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Harvest Stew

I really don’t have an absolute recipe for this particular dish, but the guidelines will give anyone who enjoys cooking stew a real treat.

I make this only in the early fall, when the apples and all the other ingredients are still available.

The first step is to go into your garden and/or local farm stand and get the following:

Onions (1 large or 2 or 3 small)

Fresh thyme, sage, garlic

Red and/or green peppers (1 whole pepper)

Cauliflower, ½ head (if you like cauliflower; sometimes I use it)

Potatoes, 2 large or 4 small

Sweet potatoes, 1 large

Butternut squash

Corn, 6 ears

Apples, 2 (any local variety will do)

Apple cider

Remember all your veggies must be freshly grown or it’s not “Harvest Stew.”

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil (enough to cover the corn).
2. Cut corn in half and add to pot cook for about 5 min. Remove the corn and set aside to add back in later.
3. Add minced garlic and herbs (2 cloves and ½ tsp. of herbs usually works well) to the pot of water.
4. Cut up and add all the veggies, return to the boil, turn heat down and simmer. Cook until tender.
5. Cut, core, and peel 2 apples and add to the pot. Return the corn to the pot (you can cut the kernels off the cob).
6. Add about one cup of apple cider. Simmer about 10 min. Finish off with a dash of cinnamon and nutmeg and enjoy.

Diane Kunkel
Rockin K Cafe
Bridgewater MA 02324
508.697.8278

with 40 to 50 percent,” says Garcia. Some of his sources include strawberries, potatoes and greens from Cape Cod Organic Farm in Barnstable; blueberries, corn, squash and cucumbers from Sauchuk Farm in Plympton. The list goes on and on.

Hingham’s Hornstra Farms delivers milk and other premium products to 3500 South Shore homes. “Ninety percent of what we sell comes from New England,” says Alison Hornstra. “Our milk is produced at our family farm in North Haverhill, NH. It’s antibiotic free, with no artificial hormones. And we just recently brought in organic milk from Dracut. We have Bliss Bros. ice cream from Attleboro, frozen chowders from Marion, cider from Harvard, MA, and our beef is from family owned farms in New England and New York.”

The Fruit Center Marketplace is known for its fresh and beautiful produce, but it is also a leader in supporting local food. “We are very focused on our community and thankful for our customers,” says Dwyer. “As a part of that we like to support local businesses and the local economy. An example is our coffee. We have some well-known national brands like Peet’s and Green Mountain, but we also have had tremendous success with Redeye Roasters, coffee roasted right in Hingham. People come here looking for it — we’re one of the few places that have it.”

“Also, 90 percent of our bakery products are local: Fratelli’s in Quincy, Baking with Joy in Weymouth, Fancypants Bakery in Walpole. They are incredibly fresh, incredibly unique, and people understand that there is a tremendous difference from those produced in huge quantities on assembly lines.”

Chefs, too, are interested in local food. “We grow as much as possible ourselves: lettuce, squash, herbs, garlic, snap peas, green beans, tomatoes,” says Robin Salazar of Pembroke-based Cooking from the Heart, which creates entrees, soups and salads and delivers them to your door. “I always get winter squashes and cranberries from Sunrise Gardens farm stand in Plympton,”

Diane Kunkel, who runs the Rockin K Café in Bridgewater, adjusts her menu as the seasons change. We make gazpacho when the tomatoes, cucumbers and onions come in and corn chowder when the corn comes in. In the fall we have a local stew with

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squash, sweet potatoes and corn. Kunkel gets a lot of her produce from C.N. Smith and Hanson Farm, both in Bridgewater. Plus, my husband is an organic grower, so we use our own eggs, tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplant, peaches and raspberries. People really do appreciate that we’re getting it from a local farm, she says.

Executive Chef Kevin Long has been with Hingham’s acclaimed Tosca since 1995. He uses as much local food in the restaurant as he can. “Everything we can get. It’s been a huge focus of ours for a long time. It’s a little more work, higher prices.” But it’s worth it. “The products are great, and you want to be able to work with these people, support the market, support sustainability.”

Long lists Island Creek Oysters of Duxbury, Lipinski’s Farm of East Bridgewater and Hornstra Farms are among his regular sources. Then there is Eve’s Garden of South Dartmouth. “We get everything from her: greens, herbs, herb flowers, squash blossoms, wild harvested roots, berries, mushrooms,” he raves. “And there’s a farmer right in Hanson with the most unbelievable tomatoes. We also buy summer squash, zucchini, snap peas there, all hand-picked. The stuff is phenomenal.”

HOW TO SPREAD THE WORD

As more of us eat local, the more it will help our farmers, our economy, and the planet. The key is to get the word out. Talk to the managers of the stores you frequent and ask them to stock local products. Tell your friends and family about the benefits of eating what’s grown nearby. Consider creating just one meal a week with foods grown or produced only within New England.

Share this magazine with them too. The mission of edible South Shore is to transform the way consumers shop for, cook, eat and relate to local food. We are committed to sustaining the unique local flavors and economic viability of Plymouth and Bristol counties, connecting people with local growers, retailers, chefs and food artisans and encouraging those relationships to thrive.

Kezia Bacon-Bernstein’s monthly column, “Nature (Human and Otherwise),” has appeared in the Community Newspaper Company’s South Shore newspapers since 1996. She also writes a weekly “Around Town” column for the Marshfield Mariner, and occasional articles for other publications. Also a yoga teacher, she lives in Marshfield with her husband and son.

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holisticandrealistic@yahoo.com
508.245.9716
508.697.9824

Noelle Armstrong, CHHC, AADP
holistic health & wellness coach
www.HolisticAndRealistic.com