

Chicago Tribune

Food fights: Locavores, conventional food fans battle over benefits

September 02, 2010 | By Monica Eng, Tribune reporter

Thomas Stern is an unabashed locavore, buying everything from beets and basil to lamb and legumes from nearby producers. "Things like salt and oils are a little harder to source," the 23-year-old Evanstonian said at a farmers market recently. "But I'd say that about 80 percent of my food is local." Stern, who cooks at Fraiche in Evanston, said he chooses local foods largely for taste, higher nutrient values, environmentalism and a connection with the person who grew them.

That philosophy — to try to source food from within a 100- to 300-mile radius — is fueling "eat local" initiatives across the country. These include Green City Market's annual "Locavore Challenge," where hundreds of Chicago-area residents are expected to follow a mostly local diet from Sept. 8 to Sept. 22. While such efforts might seem innocuous, a growing chorus of writers, politicians and bloggers is challenging the locavore movement, painting it as naive and elitist at best and dangerous to the livelihood of conventional commodity farmers at worst.

Last spring, Republican Sens. John McCain of Arizona, Saxby Chambliss of Georgia and Pat Roberts of Kansas wrote a letter questioning the Department of Agriculture's \$65 million Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food program, which they said was using public funds to "prop up urban locavore markets."

The effort, they wrote, "doesn't appear geared toward conventional farmers who produce the vast majority of our nation's food supply, but is instead aimed at small, hobbyist and organic producers whose customers generally consist of affluent patrons at urban farmers markets."

In a hotly debated New York Times op-ed column last month, historian Stephen Budiansky attacked "locavore math," questioning the movement's assumptions about the energy used to grow and transport produce. And economist Hiroko Shimizu and University of Toronto geographer Pierre Desrochers are finishing a 2011 book, tentatively called "In Praise of the 10,000 Mile Diet," that argues locavorism is a misleading marketing fad that, among other problems, ignores the threat it poses to the current affordability of food and to the economic health of developing countries.

Food security can suffer if "you put all your eggs in one local basket and something goes wrong," Desrochers said from his Toronto office. "I also have a problem when local food activists want to promote food that is either not economical or cannot compete with foreign food in that area."

Locavores respond to the claims of elitism by citing the thousands of people across the country who use food stamps at farmers markets — the Daley Plaza market recently took in \$890 of food stamps in a day. They also say the \$65 million USDA program is dwarfed by the \$12 billion in subsidies awarded to big conventional commodity farmers last year and that energy usage is only one factor in their decision to consume local products.

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With each side brandishing favorite statistics, it's difficult to know what the data mean for the average conscious Chicago eater. But University of Chicago professor Pamela Martin is seeking to change that by fielding three years of data from local farms that serve the Chicago area.

A geophysicist, Martin and grad student Esther Bowen have recorded energy inputs and outputs along with productivity levels per acre for eight local farms (both urban and rural). They are still preparing a paper based on their first year of data, but by the time her team is done with the three-year study, Martin hopes to present solid figures that can provide the basis for fact-based conversations and policies.

Martin stresses that eating local is no guarantee of reducing one's environmental footprint. But her early data are already challenging some assertions by Budiansky, such as: "Whether it is grown in California or Maine, or whether it's organic or conventional, about 5,000 calories of energy go into one pound of lettuce."

"That is absolutely not true according to our data," she said. "If that lettuce had been grown locally in a passive greenhouse and you take into account all energy inputs, the local lettuce wins out." Passive greenhouses retain solar heat through reusable plastic covers and ground cloths; active greenhouses pump in heat.

Her team is still calculating the farms' energy use — including man hours, fertilizers, water and pesticides — but Martin said preliminary data suggest the organic urban farms in her study were at least as productive as conventional farms. Rural sustainable farms (those using organic or similar practices) yielded about half to 85 percent of the produce as conventional farms in the first year of data, she said, "but they might also use half the energy. We just don't know yet."

In the future, Martin hopes to investigate other effects of local food, such as whether farmers market purchases result in less food waste than purchases of grocery store produce.

"Food for Thought" Answer the following questions for reflection in your notebook or on a separate sheet of paper. Give both this paper and your answers back to the teacher when complete.

1. List three of the reasons that Thomas Stern provides for choosing to make 80% of his diet locally sourced.
2. List two arguments against local food systems provided by the book, "In Praise of the 10,000 Mile Diet."
3. What is one way that "Locavores" state that local food systems are not "elitist?"
4. Aside from productivity, how are Pamela Martin and her graduate student setting out to prove that local and organic growers are different from conventional farms?
5. What do you feel are shortcomings in the local foods movement?
6. Do you feel that the lower amount of energy used by local farms is enough of a reason to choose local foods? Why or why not?