

# Eat Real Food

By Ed Hopkins

Michael Pollan, nationally recognized writer on the “Local Food Movement”, writes “Eat real food, not too much, mostly vegetables.” This statement, simple as it is, embodies a food philosophy which is rapidly gaining adherents in our nation. Interestingly, this rising appreciation of locally-sourced, and hence fresher, less "messed with" food is a sharp reversal in a 50-year long trend of increasing distances between where food was harvested and where it was consumed.

Five or six decades ago, supermarkets were a supplemental food resource. Many town or city folks still selected a live chicken at a small butcher shop, and bought eggs from the neighborhood "egg lady". Beyond the suburbs, gathering eggs and tending a vegetable garden were typical chores. Fresh fruits and vegetables from one's own garden or from food stands along small farm roads were the rule all summer, and home canning of "excess" summer produce was still popular. Exotic fruits, vegetables, and even fish were simply not available.

Slowly this local distribution system was replaced by foods coming from farther and farther away, and by more and more pre-prepared, highly processed "convenience" foods. The global economy has intensified this situation. However, two major recent events in our society suggest that small, local food distribution systems will grow to successfully co-exist with globally sourced products into the future:

The first is that the exploding price of declining oil reserves is erasing the cost benefits of distant mega-supply chains. Iceberg lettuce is 90 percent water. Yet it costs as much as \$10,000 to bring a large truckload of lettuce and other vegetables from California! Does this make sense at a time when America is going into debt over the cost of importing more than 50 percent of its oil supply? Government economists' recent ploy of exempting food and oil from a "core inflation index" may have satisfied Wall Street for awhile, but it didn't change the underlying economics.

The second event encouraging local food distribution is that Americans are realizing that quality control in food safety and nutrition have "gotten away from us". Labels don't tell us how long ago our supermarket's produce left the field (when nutrient, vitamin and mineral levels were likely at their peak) -- four days ago from California or two weeks ago from Chile? Today, not only do we not know the farmer who grows our food, we generally have no idea what government is involved, or the safety of the agricultural practices in that country. This is also true for meat, fish, poultry and any other imports.

With rising transportation costs and loss of food quality, it makes more and more sense for Americans to limit fossil fuel consumption, spend our food dollars on the food itself, and keep these dollars circulating in the local economy. While we are proud to have many big farmers here on the shore who ship most of what they grow, and thus contribute to the national and international food economy, we are also very lucky to have small family farmers (and watermen) whose livelihoods are geared to selling to the local population.

Of course for most of us, food isn't just about economics. Food is about nutrition and good-taste. We all know corn should come right from the field to be at its best -- but this is also true of most vegetables, seafood, dairy products and -- well, you get the idea. When we serve one of our member's eggs to visitors, they marvel at the orange yolks and the amazing flavor! And if you're lucky enough to have recently tasted a range fed steer or a chicken that goes outdoors and catches insects, you are reminded again that "real food" is sustenance of the body and the spirit.

Sure, for most of us it's not possible or even desirable to return to the lifestyle of the "old days". However, reinventing ways to get back at least a part of our previous food culture could mean fresher (more nutritious), safer (fewer pesticides, etc.) and even lower cost (bulk versus heat-and-serve) food on our tables.

Now that spring is well under way, we in the Local Food Project are all quite busy planting for harvest (one of us has been selling greenhouse-grown Swiss chard and spinach for the past month and another has been sharing his bumper crop of lettuce grown this past winter under a cold frame). Stay tuned for the field and garden reports and get ready for some summer classics - - and in the meantime be sure to look us up on our website at [www.eslocalfoodproject.org](http://www.eslocalfoodproject.org).