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## Why Eat Local?

by Steven Dahlberg, White Earth Tribal and Community College

Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society has undertaken a major initiative to promote the local food movement in our region. Beyond that, I would hazard a guess that the overwhelming majority of the membership is producing and/or consuming local foods to some degree. Many of you are probably also aware that there has been quite a bit of noise in the media about a report suggesting that local foods are not as “green” as one might think. Because of this I thought it might be worthwhile to revisit the question of why eat local.

One of the main talking points in the “debate” about the merits of local foods relates to the carbon footprint of local vs. industrial agriculture. In my opinion, this is a pointless argument to engage in. First of all, calculating a carbon footprint is an extremely subjective process and the uncertainty in your answer is at least as big as the differences you are arguing about. More importantly, it probably doesn’t matter. In all likelihood we are not going to be able to afford the industrial model much longer. I think we can safely ignore it until it goes away and not quibble about silly numbers.

I’m going to rattle some cages and say that reasons for supporting local foods that fall under the title of “saving the earth” are not worth the trouble of fighting about. We don’t have the power or the need to save her. The world has undoubtedly been rocked by forces *much* greater than our puny efforts. It is very resilient. Our society, however, is not! This leads to one of the reasons for local foods that is worth standing on. We should support local foods out of an acute sense of self preservation. Local food systems are more resilient and more likely to deliver food in spite of disruptions like war, energy and/or economic crises, etc. The only stresses to which local food systems are more fragile are local



events like droughts, localized disease outbreaks, etc. Life is not without risk. Even the best system fails sometimes.

Now I would like to look in a different direction. I find little joy in trying to avoid the bad in life. I prefer to seek out the good. For me, one of the paramount goods is good food prepared in a loving way. This is the ultimate reason for local foods. Local foods are higher quality foods for many reasons. First, local foods have to be better

because the only reason someone would go out of their way to pay more for food is because it tastes better! Furthermore, local producers can’t depend on a building full of PR people and lawyers to promote and protect their interests. They live and die on the quality of their products and their reputation in the community. Local food is fresher and everyone knows that both nutrition and taste are degraded by storage. Local foods are fun to buy because they involve relationships and personal interactions much more than the super store. Also, a local producer is more likely to be willing to grow the particular variety of produce you remember from your youth and can’t live without.

The last reason I would like to mention is economic. Local producers get a greater portion of the food dollar than those selling commodities. A dollar spent on local food is more likely to stay in the community supporting the businesses and services that we all depend on. A community that has a functioning local economy has greater control over its destiny than one that is dependent on interests from outside.

These are reasons enough to support local foods. Let’s stay focused on these strengths and ignore the straw men that the opponents of local foods set up to flail at.



## How to Eat Local

by Steven Dahlberg, White Earth Tribal and Community College

In the last issue of the *Germinator*, we looked at some of the reasons for eating and promoting local foods. It's important to start there because most people can deal with the life changes required to eat local if they have the motivation of a strong enough why. Eating local is not the same old thing unless you were born before World War II. It involves more time and effort, more planning, and the right infrastructure. These are in order of importance, and we will look at each in turn.

First and most important, you must like to produce, preserve and prepare food! If you don't enjoy these activities, in fact, if these are not already major hobbies, eating local is probably not your cup of tea. The whole point of this is local control over your food. That control is centered in your garden and kitchen. More control means more responsibility and, therefore, more effort. You will also have more travel to get those foods you don't grow yourself. This is another time commitment beyond heading to the super center for everything. If any of this feels like a burden rather than an opportunity, you will probably not stick with it. So the first task is to honestly assess your willingness and ability to take this control, to make this investment. On a related note, it is very helpful to find like-minded souls to collaborate with to share some of the extra work involved.

If you have the commitment, the next step is to plan. We on the Northern Plains have a major challenge compared to some other regions of the world in that the growing season is considerably shorter than the eating season. Today, most of us deal with this by importing other peoples' growing season to fill that gap. In the past, we dealt with it by preserving foods for times when they weren't available fresh. This is the crux of the planning needed for local foods. You must be able to accurately estimate your needs for meats, fruits and vegetables so you can buy/produce what you need when it is



available. Bad estimates lead to either waste or shortages.

You also have to budget the time, money, and other resources so they are available when needed. Winter storage vegetables and your years supply of meat are both going to hit in roughly August to October. You will need money to buy them and time to process them for storage. People who have not experienced the traditional yearly food cycle of the cold climate really can't appreciate how busy the fall is. Be prepared for long days.

Another aspect of planning is changing your dietary expectations and learning to eat with the seasons. Fresh strawberries and salad greens are only available locally during a limited window of time. You will learn to treasure those times and eat other things (like frozen, canned or dried strawberries) the rest of the year. Make sure you know how to adjust recipes to deal with preserved or substitute ingredients as needed.

One thing that I think is critical is the need for raw food throughout the year. There are many temperature-sensitive vitamins and enzymes that our bodies need regularly. There are several ways to

get these during the winter; like sprouting, drying to a certain extent, and fermentation. My personal favorite is the latter. There are several good books by authors like Sally Fallon, Sandor Katz and Eliot Coleman that I recommend for learning how to do this. Sauerkrauts, fermented pickles, and drinks were the superfoods that helped our ancestors stay healthy through the winter. Your success as a locavore depends on bringing some of these foods back into your diet. There are also a number of wild foods that are available through the winter, such as conifer needle teas, that are worth learning about.

The final piece you need is the proper infrastructure. Ideally, this includes the following: a spare refrigerator, at least one large freezer, a root cellar, and lots of storage space for canned, dried and fermented foods. You will need lots of jars and other sealable containers and equipment for canning, freezing, fermenting and drying. All of this is available at the Ford Fiesta through Mercedes levels. I would recommend shooting for about a Buick. Equipment designed for the dabbler is not going to be up to the demands of a serious locavore. You'll save money in the long run by buying good quality, higher volume equipment. This is a whole deep subject, as with everything above, that we can't get too far into.

Depending on where you are right now, all of this could seem very daunting. I'm now going to give you the single, most important piece of advice. Take it one step at a time! For example, decide to buy all your eggs locally. Find the producers/sellers of local eggs and get in the habit of going there every week. Once that is routine, pick the next food to focus on, say beef, and do the same. Repeat as needed. Change, even a "good" one, is stressful. If you turn your whole food life upside down at once, your career as a locavore will probably go down in flames.

That's about it. Oh, and did I say, "Take it one step at a time!!!"





# Local Foods and the New (Old) Economy

by Steven Dahlberg, White Earth Tribal and Community College

**\$** By now I'm sure you are aware that the virtual economy of sellers pretending to have something of value and buyers pretending to pay has hit a "rough patch." You have probably also heard that the real cause of this is that we the people are not adequately fulfilling our most sacred duty of buying all the stuff others so selflessly provide for our benefit (or is it because we already bought too much on credit, or rather that there isn't enough debt and the banks need to stop shirking their responsibility to make more. I get confused!). Fortunately, countless experts are now busy fixing the problem, so things will all be made right shortly.

Being a contrarian by nature I have been wondering if the problem might not be a bit larger than represented. I wonder, for example, if there is more to life than selling our time to the lowest bidder and using the proceeds to seed endless consumption. It occurs to me that some of the struggles people are facing today might improve if we focused our energy on being good producers instead of just "consumers." What better place to begin than by producing some portion of the food needs of our families, friends and neighbors. What I'm talking about here is a productive home economy producing basic foodstuffs and/or converting these into finished products for home use and/or to barter/sell within the community.

The particular theme I would like to focus on is our children. At one time they were a productive and essential part of the home economy. Now they are considered an expense (and a large one at that). I'm not talking about child labor here. Children really do want to be productive, at least outside of that brief period known as adolescence where they temporarily leave the human race. They love to participate, learn, create, test new skills, etc. Of course they try to dodge responsibility as well (good thing that stops when we

grow up!). There are many ways to provide outlets for children's drive for meaningful participation in the home economy. Here are a few case studies.



Recently, the *Farmer's Fargo Forum* featured NPSAS member Elizabeth Petry and the gluten free pies that she makes and sells at the local farmer's market. The Petry family is a wonderful example of how parents can provide opportunities for children to find the pleasure in productive activity. Elizabeth began to explore gluten free baking because of her mother's gluten intolerance. The pie recipe she developed was such a hit at home that she test-marketed them at the monthly farmer's market in Moorhead, Minn. They were equally well received there and, presto, a local food microenterprise was born. Look at the skills demonstrated: creative problem solving, planning and scheduling, baking, pricing, marketing, customer relations, etc. More importantly, she has the opportunity to experience success resulting from her own initiative. What a powerful reward!

The Petry's are not a one-trick pony either. Their son Karl produces beef jerky and eggs for the farmer's market. Both children are responsible for the production and sale of milk from their two cows. These activities cover a substantial portion of the family's mortgage payment.



The above mentioned farmers' market is the creation of Noreen Thomas of My Sister's Farm. Noreen is a tireless local foods evangelist who has made it her mission to provide opportunities for young people to produce for the local foods economy. For example, four young men under the age of 18, Jared and Erik Trangasrud, and Evan and Carsten Thomas, produce pork for Fargo restaurants like



the Hotel Donaldson, Silver Moon and Green Market; as well as for banquets. They also sell the pork and chickens at the farmer's market. Nick Kukert makes very popular maple syrup and gluten free granolas. Stacy Trangasrud produces and sells eggs. Melanie Fagre does cattle and heirloom turkeys. A group of kids have worked together to make bread for the NPSAS Winter Conference and for other banquets. Children from Fargo/Moorhead's immigrant population have sold extra apples from their yard.

The market also provides opportunities for young people outside of the F/M area. Noreen sells goat's milk soap produced by Amanda Dagley, an 18-year-old from New Salem, N.D. Amanda raises up to 50 dairy goats and uses the milk as the key ingredient in her soaps.

These young people earn incomes comparable to their peers in the formal economy. Often there are no opportunities for them in that economy. They are learning and applying skills that go well beyond, "would you like fries with that?" They are clearly excited about what they do and how it contributes to their lives and their family. These young producers are not likely to sit around helpless if some future job gets "right sized" away. They have the confidence, born of experience, that they can make their ideas happen. This isn't exploitation or drudgery. This is power.

Of course, all of this is obvious to the point of being trivial to most NPSAS members. There are undoubtedly dozens of similar stories in our ranks. I am not so confident about the broader society where we often see, as Noam Chomsky once said,

*"Some things are so obvious it takes a great education to miss it."*