

Colorado Proud:
Eating locally on the Front Range of Colorado

As industrial agriculture creates more and more problems for the environment and the nation's health, a sub-culture of food rebellion has emerged. The local food movement focuses on trying to eat food that is grown, prepared, and/or processed locally. These "Locavores" often utilize community supported agriculture programs, home gardens, or even foraging to sustain themselves. What if I were to eat an entirely local diet? The process poses numerous problems, many of which have no certain answer. Acquiring local flour, for example, can be enormously difficult as it is impossible to track the movement of grain across the state. Even then, it is difficult to determine where the grain was milled or processed. Finding enough food to healthily sustain a person is a challenge worth considering. Even though some foods are nearly impossible to attain locally, such as salt, and others are grown locally but are impossible to trace, such as wheat and corn, I could survive on local food within my local range of Colorado.

Local has many different definitions, but a common designation is a 100-mile radius (Diet, 2010). For others, local can mean a specific geographic region or even an entire state. Bon Appétit, Willamette University's food service, uses a 150-mile radius, as 100 miles simply wouldn't cover enough land to support their requirements. For the purpose of my own study, I define "local" to be a gradient. Drawing a solid line through the earth simply will not facilitate this process. The front range of Colorado will be my primary local zone and all of Colorado will constitute the second zone. The Front Range extends from the top of the state to just south of Denver, the continental divide to just east of Denver. Major cities include Estes Park, Boulder, Longmont, Fort Collins, Loveland, Greeley, Westminster, Brighton, and Denver. In Estes Park, my hometown, people commute everywhere. It is necessary to drive to school. Going to the movies takes an hour to get to the theater. We are used to driving long distances. Making a trip to Boulder or Fort Collins is already a common part of many people's lives. Reasonable distances do not limit our range of food. The state is divided mostly into the mountains, where I actually live; the foothills, where I am buying most of my local food; and the plains, where the state produces most of its food. Greeley and the areas east of I-25 are especially well adapted to agriculture. Greeley is known for

its massive cattle production. The plains from Denver north along I-25 are covered in crop fields. Colorado produces most types of foods and crops, but it, like most other places, exports the vast majority of them before they can get to market.

MY FOOD

An important factor in eating locally is health. Surviving on foraged mushrooms all year cannot really be called eating locally. Survival is one thing; comfortably living your daily life is another. To be deemed a healthy person, the government has decided that per day, a person should eat: 6 oz. of grains (half of which should be whole), 2.5 cups of vegetables (preferably dark green, like broccoli; orange, like sweet potatoes; and beans), 2 cups of a variety of fruits, 3 cups of milk, and 5.5 oz. of meat(USDA, Inside the Pyramid, 2010). Given that I currently do not consume a balanced diet, some alterations should be made. I will not drink soymilk because I detest the taste. I eat meat regularly; however vegetables are optional. Butter and oil are also common in my diet. I don't feel the need to buy copious amounts of soda and coffee, and I rarely buy any sweets for myself. I still have my dietary staples to consider. Making the switch to eating locally needs to cover these requirements, or it isn't really a viable option for me.

AVAILABILITY

In my area, a surprisingly large amount of food claims to be local. A farmer's market in Fort Collins, The Fort Collins Co-op, offers a huge selection of food throughout the year (Coop, 2008). Two other farmer's markets are in the city, but it is unclear exactly how "local" these can be considered. Boulder also offers a regular farmer's market in the summer. It usually contains a large variety of vegetables and fruits, as Boulder is more agriculturally fertile than my mountainous home. Apples, apricots, bell peppers, cantaloupe, carrots, celery, cherries, chili peppers, grapes, onions, peaches, pears, plums, popcorn, potatoes, pumpkin, raspberries, strawberries, sweet corn, and watermelon are all available at the end of August (USDA, Colorado Crop Calendar). Boulder also has an organic grocery store called Lucky's Market that sells local products. Actually having been to Lucky's, I can confirm that they sell genuinely local foods. Estes Park, my hometown, even has its own organic grocery store and a weekly farmers market every Thursday throughout the summer(People, 2010). There isn't a lot of food from the Estes Valley itself, as it is simply too rocky, too high, and too dry to be productive farmland. However a large number

of vendors from the front range show up with breads, honey, fish, sunflowers, carrots, and the occasional crate of cherries. There are a large number of sources for obtaining local food within a normal day's drive.

Barley, wheat, and rice are all grown in Colorado; the real difficulty is finding them available locally (USDA, Quick Stats). This is one of the concessions I must make; many more commercial crops are impossible to track, so it is impossible to tell if they are truly local or an import. A local market could easily repackage commercial sweet corn and sell it as a local crop (Karp, 2010). Grain crops are very quickly assimilated into the commercial agriculture machine, so there isn't really any time to intervene. The harvesters rip the crops from the earth and the crops are transported to some mass storage location, which makes them already indistinguishable from the others of their kind. The grain is then shipped to any one, or several, of all the processors in the area and outside of the area. By this time it's pointless to guess the grain's origin. Even if I tracked down one specific farmer and asked to buy some "local" corn, he probably wouldn't take the time to separate ten or so husks every few weeks out of the thousands of bushels he produces, especially not for one person.

However, I can find some ingredients for cooking in my area. Madhava Honey, based ten minutes from my house, sells local honey created in the canyon by Colorado bees (Honey, 2010). Milk and butter are within reach, as Longmont has a small family-run dairy that my family used to utilize (Inc., 1998). MacGreggor Ranch is located in my hometown and sells grass-fed, natural, organic, hormone-free beef. If I really want to, I can buy my whole year's meat from them alone (Ranch, 2010), although there are other options available. Colorado's Best Beef, for example, sells an enormous amount of meat to local vendors all over the state(Company, 2010).

SEASONALITY

Pinto beans, popcorn, and potatoes are available year round, and other crops, such as apples and onions, store until the early summer (USDA, Colorado Crop Calendar). Potatoes especially excite me, because they have so many applications and I actually enjoy them. Storing food would be essential to surviving the cold season, and it is entirely doable. It would be a bleak winter as far as variety goes, but that is to be expected. By the end of the year I may be sick of potatoes, but I could survive on them. Apples will keep for a very long

time (once I learn how to store them properly), so I won't die from lack of fruit. Come spring a whole new layer of food would become available and I would feast like royalty after the harvest.

COLORADO PROUD

Colorado already has a state-sponsored local food movement entitled "Colorado Proud." This program was created to boost Colorado's economy and create a fresher marketplace (Agriculture, Agriculture Publications, 2010). The grounds for a Colorado Proud label are similar to those for getting an organic designation, although the requirements are locally oriented instead. These are foods are local to Colorado, either in origin, production, or processing. A series of restaurants all over Colorado are "Colorado Proud." They serve menus either entirely composed of local foods or that have selections of local foods. There are restaurants listed from every corner of the state, but the majority of them are in the Front Range (Agriculture, Farm Fresh Directory, 2010). This provides those weak-willed locavores with an easy way out. They would not have to store millet in their garage for the entire winter; they could just go out and get food that other people had already collected if they wanted to. Having a built-in local food program makes life much easier, but many people might have issues with going out to eat and calling it "eating local." Chances are there are things used in these "local" restaurants that are not local, but eating locally is a gradient. If I don't feel like living on just snap peas and fish caught from the river all year, I do not have to. If my will breaks and I can't take consuming another homemade potato salad, I do not have to trash the whole program. I can go out for dinner, if I really needed to, I have options.

COST

Preparation and cost also factor heavily into any local eating campaign. While many essential items, such as oils and flour used for cooking, are missing from my area, a number of baking goods can be attained locally, such as honey. Buying all of these ingredients will definitely create economic problems, because each crop isn't guaranteed to create a wonderful meal and I will probably not utilize my resources adequately in the beginning. I will have to evolve and adapt my cooking to my new limitations. Switching from sugar to honey and from lots of bread to lots of potatoes will be challenging. Having to recreate the same meal over and over again in an effort to make it palatable creates a lot of waste.

Appliances are also an essential cost of eating locally. Buying a large freezer is an important step towards food independence, but it is an expensive investment. Along with other instruments, a bread maker, a dehydrator, and an oven are essential to be successfully local in my food consumption. It is a bit of an economic burden, but dehydrated apples are delicious and freshly baked bread is worth the cost of any bread machine. If I'm actually motivated to put this plan in motion these problems are simply boxes to be checked off after completion.

Creating every meal alone will be a challenge, as we eat out frequently. However, food preparation isn't hard labor. Time spent cooking or making sandwiches is time well spent. An afternoon in the kitchen with family is worth the scrounging of ingredients. A local Thanksgiving is an amazing, delicious feat. A homemade pie with local apples and freshly mashed potatoes are magnitudes better than anything I could find in the supermarket.

On top of that, I am getting a healthy, local meal out of it. The trick is finding the ingredients in the first place. Flour, butter, oil, and salt will all be difficult to find locally, maybe even impossible. I am sure it is produced somewhere in Colorado, but I would not be able to attain it before the final product is shipped to some foreign country. Here is that same concession again. Buying Colorado Proud products whenever possible, making the rounds on all the best farmer's markets, and using locally produced vegetables and fruits is not fully a "Locavore" diet, but it's as close to eating locally as is practical for an average person such as myself.

EFFECTS

Given all of the above, my actions in the pursuit of a local diet will have impacts outside my own health. The environment, the community, and my friends will all feel the changes I make. Showing such dedication to an ideal is contagious. It is entirely possible that I will inspire others to join in the movement to eat locally. This added pressure would eventually have its own weight. At that point, attaining local food will become easier because the client base will be expanded for the farmers in the area. Farmers could pull more of their crop out of mass production to be sold locally and still make a profit. Not only will this keep money used for food in the area, but it will also foster closer ties between the producers and the consumers of the community. Even more CSAs (Community Supported

Agriculture) will appear and strengthen the local food movement in the area. Fresh boxes of vegetables, brought straight from the CSA garden would be a common sight.

Eating locally may be an extremely tiresome and difficult way of living, but it is entirely possible to achieve some level of locality in a daily diet. Not everyone can make the switch to being fully self-sustainable, but most people can choose to buy a Colorado Proud product over an imported version of the same food. Colorado offers a large amount of enjoyable food, so there really isn't any reason to go outside the state for most items. I can live comfortably on food that comes from my area. Not everyone can do this, but I've found that places that I previously assumed to be desolate and food-barren were actual rich with resources that I hadn't considered. Once I realized what was growing in my proverbial backyard, all sorts of edible options opened up to me. I'm not sure about other places, as I'm sure cities like Las Vegas would have difficulties feeding its populace locally. However, my home state of Colorado has a tremendous capacity for local food consumers; all a Colorado resident needs to do is realize what they've got all around them.

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