

Eating Local: A Global Solution?

As I learn about the industrial agriculture that I rely on for food, I am often shocked at the detrimental effects and injustices that litter the American food system. *Fast Food Nation*¹ showed that a meal from McDonalds comes with serious consequences, from health risks and economic repercussions to concerns about the treatment and safety of workers. Watching *King Corn*² and *The Future of Food*³, I witnessed the loss of the livelihood and identities of small family farmers, who are being replaced by huge operations that, supported by government subsidies, practice monocrop farming that leads to a loss of biodiversity. In the search for a solution to these problems, the local food movement has emerged as a possible alternative to the conventional food system. It may offer a way to sustain myself without contributing to the damage caused by industrial food production.

The local food movement encourages consumers to look within their own communities for food, buying food that was grown and/or processed locally. Interpretations vary in their definition of a local geographic region, from the “100-mile diet⁴” to boundaries based on bioregions, or state and county lines. Some adherents commit to a completely local diet, while others simply strive for an improvement over their current habits, maybe attempting to purchase 80% of their food from local sources. Others try eating local for a set amount of time, like one year, or during seasons when local farms are productive. Advocates emphasize that even small shifts to more local sources can make a difference.

I wanted to know if it would be possible to eat locally in my area. I am from Pullman, Washington, a small town in Eastern Washington. I was able to find sources to form a nutritionally complete local diet and I believe that choosing to eat locally can be personally rewarding and provide benefits for one’s community; however, because of the difficulty others would have eating locally and the effort and time that it requires, I do not believe that eating locally is a universal solution for the weaknesses of the industrial food system.

¹ Schlosser, E. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. Boston: Houghton.

² *King Corn* [DVD]. (2007). (Aaron Woolf). Mosaic Films Incorporated.

³ *The Future of Food* [DVD]. (2004). (Deborah Koons). Lily Films.

⁴ *100 Mile Diet*. Retrieved November 3, 2010, from : <http://www.100milediet.org/>

For my research, I chose to define local food as something grown, processed and sold within the Palouse Region as proposed by Caldwell⁵. The Palouse includes the agricultural areas that surround Pullman and nearby Moscow, Idaho, and reach north to Spokane, Washington. (See Figure 1). I searched for sources in the Palouse that would allow me to fulfill all of my dietary requirements year-round. The United States Department of Agriculture's Food Pyramid divides a nutritional diet into five main food groups: Grains, Meat/Beans, Vegetables, Fruit and Milk.

The Palouse's distinguishing feature is its landscape of rolling hills, covered primarily with wheat, lentils and peas. So I was not worried about finding a source for grains. Although most wheat and barley farmers sell to elevators, there are a few small operations that produce for the local market. Joseph's Grainery⁶, based in Colfax, Washington, offers wheat, barley and lentils, and flour derived from each, that are sold at the Pullman Farmers Market or online. If organic grains were a priority, I could look to Rene Lentz⁷, who grows organic heirloom grains at his farm in Marlin, WA: emmer spelt, emmer farro, and lena camelina. These grains are available at a Co-op in Moscow, just eight miles away from Pullman.

My region provides a few different ways to eat protein. Joseph's Grainery, mentioned above, sells lentils. Clearwater Country Foods locally grows and processes frozen green garbanzo beans. Eggs are readily available in the Palouse. They are sold at the Pullman Farmers Market; chicken eggs as well as duck and goose eggs. My own family buys eggs and chickens from the Zakarison Partnership⁸, an environmentally-conscious operation that sells eggs and chicken, turkey, and lamb. Other sources, like Pickleflat Farms and D & M Stout Ranch⁹ offer grass-fed beef and pork.

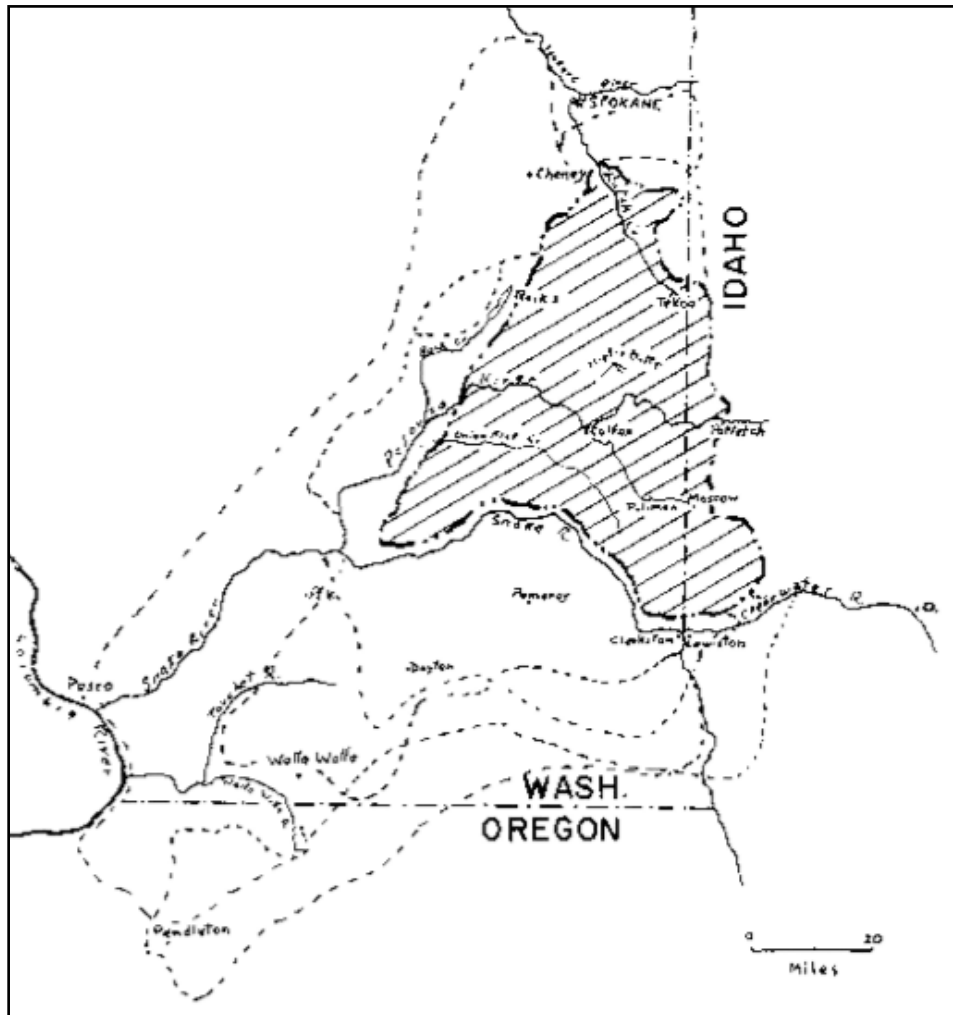
⁵ Caldwell, H. H. (1961). The Palouse in Diverse Disciplines. *Northwest Science*, 35, 115-121. Retrieved November 3, 2010, from GREENR database.

⁶ *Joseph's Grainery*. (2009). Retrieved November 6, 2010, from : <http://www.josephsgrainery.com/>

⁷ Magnuson, S. (2010, September 7). Introducing Rene Lentz of Lentz Farms. *Community News: The monthly newsletter of the Moscow Food Co-op*. Retrieved November 7, 2010, from <http://www.moscowfood.coop/content/view/29/53/>

⁸ *Zakarison Partnership*. (2010). Retrieved November 6, 2010, from : <http://www.farm.zakarisonpartnership.com/>

⁹ *Order forms and information*. (2010). Retrieved November 6, 2010, from Zakarison Partnership: <http://www.farm.zakarisonpartnership.com/resource-center>

Figure 1: *The Palouse*

Source: http://www.vetmed.wsu.edu/org_NWS/NWSci%20journal%20articles/1960-1969/1961%20vol%2035/Issue%204/v35%20p115%20Caldwell.PDF

The Palouse also offers sources for produce. A variety of vegetables are available at both the Pullman and Moscow farmers markets, including sweet corn, summer squashes, tomatoes, onions, garlic, leafy greens and a surprising array of chili peppers. Another interesting source for produce is the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program that is run by Washington State University's (WSU) Organic Farm¹⁰. Members of the CSA pay at the beginning of the growing season and, from May to October, receive weekly shares of produce.

¹⁰ *Community Supported Agriculture*. (2010). Retrieved November 6, 2010, from Department of Crop & Soil Sciences WSU Organic Farm: <http://css.wsu.edu/organicfarm/CSA.htm>

The CSA offered by the WSU Organic farm includes a small amount of fruit in addition to vegetables. A week's share might include a pint of small, sweet strawberries. Tukey Orchard, also affiliated with WSU, sells organic apples and pears, grown at the orchard in Pullman. Bishops' Orchard, in nearby Garfield, Washington, grows many varieties of apples, which customers can pick themselves to take home or press into cider. Vendors at the Pullman and Moscow Farmers Markets sell freshly picked raspberries, strawberries, peaches, and other summer fruits.

Finding a local source for dairy was surprisingly challenging. I knew that WSU managed dairy cows, but all of the milk produced at WSU is used by Ferdinand's, the university's creamery. Ferdinand's could be a source for cheese, but fresh milk is harder to find. One dairy farm, Spokane's Family Farm, is based outside of Spokane, which is technically within my definition of local, but their products are only for sale at the farm itself and in stores in Spokane, an hour and a half drive away from Pullman. It would be impractical to go so far for a nutritional necessity, especially given the short shelf life of milk.

Though I could not find an accessible local source for dairy, I was able to find a local source for items from all of the other food groups. However, following such a diet, I would feel the absence of other foods that are not considered to be nutritionally necessary. First of all, most recipes require some kind of cooking oil. Although many farms in the Palouse grow canola for oil, there are no local processors. Sugar is another staple that I would have to do without while following a strictly local diet. An acceptable substitute may be honey, which is widely available at farmers markets and from the WSU apiary. There are no local sources for salt or spices, so my local diet might be very bland.

Coffee is not well-suited to the climate of the Palouse, but DOMA Coffee Roasting Company¹¹ roasts imported beans in Post Falls, Idaho. They buy coffee beans directly from farmers at fair trade prices¹² and utilize eco-friendly roasters¹³ so, although their product is not cultivated locally, buying coffee from DOMA could support some of the same values that

¹¹ *DOMA Coffee Roasting Company*. (2010). Retrieved November 7, 2010, from : <http://www.domacoffee.com/>

¹² *Coffee*. (2010). Retrieved November 7, 2010, from DOMA Coffee Roasting Company: <http://www.domacoffee.com/coffee.php>

¹³ *Roasting*. (2010). Retrieved November 7, 2010, from DOMA Coffee Roasting Company: <http://www.domacoffee.com/content.php?id=129>

buying completely local does. There are a few wineries in the Palouse, including the Camas Prairie Winery and Wawawai Canyon Winery. Pullman also has two breweries, Paradise Creek Brewery¹⁴ and Palouse Falls Brewing Company¹⁵, though their sources for hops and barley are not within my definition of local.

I found that it would be possible to eat locally in the Palouse. I was able to find a variety of small farms and organizations that support consumers in my area. It was an interesting and exciting experience to seek out local alternatives for food and I know that my family has enjoyed utilizing some of these, such as the WSU CSA and the Zakarison Partnership. However, the local food movement as a whole is a more complex issue, with both pros and cons.

Proponents of the local food movement claim that it offers many benefits. Eating local can help local economies in a few different ways. First, buying local often means buying directly from a farmer, decreasing or even eliminating middlemen like elevators and distributors. These middlemen lop off an enormous part of a farmer's profit.¹⁶ Higher profit margins can help small family farms survive. Also, local consumers like to know that the money they are spending is staying in their community, and stimulating the local economy. The capital spent on local foods is significant. A survey of the farmers market in Moscow estimated \$47,753.65 in sales on one Saturday, all directed toward local farmers and vendors¹⁷. CSAs decrease the vulnerability of farmers by allowing consumers to pay in advance for a season of weekly shares of produce, securing the farmer's income for the year.¹⁸

Eating local food may also be more healthful than a traditional diet. Fruits and vegetables lose nutrients in the time after they are picked, so local, freshly picked produce can provide health benefits. And the local food movement often includes organically grown

¹⁴ Paradise Creek Brewery. (2010). Retrieved November 6, 2010, from : <http://www.paradisecreekbrewery.com/>

¹⁵ Palouse Falls Brewing. (2010). Retrieved November 6, 2010, from : <http://www.palousefallsbrewing.com/>

¹⁶ Starr, A., et al. (2003). Sustaining local agriculture: Barriers and opportunities to direct marketing between farms and restaurants in Colorado. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 20, 301-321.

¹⁷ Williams, C. (2009). *Moscow Farmers' Market Rapid Market Assessment*. Retrieved November 7, 2010, from City of Moscow: <http://www.moscow.id.us/art/fm/index.aspx>

¹⁸ Lea, E. (2005). Food, health, the environment and consumers' dietary choices. *Nutrition and Dietetics*, 62, 21-25.

food, allowing a consumer to avoid pesticides and other chemicals used in conventional agriculture.¹⁹

The local food movement can also contribute to a sense of community. It is a valuable experience to interact with the people that are producing one's food. Farmers markets especially are social places. On Saturday mornings the Moscow Farmers Market is filled with chatting friends, joined by children and dogs and accompanied by live music, highlighting local musicians. Food vendors sell a variety of ethnic foods for breakfast or lunch.

With such a personal experience comes transparency that traditional food sources do not provide. When buying products directly from a farmer, it is reasonable to ask about the conditions in which they were produced: growing methods, the treatment of animals, and the rights of workers. Many producers that market directly encourage consumers to visit their farms. For example, Spokane's Family Farm gives tours and sells their milk on the farm. Seeing the production of food for oneself is a clear way to know whether it is morally acceptable to support a producer's practices.

Despite these benefits, the local food movement remains controversial for a few reasons. First, there is the fact that eating locally is just not viable in many, if not most areas. My research was based on the agricultural Palouse Regions, but it is probably unrealistic to expect urban areas or bioregions that don't support agriculture to provide food for their populations. Even in the fertile Willamette Valley, there is not enough food grown to nutritionally satisfy the local population²⁰.

Environmental benefits are often touted in the promotion of the local food movement; however, recent studies refute the idea that food grown closer has less of an environmental impact. Researchers point out that the mode of transportation matters just as much as the distance that food travels. For example, trains can transport food much farther than pick-up trucks can with the same amount of energy. And consumer demand

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Giombolini, K. J., Chambers, K. J., Schlegel, S. A., & Dunne, J. B. (2010). Testing the local reality: does the Willamette Valley growing region produce enough to meet the needs of the local population? A comparison of agriculture production and recommended dietary requirements. *Agriculture and Human Values*.

for a variety of locally grown products can encourage farmers to attempt to grow crops that are not suited to their environment, leading to a wasteful and risky growing process.²¹

Another criticism of the local food movement is that it is an elitist movement. A revolution in our food system is not responsible if it fails to address and support those outside of the privileged middle and upper classes. Locally grown foods can be more expensive than those grown on a bigger scale. Some initiatives have been taken to combat this reality, including programs that allow recipients of EBT (Food Stamps) to use their credit at farmers markets²².

Even so, eating locally does require more thought, time and effort than traditional practices. Locating sources for each food group entailed a lot of research. Some farms and vendors do not advertise beyond the reach of simple flyers, which are not widely distributed, so eating locally can require insider knowledge. In addition, I found that the foods local to the Palouse were not all available at the same place. For a week's worth of groceries, I might have to travel to the Moscow Food Co-op, to the Moscow and Pullman Farmers Markets, to the WSU Organic Farm and Tukey Orchard, and all the way to Spokane and back. Though possible, such a routine seems unrealistic, and without a car it becomes impossible. Also, the majority of the foods I located locally require preparation. In contrast to picking up a fast food meal or heating up prepared food from the store, fresh vegetables, proteins and grains need to be cooked from scratch. This requires time, effort, and knowledge. Another challenge of a local diet is to find a way to preserve the yield of summer and fall to last through winter and early spring. Most perishable produce and meat could be frozen or canned, but canning is time-consuming and intimidating, and I can imagine that a winter filled with preserved food would become monotonous.

On an individual level, I believe that seeking out and utilizing local sources for food can be a rewarding experience. It allows a consumer to support his or her local economy, connect with the community and quell concerns about the ethical and health implications of the food that is being consumed. I personally found it interesting to learn about what farmers in my community are producing and achieving. But the local food movement is not

²¹ The Carbon Cost From Farm To Fork. (2008, March 8). *Newsweek*, Retrieved November 3, 2010, from <http://www.newsweek.com/2008/03/08/the-carbon-cost-from-farm-to-fork.html>

²² Thilmany, D., & Watson, P. (2004). The Increasing Role of Direct Marketing and Farmers' markets for Western U.S. Producers. *Western Economics Forum*, 3, 19-25.

1720501

a universal alternative to conventional food because it is not feasible for everyone and does not necessarily solve the problems presented by the reality of today's industrial food system.