

Eating Local: A Matter of Integrity*[i]*

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In his best seller, *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser writes of the growing costs of our “love affair” with fast foods.*[1]* He states, “fast food has triggered the homogenization of our society... has hastened the *mall*ing of our landscape, a widening of the chasm between rich and poor, fueled an epidemic of obesity, and propelled the juggernaut of American cultural imperialism abroad.” He documents how fast food has lured us into choosing diets deficient in nearly everything except calories, supporting practices deceptive in every aspect from advertising to flavoring, and systems that degrade nearly everyone and everything involved. The problems arising from the fast food industry are rooted deeply within American society.

In a new book, *Fed Up!*, Harvard-trained physician and medical reporter Susan Oakie suggests that today's childhood obesity epidemic is associated with a number of factors which characterize today's American society.*[2]* Sprawling suburban neighborhoods discourage walking, ballooning portions in fast food restaurants encourage overeating, poor choices of menus for school lunches rob children of nutrition, and a decline in home cooking and the resulting tendency to snack rather than sit down for a family meal has transformed the act of eating into refueling. Current diet and health problems in America are not just food safety or food quality issues; they are symptoms an increasingly exploitative and degenerative culture.

Organic foods now represent the most rapidly growing segment of the American food industry. Growing at a rate of twenty percent per year over the past fifteen years, organic food production has been doubling every three to four years. The growing preference for organic is not simply a reflection of consumers trying to avoid pesticide and agrichemical residues in their foods. In America, organics is the only available means of avoiding foods from genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Organic meats likewise provide a means of minimizing exposure to growth hormones and antibiotics routinely fed to animals raised under inhumane conditions in environmentally threatening confinement animal feeding operations (CAFOs). In addition, many organic producers and consumers are motivated by the deeper historical commitment of organics to building healthy communities and permanence within society. The organic movement is about far more than food safety.

At no time in recent history have so many Americans expressed so little confidence in the basic integrity of their food system. For example, more than 90 percent of consumers in recent polls have supported labeling of foods which contain GMOs.*[3]* Roughly 75 percent of American consumers have consistently indicating a strong preference for foods grown in the U.S., preferable locally on small family farms.*[4]* Parents in many school districts have demanded that soft drinks and fast foods be removed from their schools and replaced with wholesome local foods. Increasingly, Americans are choosing to buy more of their food locally, from people they know and trust, so they won't have to worry about such things as empty calories, pesticides, GMOs, E coli, or “mad cow disease.” Many Americans have simply lost confidence in the integrity of the food corporations and the government agencies with whom the integrity of the food system has been entrusted. Increasingly, Americans want to know where their food comes, want to know how it is produced, and who produced it; they want food they can trust.

One by one, these dissonant Americans are creating a new food culture. While this new culture remains somewhat ill defined, some important characteristics are beginning to emerge. The new American food culture values quality; its

members demand that their food to be safe, wholesome, attractive, and flavorful; they don't take these things for granted. They also want their food to be produced in ways that respects people – including farmers and workers in the food system, as well food consumers. And, they want their food produced in ways that respect the natural environment. They also expect food to be reasonably priced, but price is not the determining factor in their purchase decisions. They want food that reflects their preferred lifestyles and values. They want food with integrity. They are willing to compromise, at least to some extent, on cosmetic appearance, convenience, preparation time, and price in order to ensure the overall integrity of their food.

This new food culture is but one part of a broader, more inclusive new American culture. Psychologist Sherry Anderson and market researcher, Paul Ray, in their book, *The Cultural Creatives*, indicate that possibly 50 million already are involved in creating this new American culture. [5] These cultural creating people believe that relationships are very important, share a strong sense of community, are committed to social equity and justice, believe that nature is sacred, and are concerned for the natural environment and ecological sustainability. They also tend to be more altruistic, idealistic, optimistic, and spiritual than is the average American. They are less materialistic, are less concerned about job prospects, and have fewer financial concerns. These are all characteristics of people who are concerned about the issues that are driving the new food culture.

These “cultural creatives” have come together through various social movements, including those advocating social justice, civil rights, human rights, world peace, environmental protection, sustainable development, holistic health, organic foods, and spiritual psychology. These related streams of concern are merging into a common movement committed to building a more healthy and sustainable human society. While this group represents less than one-third of the total adult population, their numbers are growing, and they are far more than sufficient in numbers to support a new sustainable alternative to the quick, convenient, cheap food system of today.

This trend is validated by the nationally respected Hartman Report, which surveyed representative United States households to explore the linkage between food purchases and environmental attitudes. [6] The report identified two groups, the “true naturals” and “new green mainstream,” which already make up about 28 percent of the population, as prime markets for sustainably produced foods. Members of these groups are very similar in attitudes and in magnitude to the group identified by Ray and Anderson as “cultural creatives.” Increasing corporatization and globalization of the industrial food system will almost certainly fuel the continuing growth in this new food culture.

The international Slow Food movement also provides tangible evidence of the emergence of a new global food culture. [7] Slow Food is a worldwide movement with over 80,000 members in 100 countries committed to promoting the diversity of local and regional quality food produced and marketed in a way that guarantees farmers a fair price and protects the environment and the natural landscape. The Chefs Collaborative is a national network of more than 1,000 American chefs who are promoting sustainable cuisine by celebrating the joys of local, seasonal, and artisanal cooking. [8] Their organizational principles include “sound food choices emphasizing locally grown, seasonally fresh, and whole or minimally processed ingredients.” These two organizations are but the tip of the iceberg of the new American and global food culture.

In summary, the new food culture values wholesomeness, nutrition, freshness, and flavor. It values foods produced in ways that protect the natural environment and respect the farmers, food industry workers, and other living things involved in food production process. And finally, the new food culture has a strong preference for foods that are produced locally. Its members want to know where their food comes from and how it is produced. They want local foods produced by someone they know and trust.

I have met many members of the new food culture through my work with the farmers who produce their food. Over the past five years, I have had the privilege of speaking at 35 to 40 different venues a year, and most of those were conferences associated in one way or another with sustainable food and farming systems. These conferences range in size from a few dozen people to a few thousand. At least six conferences in North America now average over 1500 attendees a year, several others draw 500-700 people, and so many have 100-250 attending they would be difficult to count. Increasingly, these conferences are planned by farmers in collaboration with consumer groups or by consumer groups collaborating with farmers. Clearly, sustainable agriculture is moving into the food system, and equally important, the emphasis of sustainable agriculture is shifting toward eating local.

Sustainable agriculture is about creating food and farming systems that meet the true needs of people, specifically, about meeting the needs of the present without compromising the future. It is about creating a food system that can last, indefinitely. Sustainability requires that our food and farming systems be ecologically sound, socially responsible, and economically viable. Sustainable farms must take care of the land and natural resources that support their productivity, sustainable foods must meet the needs and expectations of the society that supports them, and the system as a whole must provide sufficient economic rewards so that ecologically sound and socially responsible food producers are sustained financially. All three are necessary. Perhaps more important, sustainable food and farming systems must be built upon a social and ethical foundation that reflects a commitment to caring for other people, both of this and future generations, as we would have them care for us. Sustainable food and farming systems must have integrity. In integrity, there is quality, both in food and in life.

The people who are creating the new sustainable food system are pioneers on a new frontier, and life is rarely easy on any frontier. They face many frustrations and some fail along the way, because no one really knows how to do what they are doing. But, more and more of these food and farming pioneers, working together, are finding ways to succeed. And, they define success not just in dollars and cents, but also in terms of integrity and quality of life.

The success of the new local food culture will grow in proportion to growth in awareness of opportunities for farmers who choose to produce for local customers and of benefits for consumers who choose to eat local foods. In an effort to do whatever I can to support this new local food culture, I have developed a list of my “Top Ten Reasons for Eating Local.”

I chose ten not only because “top ten lists” seem to be popular, but also because ten seems to be enough to show that the reasons are more than a few, but not so many as to become difficult to remember. Also, I chose to rank my list my reasons in reverse order, from the least important to most important reasons. Others obviously would rank them differently, but my ranking reflects my belief that the roots of current problems in the American food system go far deeper than food quality or safety. I believe that meeting the challenge of buying local could be an important step toward solving the deep-rooted problems in American society – a growing lack of integrity.

My Top Ten Reasons for Eating Local

by

John Ikerd

10. **Eating local eliminates the middlemen.** Buying food locally saves on transportation and energy and virtually eliminates wasteful spending for unnecessary packing and advertising, which together account for more than 20-percent of total food costs. Total middlemen profits, however, make up less than four percent of total food costs. Local sustainable farmers generally cannot afford to operate on as small a margin of profit or return to their land, labor, and management as can large-scale, global, industrial operations. In addition, industrial producers don't pay their full costs of production; they externalize some of their costs on nature and society by exploiting natural and human resources. So, eating local may not be cheaper for food buyers, but it certainly reduces the negative social and ecological consequences of our food choices.
9. **Eating local saves on transportation.** The most recent estimates indicate that the average fresh food item travels about 1,500 miles from its points of production to final purchase.^[9] Reducing transportation doesn't save much in terms of dollars and cents, since total transportation costs amounts to only about four-percent of food costs. However, the ecological savings may be far more significant. Energy for transportation is virtually all derived from non-renewable fossil fuels. In addition, transportation is a major contributor to air pollution, particularly carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses. So eating local can make a significant contribution to sustainability, even if only by making a strong personal statement in favor of reducing our reliance on non-renewable energy and protecting the natural environment.
8. **Eating local improves food quality.** Local foods can be fresher, more flavorful, and nutritious than can fresh foods shipped in from distant locations. According to most surveys, this reason would top most lists of those who choose to eat locally. In addition to the obvious advantage in freshness, growers who produce for local customers need not give priority to harvesting, packing, shipping, and shelf life qualities, but instead can select, grow, and harvest crops to ensure peak qualities of freshness, nutrition, and taste. Eating local also encourages eating seasonally, in harmony with the natural energy of a particular place, which is becoming an important aspect of quality for those of the new food culture.
7. **Eating local makes at-home eating worth the time and effort.** Obviously, preparing local foods, which typically are raw or minimally processed, requires additional time and effort. But, the superior natural quality of local foods allows almost anyone to prepare really good foods at home, with a reasonable amount of time and effort. Chefs at high-end restaurants freely admit they prefer locally grown food items in part because of their ease of preparation. Good local foods taste good naturally, with little added seasoning and with little cooking or slow cooking, which requires little attention. Home preparation of raw foods also saves money, particularly compared with convenience foods, which makes really good food affordable for almost anyone who can and will prepare them from scratch, regardless of income. Preparing and eating meals at home also provides opportunities for families to share quality time together in creative, productive, and rewarding activities, which contribute to stronger families, communities, and societies.
6. **Eating local provides more meaningful food choices.** Americans often brag about the incredible range of choices that consumers have in the modern supermarket today. Admittedly, shoppers are confronted with a vast array of sizes, shapes, and colors of foods from every corner of the world. In many respects, however, food choices are severely limited. Virtually all of food items in supermarkets and franchise restaurants today are produced using the same mass-production, industrial methods, with the same negative consequences for the natural environment and for civil society. In addition, the variety in foods today is largely cosmetic and superficial, contrived to create the illusion of diversity and choice where none actually exists. By eating local, food buyers can get the food they

actually prefer rather than accept whatever is offered in the supermarket. They can buy foods that are authentically different, not just in physical qualities but also in the ecological and social consequences of how they are produced. They can choose to pay the full cost of food, rather support the exploitation of society and the environment.

- 5. Eating local contributes to the local economy.** American farmers, on average, receive only about 20 cents of each dollar spent for food, the rest going for processing, transportation, packing, and other marketing costs. Farmers who sell food direct to local customers, on the other hand, receive the full retail value, a dollar for each food dollar spent. Of course, each dollar not spent at a local supermarket or eating establishment, detracts from the local economy. However, less than one-third of total food costs go to local workers in supermarkets and restaurants, most of the rest goes outside of the local community. So the local *food* economy gains about three dollars for each dollar lost when food shoppers choose to buy from local farmers.

American farmers, on average, get to keep only ten to fifteen cents from each dollar they receive; the rest goes for fertilizer, fuel, machinery, and other production expenses – items typically manufactured and often provided by suppliers outside of the local community. Farmers who market locally, on the other hand, often get to keep half or more of each food dollar they receive, because they purchase fewer commercial production inputs. They receive a larger proportion of the total as a return for their labor, management, and entrepreneurship because they contribute a larger proportion to the production process. Those who sell locally also tend to spend locally, both for their personal and farming needs, which also contribute more to the local economy. So, eating local contributes to both the local food and farm economies.

- 4. Eating local helps save farmland.** More than one million acres of U.S. farmland is lost each year to residential and commercial development. The loss may seem small in relation to the total of more than 950 million acres of farmland, but an acre lost to development may mean an acre lost forever from food production. We are still as dependent upon the land for our very survival today as when all people were hunters and gatherers, and future generations will be no less dependent than we are today. Our dependencies are more complex and less direct, but certainly are no less critical. Eating local creates economic opportunities for caring farmers to care for their land, even when confronted by development pressures on the urban fringes. Their neighbors are their market, as well as their community. Wherever people are willing to pay the full ecological and social costs of food, farms can be very desirable places to live on and to live around. Eating local may allow new residential communities to be established *on* farms in urbanizing areas, with residences strategically placed to retain the most productive land in farming. These new sustainable communities could be built around the common interest in good food and good lifestyles of members of the new food and farming culture.
- 3. Eating local allows people to reconnect.** The industrial food system was built upon a foundation of impersonal economic relationships among farmers, food processors, food distributors, and consumers. Its economic efficiency demands that relationships among people and between people and nature be impartial, and thus impersonal. As a result, many people today have no meaningful understanding of where their food comes, and thus, no understanding of the ecological and social consequences of its production. By eating local, people are able to reconnect with local farmers, and through local farmers, reconnect with the earth. Many people first begin to understand the critical need for this lost sense of connectedness when they develop personal relationships with their farmers and actually visit the farms where their food is produced. We cannot build a sustainable food system until people develop a deep understanding of their dependency upon each other and upon the earth. Thus, in my opinion, reconnecting is one of the most important reasons for eating local.

2. **Eating local restores integrity to the food system.** The new sustainable food system must be built upon personal relationships of integrity. When people eat locally, farmers form relationships with customers who care about the social and ecological consequences of how their food is produced – not just lower price, more convenience, or even an organic label. Those who eat locally form relationships with farmers who care about their land, care about their neighbors, and care about their customers – not just about maximizing profits and growth. Such relationships become relationships of trust and integrity, based on honesty, fairness, compassion, responsibility, and respect. Eating local provides people with an opportunity not only to reconnect personally, but also, to restore integrity to our relationships with each other and with the earth. In today's society, there should be few, if any, higher priorities.

1. **Eating local helps build a sustainable society.** The underlying problems of today's food and farming systems are but reflections of deeper problems within the whole of American society. We are degrading the ecological integrity of the earth and the social integrity of our society in our pursuit of narrow, individual economic self-interests. As we begin to realize the inherent benefits of relationships of integrity within local food systems, we will begin the process of healing the ecological and social wounds that plague modern society. Thus, my number one reason for eating local is to help build a new, sustainable American society.

Some may argue that Americans will never agree on the principles that define the integrity of our relationships. However, such arguments mistake values for principles. For example, the Institute for Global Ethics has questioned people of many different cultures, religions, and nationalities in many countries of the world regarding their ethical principles and has found that people regardless of culture, religion, and nationality agree on several moral principles, although they disagree widely on values. [10] People agree that we should be honest and truthful; responsible and accountable; fair and just; respectful and civil; compassionate and caring. Who among all of civilized society believes it to be right and good to be dishonest, irresponsible, unfair, disrespectful, or uncaring? Integrity is a condition of wholeness, completeness, and soundness that results when all of the essential principles of mutually beneficial relationships exist in harmony and balance. Only relationships of integrity are capable of sustainability, not just with respect to our food system but also in matters affecting the whole of society and the future of humanity. There can be no more important reason for eating local than that of helping to restore honesty, fairness, compassion, respect, and responsibility to our society.

Those who view eating local primarily as a means of getting fresher, more flavorful, and more nutritious food are correct, but they are greatly underestimating the importance of their food choices. Those who view eating local also as a means of supporting the local economy, local farmers, and the local community are correct, but again, they are still underestimating the importance of their food choices. Each step we take in buying more of our food from local sustainable farmers is a positive step toward a new food system, a new food culture, and a new sustainable society.

Perhaps it may seem idealistic or naïve to believe that eating local can actually change either the food system or society. Admittedly, the multinational food corporations have tremendous economic and political power, but they can do only those things that we, as consumers and voters, allow them to do. We still have the power to change our food system and our society, the only way it has ever been changed – one by one.

The current industrial food system was not dictated by some government fiat or decree; it was created one consumer and one farmer at a time. One by one, as consumers decided to buy food produced somewhere else, by someone else, in a different form or package, they transformed the food system. One by one, as farmers and food firms responded to, or sometimes influenced, changing consumer food choices, they transformed the food system. One by one, as consumers

give priority to cost and convenience and producers gave priority to production and profit, the food system was transformed from ecological to industrial and from local to global.

One by one, the food system was transformed and one by one, we can transform it again. One by one, as consumers decide to eat local and farmers decide to grow for local customers we can transform the corporate global food system to a network of local sustainable food systems.

Admittedly, the new food system must be dramatically different. It will need to be a network of local, interdependent community food systems separate and unconnected from today's corporately controlled global food system. The key to success in this new food system will not be its economic efficiency but instead its ability to maintain a sense of personal connectedness between those who produce food and those who eat it. Such connections must be established and maintained among farmers, processors, retailers, and customers living in geographic proximity – in local markets – who are personally committed to treat each other with honesty, fairness, compassion, respect, and responsibility.

Local communities need not be self-sufficient; Americans can still eat bananas, coffee, and other foods that can't be readily produced locally. Local food systems simply must be sufficiently interdependent to ensure their social, ecological, and economic integrity. Food products will move from communities to where they can be produced with integrity to communities where they can be consumed with integrity, thus creating economic, social, and ecological benefits for all. Personal relationships of integrity and trust can be established among representative members of different local communities to form national and global networks of interdependent local food systems. Unlike the current food system, relationships among producers and consumers will not be extractive or exploitative, but instead, will be mutually supportive. Such networks can meet the needs of people, all people, of the present, while leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future, because they are based on relationships of integrity. And, each local food system will be created and connected to the larger food network, one by one.

Finally, the possibilities and promises of this new global network of local food systems will serve as a useful metaphor for the rest of society. As people reconnect with each other and with their natural environment in relationships of integrity, we eventually will abandon our pursuit of our narrow, individual self-interests for the broader and higher pursuit of quality of life. Vaclav Havel, philosopher, reformer, and former President of the Czech Republic, was asked what would be required to meet the challenges of a post-industrial society. He replied, "man must discover again, within himself, a deeper sense of responsibility toward the world, which means responsibility toward something higher than himself. Only by directing ourselves toward the moral and spiritual, based on respect for a moral order that is superpersonal, for the absolute – can we arrive at a state in which life on earth... is genuinely human."[\[11\]](#)

By eating local, by creating relationships of integrity around food and farming, we can discover again, within ourselves, a deeper sense of responsibility toward the world – toward the earth and the living things of the earth, including other people. In accepting this deeper sense of responsibility toward the world, we may come to understand it as a responsibility toward something higher than ourselves. In directing ourselves toward the principles of honesty, fairness, compassion, responsibility, and respect, we can reconnect with the spiritual, the moral, the higher absolute order of things, of which we humans are but a part and within which we must function. By eating local, we can begin restoring integrity to our food system and to our society, and thus, can again arrive at a state in which life on earth is genuinely human.

End Notes

[i] Presented at *The Eat Local Challenge* kickoff event, hosted by Eco Trust, Portland, OR. June 2, 2005; and at *Sierra Club Farm Tour and the Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network Field Day*, Banks, Alabama, June 18, 2005.

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[1] Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001).

[2] Susan, M.D. Okie, *Fed Up! : Winning The War Against Childhood Obesity*, (Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press, The National Academies Press , 2005).

[3] A poll released July 15, 2003 by ABC News found that 92 percent of the American public wants the federal government to require mandatory labeling on genetically modified foods. The figure was 93 percent in a poll ABC News conducted in 2001.

[4] Ronald C. Wimberley, "Food from Our Changing World: "The Globalization of Food and How Americans Feel About It," Published in *Southern Perspectives*, by Southern Rural Development Center, February 2003, <http://sasw.chass.ncsu.edu/global-food/foodglobal.html>.

[5] Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson. 2000. *The Cultural Creatives*. Three Rivers Press, New York, NY.

[6] The Hartman Report: Food and the Environment – A Consumer’s Perspective, 1999. <http://www.hartman-group.com/products/reportnatsens.html>

[7] Slow Foods International website: <http://www.slowfood.com/>

[8] See Chefs Collaborative website: <http://www.chefscollaborative.org/>

[9] Rich Pirog, "Food Miles: A Simple Metaphor to Contrast Local and Global Food Systems," in *Hunger and Environmental Nutrition*, American Dietetic Association, also available from Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at <http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/pubs/staff/ppp/index.htm>

[10] See "Institute for Global Ethics," Web: <http://www.globalethics.org/>.

[11] Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, Inc. 1991), 11-12.