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Eating Better Than Organic

By John Cloud

Not long ago I had an apple problem. Wavering in the produce section of a Manhattan grocery store, I was unable to decide between an organic apple and a nonorganic apple (which was labeled conventional, since that sounds better than "sprayed with pesticides that might kill you"). It shouldn't have been a tough choice--who wants to eat pesticide residue?--but the organic apples had been grown in California. The conventional ones were from right here in New York State. I know I've been listening to too much npr because I started wondering: How much Middle Eastern oil did it take to get that California apple to me? Which farmer should I support--the one who rejected pesticides in California or the one who was, in some romantic sense, a neighbor? Most important, didn't the apple's taste suffer after the fruit was crated and refrigerated and jostled for thousands of miles?

In the end I bought both apples. (They were both good, although the California one had a mealy bit, possibly from its journey.) It's only recently that I had noticed more locally grown products in the supermarket, but when I got home I discovered that the organic-vs.-local debate has become one of the liveliest in the food world. Last year Wal-Mart began offering more organic products--those grown without pesticides, antibiotics, irradiation and so on--and the big company's expansion into a once alternative food culture has been a source of deep concern, and predictable backlash, among early organic adopters.

Nearly a quarter of American shoppers now buy organic products once a week, up from 17% in 2000. But for food purists, "local" is the new "organic," the new ideal that promises healthier bodies and a healthier planet. Many chefs, food writers and politically minded eaters are outraged that "Big Organic" firms now use the same industrial-size farming and long-distance-shipping methods as conventional agribusiness. "Should I assume that have a God-given right to access the entire earth's bounty, however far away some of its produce is grown?" asks ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan in his 2002 memoir, *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods*. Nabhan predicted my apple problem when he vacillated over some organic pumpkin canned hundreds of miles from his Arizona home. "If you send it halfway around the world before it is eaten," he mused, "an organic food still may be 'good' for the consumer, but is it 'good' for the food system?"

I had never really thought about how my food purchases might affect "the food system." Even now I don't share the pessimism and asceticism of the local-eating set. In her 2001 memoir, *This Organic Life*, Columbia University nutritionist Joan Dye Gussow writes that her commitment to eating locally "is probably driven by three things. The first is the taste of live food; the second is my relation to frugality; the third is my deep concern about the state of the planet." I don't have much relation to frugality, and, perhaps foolishly, I'm more optimistic than Gussow about our ability to develop alternative energy sources.

But I care deeply about how my food tastes, and it makes sense that a snow pea grown by a local farmer and never refrigerated will retain more of its delicate leguminous flavor than one shipped in a frigid plane from Guatemala. And I realized that if more consumers didn't become part of the local-food market, it could disappear and all our peas would be those tasteless little pods from far away.

Still, the fact that not all locally grown products are organic had me worried. Even if most Americans wanted to buy locally grown organics, they wouldn't be able to find many. In a few not-too-dry, not-too-wet, not-too-warm regions--central California is one--it is possible to find abundant organic produce grown locally. But if you live in a humid climate, say, the moisture that encourages bacteria and fungi means that growing without pesticides is much more risky, expensive and rare. Consequently, in the Hudson Valley of New York, near me, it's very difficult to find fruit that hasn't been sprayed with chemicals at least once. In other regions, like the upper Midwest, most big farms don't grow any vegetables for local markets, conventional or organic. Instead, they produce commodity crops like corn and soybeans for sale to food processors. At a large Hugo's grocery store in Jamestown, N.D., last summer, I noticed only one local product: flour, which is milled in-state from local wheat. But there were organic apples and oranges from out of state.

Farmers' markets often feature organic produce from nearby farms, but not everyone lives near a farmers' market--and most products at the markets aren't organic. "I've been to farmers' markets, and there's people hauling stuff from the truck that they got at a wholesaler," says Joseph Mendelson III, legal director of the Center for Food Safety, a liberal Washington group that supports strong organic standards. Mendelson prefers the "gold standard" of locally grown organics, but he is rather frightening on the subject of nonorganic food, whatever its origin. When I asked him whether I should favor local products, he replied, "I don't know what local means. Do they use local pesticides? Does that mean the food is better because they produce local cancers?"

All of which further tangles my original question: The organic apple or the conventionally grown local one?

It turns out to be a frustratingly layered choice, one that implicates many other questions: What's the most efficient way to grow food for all? Should farms be big or small, family- or corporate-run? How do your choices affect the planet? What tastes better? And then there's that little matter of cancer.

Let's get that one out of the way at the start. If scientists could conclusively prove that agricultural chemicals are harmful, we would all go organic. But it's not clear, for instance, that the low levels of pesticide typically found on conventional produce cause cancer. The risks of long-term exposure to those residues are still undetermined.

Even if conventional foods don't turn out to be as dangerous as organic advocates claim, several recent studies have suggested that organic foods contain higher levels of vitamins than their conventionally grown counterparts. In a paper published in October in the *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry*, a team from the University of California, Davis, demonstrates that organically grown tomatoes have significantly more vitamin C than conventional tomatoes. Even so, the same study shows no significant differences between conventional and

organic bell peppers.

"We're just beginning to understand these relationships," says U.C. Davis food chemist Alyson Mitchell, one of the paper's authors. "We understand, and have understood for a long time, that there is some relation between soil health and plant quality, but we still don't have a solid scientific database to link this to nutrition."

Organic adherents take it on faith that the way food is grown affects its nutritional quality. But advocates of local eating are now making another leap, saying what happens after harvest--how food is shipped and handled--is perhaps even more important than how it was grown. Locavores.com a site popular among local purists, asserts that "because locally grown produce is freshest, it is more nutritionally complete." But Mitchell says she knows of no studies that prove this.

In short, science can't tell you what to eat for dinner. Many of us end up relying on the government to keep food safe, or we just don't think about it. For those who do start to think--nervous new parents, say, or McDonald's burnouts--there are more alternative grocers than ever. There are online purveyors of gourmet health foods (pricey), the old food co-ops (too political for me), and of course those farmers' markets, which--in spite of basic limitations like not being open every day--have grown larger and more sophisticated. (According to Samuel Fromartz's valuable 2006 history *Organic Inc.: Natural Foods and How They Grew*, there were 3,706 U.S. farmers' markets in 2004, double the number there were a decade earlier.)

But for the past few years, the easiest answer for food-baffled Americans has been a single company: Whole Foods Market.

Whole Foods now has 190 locations from Tigard, Ore., to Notting Hill in London. In fiscal 2006 the chain's sales grew 19% (to \$5.6 billion), a bit lower than 2005's 22% growth. Fretful about increasing competition from mainstream grocers who are offering more organic products, investors have punished Whole Foods in the past year; its stock price has fallen more than a third since February 2006.

Still, Whole Foods is expanding rapidly. It recently said it would acquire Wild Oats Markets Inc.; the merger would give Whole Foods an additional 112 locations in North America. Already, many Americans have come to see Whole Foods as the repository of both their dietary hopes and fears--the place we can buy not only organic arugula but a decadent chocolate bar too. I have shopped at Whole Foods off and on since 1990, when I had a summer job in Austin, Texas, where Whole Foods began in 1980. If I was going to decide whether to buy organic or buy local, I figured Whole Foods' ceo, John Mackey, could help me. After all, he is vegan, and his politics lean libertarian, so he thinks hard about different paths. And he has made a great fortune by joining two previously antagonistic alimentary impulses--health and excess.

When we spoke last fall, Mackey was at first diplomatic about the organic-local choice. He told me that when he can't get locally grown organics--and even he can't reliably get them--he decides on the basis of taste. "I would

probably purchase a local nonorganic tomato before I would purchase an organic one that was shipped from California," he said. He called the two tomatoes "an environmental wash," since the California one had petroleum miles on it while the nonorganic one was grown with pesticides. "But the local tomato from outside Austin will be fresher, will just taste better," he said.

However, he also noted that products like hard squash that can last months in storage don't taste so different for being shipped. In that case, he said, "I might purchase the organic version from California." Mackey acknowledged that organic agriculture is "flawed"; he criticized organic-milk farms where cows are pumped with feed in factory settings just like conventional-milk cows. But he also bristled at criticism from local activists. He noted that just because a farm is near your home doesn't mean it practices sustainable farming. "There's an assumption that small is beautiful and big is industrial, and that's not necessarily the case," he said. Whole Foods could not keep growing without supplies from large international farms, which is one reason the organic-vs.-local debate is a delicate issue for Mackey.

At least at my Whole Foods--the one in Manhattan's Union Square, where I shop once or twice a month--most of the available produce comes from California or some other distant land, even during the local growing season. Like all other Whole Foods locations, the store began to push local products more aggressively last summer. A placard was posted above the escalator exhorting customers to BUY LOCAL, and all the cash registers were changed to show photos of area farmers.

These days, in the final weeks of winter, it would be unfair to ask Whole Foods to sell predominantly local produce at my store, because so little can be grown in the Northeast right now. But even during verdant summertime, the vast majority of products sold at my Whole Foods (fresh or otherwise) aren't from the Northeast. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that the packages in which most Whole Foods groceries are sold say nothing about the food's origin. For instance, in the freezer section you can find Whole Foods' Whole Kitchen brand Breaded Eggplant Slices with Italian Herbs. The box tells you a wealth of information about the eggplant slices--that they contain wheat, dextrose and annatto (a dye); that they can be fried, baked or microwaved; that they have no trans fat; that they are "flavorful" and "versatile." But you don't learn where the eggplant comes from.

A Whole Foods spokeswoman told me the eggplant was grown in Florida, which is too bad because eggplant grows easily in the Northeast. But in the company's defense, very few customers care whether their food is local. Most who do, shop at farmers' markets. Also, there's not even a standard definition of what local means. To Nabhan, who inspired many local activists with *Coming Home to Eat*, it means eating within a 250-mile radius of his Arizona home. Many who blog at a site called eatlocalchallenge.com aim for a stricter "100-mile diet."

My favorite definition of local comes from Columbia's Gussow, a reporter for Time in the 1950s who went on to become a local-eating pioneer. For 25 years, Gussow has lectured on the environmental (and culinary) disadvantages of relying on a global food supply. Her most oft-quoted statistic is that shipping a strawberry from California to New York requires 435 calories of fossil fuel but provides the eater with only 5 calories of nutrition. In her memoir, Gussow offers this rather poetic meaning of local: "Within a day's leisurely drive of our homes.

[This] distance is entirely arbitrary. But then, so was the decision made by others long ago that we ought to have produce from all around the world."

On his blog, Whole Foods' Mackey has used a radius of 200 miles to mean local. Measuring from my home, that includes not only much of New York State, New Jersey and Connecticut but also parts of seven other Northeastern states. Such a large food shed produces a great variety of fruits and vegetables, and Whole Foods has said it wants to increase its percentage of local produce. (Of the roughly \$1 billion in produce the company sold last year, 16.4% came from local sources, up from 14.9% in 2005.) Last year Mackey announced a \$10 million loan program for local farmers.

But Mackey also knows that most Americans will never eat a purely local diet. "One of the challenges of being a retailer is you don't want to offend people," Mackey told me. "Some customers want to eat apples year-round, and they're willing to pay more for a New Zealand apple." Finally, he offered a defense of the global food economy: "When I was a little boy--I'm 53 years old--being able to get oranges from Florida or produce from another state was a very big deal because the local-produce availability where I lived in Houston wasn't great. People back then didn't have nearly as diverse a diet as we do now, and you might also point out their life spans weren't as long."

That made me wonder if purely local eating was even possible--or healthy. Could I get everything I needed from the Northeast? What would I have to give up? For gustatory reasons, I long ago stopped eating out of season--I have no interest in those hard Canadian tomatoes my Whole Foods was selling in February. But would I have to forgo coffee? What would replace my breakfast cereal? How much would all this cost? I wasn't sure. So like everyone else, I went to Google.

I mean, I literally went to Google, to the company's Mountain View, Calif., campus.

I had read that one of Google's new cafeterias, Café 150, served only food originating within a 150-mile radius of Mountain View. I knew this radius included a glorious fund of farms, ranches and fisheries, the Salinas Valley food shed that Steinbeck made famous in *East of Eden*. I also knew that as one of the most successful companies of the era, Google could afford not only to pursue such a whimsical culinary ideal as total locality but also to do so in the form of a fine-dining restaurant. (Café 150 is one of 11 employee eateries on the Google campus, all of which famously charge nothing.)

Still, I wanted to see how Café 150's founding chef, Nate Keller, managed to serve more than 400 purely local meals a day. Most chefs simply place orders with suppliers. Good cooks understand that quality and origin are related because of the toll extracted by transportation, but in the end, if Emeril Lagasse wants to serve wild salmon one night, he can just order it from Alaska. Keller, who recently became the chef at another Google restaurant, couldn't do that. Although just a freckly 30-year-old, he had to plan his menus the way preindustrial cooks did, according to whatever local vendors offered that day.

"These guys have to be so flexible with their menus, it's unreal," said Café 150's fishmonger, Tim Zamborelli of Today's Catch in San Jose, Calif. "We have to find out what's coming in on that particular day and let them know so they can change." Café 150, which opened a year ago, can serve no shrimp or scallops, since they can't be found in the area, and tuna was available only from August through October, when currents brought bluefins into the radius. The day I visited, Keller hadn't learned what vegetable he would be serving until the night before. (He got baby red chard.)

It's a radically new way of thinking about cooking because it's so very old. But I was surprised to learn that Café 150 was the brainchild not of some anticorporate artisan but of John Dickman, 51, Google's food-service manager. Dickman not only worked for 14 years at the food giant Marriott--he even trained flight attendants to cook plane food. I was curious how he had created such a radical restaurant.

Dickman says he was inspired by chef Ann Cooper, whose 2000 book, *Bitter Harvest*, is well described by its subtitle: *A Chef's Perspective on the Hidden Dangers in the Foods We Eat and What You Can Do About It*. Cooper, who now runs the acclaimed meal program of the Berkeley, Calif., public schools, writes passionately against industrialized farms that "inhabit a flattened landscape dotted not with trees, farmhouses [and] animals ... but with huge motorized vehicles." After meeting her, Dickman began to go to farmers' markets.

When Dickman arrived at Google in 2004, he says, "organic was the cool thing," and the company's chefs were buying organic whenever they could--even if that meant flying in Chilean nectarines. Dickman worked with the team to write new standards that place local before organic for all Google eateries. "You're using X amount of jet fuel to get it here, and that doesn't make sense," he says. "So forget the nectarines. Buy something local. Get some plums." Of course, this doesn't work in, say, Dublin, where Dickman also helped set up a Google café. ("Everything is flown in there," he said.) When I asked if he thought a restaurant as strictly local as Café 150 would be possible anywhere outside central California, he answered, glumly, "Probably not."

But others are trying. Restaurants from Cinque Terre in Portland, Maine, to Mozza in Los Angeles are run by cooks who strive always to find local products first. Some chefs are not only buying locally but actually growing the food. The two Blue Hill restaurants in New York--one in Manhattan and the other in Pocantico Hills--buy less than 20% of their ingredients from outside the New York region, according to chef Dan Barber. Much of both restaurants' food (including all the chicken and pork) is raised on about 20 acres next to the Pocantico Hills location. In the 31/2 years since the farm was launched, Barber has become one of the nation's most eloquent pro-local spokesmen, not least because he makes local eating profitable (and delicious--his restaurants win raves). But his commitment to locality means that Barber can't always serve beef, since the quality and availability of steers in the Northeast are uneven.

Café 150 has access to local beef from Bassian Farms in San Jose, Calif., but the restaurant can't obtain everything it needs from the valley. Take salt. "There are salt flats a quarter-mile that way," said Keller, pointing to the horizon, "but they're for industrial purposes." So he buys salt "off the truck," from a food-service deliverer.

Still, apart from such staples, Café 150 is living up to its name. It never serves tropical fruits, and it has planted lemon and lime trees just outside to ensure local citrus. The restaurant grows many of its own herbs and makes its own ketchup. And last fall Café 150 jarred tomatoes and fruit so that even though it's March, Googlers can get a taste of the local harvest every day. Imagine that: a company as ostentatiously hip as Google canning fruit in its kitchens.

Could I do this? Could I operate my own "kitchen 150"?

Following Café 150's lead, I decided to keep basic dry goods like coffee, chocolate and spices. But since I have no interest in gardening (and no yard, for that matter--I live in an apartment), I needed a source of produce. I find farmers' markets inconvenient, if only because you have to pay each farmer separately for items, which can mean a lot of waiting in the cold. Then I heard about the farm shares run by Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs.

They sounded a little lefty to me at first, but it turns out CSAs are a wonderfully market-driven idea: you join with others in your community to invest in a local farm. At the beginning of the season, members pay the farmer a lump sum. Each week, or perhaps once a month in the winter, the farm delivers fresh vegetables (and, for more money, items like fruit, eggs and flowers) to a central location. Prices vary widely depending on where you live. The CSA in the Mott Haven neighborhood of the Bronx costs just \$220 for five months for those with a low income (food stamps accepted). The CSA run by Angelic Organics in Caledonia, Ill., starts at \$600 for 20 weeks of vegetables and goes north of \$1,000 when you add fruit.

There are some lefty aspects: You don't choose what the farmer grows. He does. You might get lettuce one week and then--if, say, a hailstorm hits the lettuce patch--none for several weeks after. Also, you're locked into a fixed amount of food each week, so if you don't feel like cooking for a couple nights in a row, you feel guilty. A farmer sweated over these beautiful ears of corn, and I'm going to throw them out so I can pick up riblets at Applebee's?

The benefit is that the food is affordable--for \$40 a month at my CSA, I get (to take February as an example) four bunches of winter greens, a head of red cabbage, 5 lbs. of apples, and about 2 lbs. each of beets, onions, carrots, turnips and Yukon Gold potatoes. The stuff is phenomenally fresh. I once discovered a nine-day-old head of lettuce from my CSA farm at the back of the refrigerator. Because it had come to me just 24 hours after being picked, it was still crisp.

But how local was my CSA farm? And was it organic?

Windflower Farm is in Valley Falls, N.Y., 185 miles northeast of my apartment. Mapquest calls it a 3 1/2-hr. drive, but if you leave on a weekday at 5:30 p.m., as Windflower's Ted Blomgren and I did, it can take closer to five hours. That meets Gussow's definition of local--"within a day's leisurely drive"--although our drive through Manhattan wasn't leisurely.

Blomgren runs Windflower with his wife Jan. He is 46, and on the day we rode to the farm, he wore sandals and glasses. Ted, who has a degree from Cornell, is balding and studious, and might pass for a professor if he didn't have so much dirt under his toenails. Ted and Jan--who has lovely bright blue eyes perpetually fixed in a startled expression--have operated Windflower for eight years with their sons Nathaniel, 14, and Jacob, 11. On the day I visited last summer, I watched a barefoot Nathaniel walk to the henhouse to collect eggs in an old white bucket, as he did every day. I had been eating those eggs most days--that's how I had replaced cereal. Seeing Nate carry that bucket into the smelly humidity of the chicken coop, I realized I had never before felt so connected to my food. I had not only seen the chickens that produced my eggs but had also met the person who gathered them.

That's a core goal of CSAS--to remind you that your food originates in some place other than a grocery store. There are now some 1,200 csa farms in the U.S., according to the Robyn Van En Center at Wilson College in Pennsylvania. Van En helped start the first American csa at her Massachusetts farm in 1985 after hearing about the idea of farm shares from a Swiss friend. (You can find a csa near you at sites like localharvest.org.)

So I was finally eating local, and it tasted great. Ted's yellow wax beans last year were so crisp and oniony sweet you could eat them directly from the field. During the winter months, Ted has delivered sturdy vegetables from his cold storage that look as good as anything at Whole Foods and seem to taste better, if only because they remind me of a warm day on the farm. And yet I do worry that the Blomgrens aren't certified by the Federal Government as organic growers. They say they don't use synthetic pesticides or fertilizers, and Ted's policy is that any csa member can come to his farm to check his growing practices. "I couldn't show up at my local Agway and buy a jug of herbicide without it getting told to everybody," he said. Like many small farmers I met, Ted felt that organic certification would be too costly and time consuming.

Having met Ted, Jan and their sons--and having spent the night in their barn--I trust they don't use chemicals. But the Blomgrens don't grow fruit for the CSA. They buy it from other local growers, and most of them use sprays because of the humidity. Ted's hens were free-range--they strutted around eating the grass behind his house. But pastured chickens still require some grain feed, and the grain Ted bought was mostly conventionally grown, industrially processed corn.

I was deflated to hear that I had ingested chemicals with my fruit and eggs. But at this point I threw up my hands. If I wanted total purity, the only option was to grow my own food. Forget it. Farming is dirt-under-the-toenails hard work, and the Blomgrens are by no means making a vast fortune.

But I had arrived at an answer to my question: I prefer local to organic, even with the concessions local farmers must make. I realize there's something romantic about the desire to know exactly where your food is from. Among true agrarians, that desire carries a reactionary strain, a suspicion of modernity. "Instead of relying on the accumulated wisdom of a cuisine, or even on the wisdom of our senses, we rely on expert opinion," journalist Michael Pollan wrote in last year's acclaimed book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. "We place our faith in science to sort out what culture once did." But science should trump culture on matters of nutrition. The problem is that

science offers no clear guidelines yet on how beneficial organic food is.

When asked years ago whether she preferred butter or margarine, Gussow famously remarked, "I trust cows more than chemists." For my part, I do not. I will still go to Whole Foods to buy the mass-produced Organic Food Bars I eat for breakfast when I don't have time for eggs. I am happy that food scientists are finding ways to produce everyday products like cereal with organic ingredients. (How about organic Froot Loops? I have a weakness for Froot Loops late at night.) But when it comes to my basic ingredients--literally, my "whole" foods rather than my convenience foods--I would still rather know the person who collects my eggs or grows my lettuce or picks my apples than buy 100% organic eggs or lettuce or apples from an anonymous megafarm at the supermarket. Choosing local when I can makes me feel more rooted, and (in part because of that feeling, no doubt) local food tastes better.

Eating locally also seems safer. Ted's neighbors and customers can see how he farms. That transparency doesn't exist with, say, spinach bagged by a distant agribusiness. I help keep Ted in business, and he helps keep me fed--and the elegance and sustainability of that exchange make more sense to me than gambling on faceless producers who stamp organic on a package thousands of miles from my home. I'm not a purist about these choices--I ate a Filet-O-Fish at McDonald's on the way to Ted's farm. But in general, I have decided that you are where you eat.

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