

BUYING POWER:

Think Globally, Eat Locally

By Peter Hanlon, Massachusetts Bays Program

Buying groceries—it used to be so easy. A few coupons and some catchy jingles were all we needed to guide us toward what to eat for the following week. Perhaps inevitably, with more people concerned about their carbon footprints, the trips up and down the grocery aisle have become a bit trickier. The journey that food takes from the farm to our plate has finally become a hot topic at the dinner table.

A couple of points to stir the discussion: The average U.S. meal comes from five different nations and food now travels 1,300 miles on average from farm to market. Unfortunately, those off-season salads and fruits leave some big carbon footprints* all over our kitchen.

The response from many conscientious shoppers has been to eat locally grown and raised foods whenever possible. Those dedicated to this way of eating refer to themselves as “localvores” (the New Oxford American Dictionary “2007 Word of the Year,” by the way). Many choose locally grown food to cut down on the need for a lot of carbon dioxide-emitting transportation, thus shrinking their carbon footprint. However, calculating the climate change benefits of eating locally can be incredibly complex. For example, is food transported a short distance in small trucks less fuel-

consuming than food shipped long distance via railroad? Researchers have begun applying Life Cycle Assessment (the valuation of the environmental impacts of a product) to food production to help account for all elements used in growing food, from fertilizer to packaging to fuel to warehousing. But until this assessment becomes part of standardized packaging, consumers are left to navigate the aisles of the grocery store or co-op armed with their own best-guess assessments.

Perhaps the one assessment that doesn't require a lot of thought is this: eating both locally and seasonally has very straightforward benefits for both foodies and farmers. Farmers who sell directly to local consumers can focus on freshness, nutrition, and taste instead of the shelf life of their crops. Eating locally can help local economies

***Carbon footprint:**

A measurement, in carbon emissions, of the impact of our actions in terms of the contribution made to global climate change.

because farmers who sell to local customers receive the full retail value of their crop. Buying directly from local farmers also encourages the use of farmland for farming, preserving open space and keeping sprawling development in check.

Even if you're not ready to jump headfirst into eating entirely locally, you can take smaller steps, such as eating at restaurants that serve local food, shopping at farmers markets, or subscribing to Community Supported Agriculture (see *Meet a Burgeoning Localvore*, page 62).

"Early spring starts with asparagus and rhubarb, and segues into late spring with local strawberries and baby vegetables. Early summer we see more baby vegetables, baby root vegetables, and the greens that start coming in. By late summer the greens continue, the hearty greens appear, as do full-size veggies such as cukes, zucchini, and eggplant. Then the best part comes when we continue with awesome field greens and veggies— and the arrival of the heirloom tomato is a truly special time. Let's not forget about the corn and peaches and berries. Now we hit early fall and all of the aforementioned veggies are around and

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Many restaurants are introducing their patrons to the quality and freshness of local food. Andy Husbands, the chef and owner of Tremont 647, a restaurant in Boston that incorporates many locally grown ingredients, characterizes New England foods within an eight-season cycle:

we also see the gourders (pumpkins, hubbard squash). Late fall, only the gourds and winter greens, such as kale, remain. Finally, in winter and late winter let's just say we have to be *very imaginative*. Generally it's cellar vegetables like gourds and potatoes and garlic."

Okay, so it might be near impossible for many of us to replace that occasional winter orange with, say, a potato, but a few changes to our eating habits can go a long way toward putting fresher food on our tables, supporting local farms, and maybe, just maybe, shrinking our carbon footprints a little.

