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In Pursuit of Farm Fresh Flavor



By [KIM SEVERSON](#)

MY church is a farm. Give me a few chickens, a long row of carrots and the smell of dirt, and I'll find the open heart and inner peace others might seek from a prayer book or a pew.

The connection between what I put in my body, the land around me and the miracle of things that grow makes me feel as if I'm part of something bigger than myself.

But before you dismiss me as some sort of patchouli-scented wacko, allow me to share my hedonistic bottom line: a perfect ear of Long Island corn or a lovely little lump of Hudson Valley goat cheese simply tastes better to me than anything I may find at the supermarket.

Of course, in the city or the suburbs, a farm is a really impractical church to have. So in a pinch, I'll go to a farmers' market. And on some days, a bin of local apples at the supermarket will do.

But luckily, it's getting easier to find something local to eat. All over the tristate area, the church of local food is growing at rates that have farmers, serious cooks and even the most casual farm stand shoppers in awe.

"We have people calling every week wanting to start farmers' markets," said Linda Piotrowicz of the [Connecticut](#) Department of Agriculture. "It's gotten to the point where we've had trouble recruiting enough farmers." That's a bold statement, when you consider that the state has about 4,000 farms.

This year, about 90 farmers' markets are operating across Connecticut. Twenty years ago, there were only 22. The story is the same in other areas. [New Jersey](#) has 95 farmers' markets, almost double the number from five years ago. New York has almost 300.

And local food fever is stretching beyond farmers' markets. Dairies in New Jersey, New York and Connecticut are promoting 100 percent local milk and getting a dollar or two more a half gallon for it. Grocery stores like Whole Foods Market and the regional chain Wegmans have developed special programs to get locally produced food on store shelves.

That is not as easy as it may seem. In the Northeast, regional pride is at stake, said Jeff Turnas, vice president of purchasing for Whole Foods in the region that covers its tristate stores. "It is pretty territorial," he said. "If they live in Connecticut, they want to see products from Connecticut. If they're from New York, they want to see products from New York."

Of course, in the summer, there are so many other options, who cares what's in the produce aisle at the supermarket? On Long Island, humble roadside farm stands and more elaborate farmers' markets are jammed with day trippers and locals who try to avoid the grocery store.

"If you live here you know that the supermarket is for winter," said Sandra Fox, a retired schoolteacher who lives in Southampton.

Sure, shopping at a grocery store is more convenient and sometimes cheaper, conceded Lisa Tamra of Yonkers. She was at the Bronxville farmers' market recently, picking up nectarines for \$2 a pound.

"My fiancé thinks I'm a nut that I come down here," she said. "But I go to the grocery stores and it's not up to par."

For some, even a trip to the farmers' market isn't good enough. They want to connect directly with the farm. So they sign up for community-supported agriculture projects. These nifty little pieces of commerce allow customers to buy shares in a farm for a few hundred dollars and then get boxes of whatever the farm is producing that week. Some are so popular there are waiting lists.

Jane Hutnik, who lives in Lake Shawnee in northern New Jersey, is one of 140 people who bought a share in Upper Meadow Farm this summer. Boxes of Chinese cabbage and Rose Gold potatoes help her feel more connected to her food and the people who grow it.

"You're involved in the same gamble as the farmer," she said. "If there's been a bad storm and there's no broccoli, then you don't get broccoli."

Gail Brussel of Larchmont, N.Y., started Farm Share in June, and already 200 people have signed up. The program delivers organic, local fruits and vegetables to chefs and home cooks in Westchester and parts of Connecticut. **In May, Maryanne Hedrick of Peekskill, N.Y., started My Personal Farmer, which allows people in Westchester to shop online and eat the best of Hudson Valley farms without having to leave home. The food comes from farms within 150 miles of New York City.**

"We're losing the equivalent of seven acres of farmland a day in the Hudson Valley," Ms. Hedrick said. "I'm using new technology to support an old idea: that there is great

bounty in this region that we should all be enjoying.”

Of course, even the most ardent supporters of local food draw the line. Marilyn Rovira, who lives in Princeton, N.J., has been a member of the Honey Brook Organic Farm, a community-supported agriculture project in Pennington, N.J., for a dozen years. She loves the farm, but she has her limits.

“We’re not going to be 100 percent local,” she said. “I’m not convinced enough to buy New Jersey wine and I’m not giving up olive oil, but from May to November eating locally is an important thing.”

So why is local fever gripping the region? The trend is a case study in cultural and environmental changes.

Let’s start with the runaway train called organics. In 2000 when the federal Department of Agriculture announced a set of standards, the spirit of the [organic food](#) movement was changed forever. You would think people who wanted to eat food from small, well-run, pesticide-free farms would have welcomed a national set of rules. But it unleashed a monster.

Now, the market is more than \$15 billion a year and draws players like Wal-Mart and General Mills. Somehow, organic garlic from China doesn’t have quite the same appeal as some hard-neck variety from the Hudson Valley.

For small farmers, the paperwork can be expensive and cumbersome so they don’t apply for organic certification, even though their

practices are in line with organic principles. And the organic label doesn’t mean a product is from a farm that uses sustainable practices.

So local has become the new organic, helped in large part by a growing concern over the environmental impact of transporting food thousands of miles. A few years ago, the term food miles moved into the lexicon. Dedicated people calling themselves locavores began limiting their diets to food that came from a radius of a couple hundred miles.

The author Barbara Kingsolver became a locavore and in May published “Animal, Vegetable, Miracle” (HarperCollins Publishers), which chronicles her family’s yearlong adventure trying to eat locally. That book and [Michael Pollan’s](#) “Omnivore’s Dilemma” (Penguin Press) have become the bibles of the church of local food. Laura Singer, a resident of Trumbull, Conn., who shops at the Westport Farmers’ Market, has read both.

“I’m on this total guilt trip about buying food and having it shipped halfway across the world,” she said. “My consciousness has really been raised about supporting local farmers and the amount of fossil fuel it takes to get food from long distances.”

The desire to save shrinking farmland in densely populated areas also figures into the equation. There is no better way to save a small farm than to buy the farmer’s food. And buying directly at a farmers’ market or through a community-supported agriculture project brings in more money for farmers than the wholesale market,

said Tim Warner of Orient, N.Y., who helps run his family's 120-acre farm. "The farmers' markets are our only outlet," he said. "That's what keeps us going. We couldn't wholesale anymore. It was just really hard."

The last two threads of the local food trend come from concerns over food safety and the talent of area chefs.

Mix a little mad cow disease, bags of spinach infected with E. coli and an obesity epidemic and people begin to question what is happening to the food supply. A bunch of kale from Hepworth Farms in Milton, N.Y., may not solve those problems, but it is one sure, small step toward a healthier family dinner table.

The modern notion that food grown organically and close to home tasted better might have been pioneered in the 1970s by people like Alice Waters at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif., but chefs like Dan Barber at Blue Hill at Stone Barns in Pocantico Hills in Westchester County and Michel Nischan at the Dressing Room in Westport, Conn., are perfecting what Adam Platt from New York Magazine calls haute barnyard cuisine.

Of course, trying to buy more local meat and produce isn't without its problems. Finding what you want isn't convenient, and it can be more expensive. And food coming directly from the farm means washing your own lettuce and learning how to cook beets.

But there is value beyond the price per pound. Mr. Pollan points out that the American food system is devoted to increasing quantities and

reducing prices. The average American spends less than 10 percent of his or her income on food. In 1947, the figure was 24 percent. Mr. Pollan believes people who can afford to pay more for better food should.

Still, we all become misers at the supermarket. There are those of us — and I certainly have done this — who will happily spend \$4 for a cup of warm milk and coffee but balk if organic tomatoes cost 40 cents a pound more than something shipped from Mexico.

The farmers know customers are price-sensitive. "Getting people to understand why things are more expensive is a challenge," said John Ramsey, who runs a four-acre family farm in the heart of Scarsdale, N.Y. "For years we've had the same prices. A bunch of basil was always 50 cents."

Now, with fuel prices up and a year of tough weather, he is going to have to raise it to 75 cents. But imagine what that brings. You get the basil, and you get to be part of a community and help save some farmland.

Earlier this month, I visited Cindy Burke, an old friend who created the recipes for a book I wrote on trans fat. She lives in a Seattle suburb and recently published her book, "To Buy or Not to Buy Organic: What You Need to Know to Choose the Healthiest, Safest, Most Earth-Friendly Food" (Marlowe & Company). She knows more about the dynamics of buying local than most people I know. And like me, farms are her church.

I asked her about why people were so interested in buying local as we drove with her young daughter to a farm about a half-hour from her West Seattle home. We were picking up a pig. Half a pig, actually. She had bought a share in a Berkshire-Duroc mix. It had been cut into chops and roasts and was ready for her freezer. In all, the meat cost a little more than \$4 a pound.

Local food is more delicious, true. But buying it does more than fill our bellies, she said. It keeps us connected. Technology, the mass media, long commutes and the never-ending pressure to earn more money keeps us separate from our neighbors and families, she said. And these days, people are so mobile that they don't necessarily live in the place where they grew up.

“Eating locally ties us to a place,” she said. “It give us roots in the local community where we live. It makes us think about other people, and how we're connected. It puts us in touch with a life force we can't find anywhere else.”

To which I say, amen.

Jan Ellen Spiegel contributed reporting from Connecticut, Susan M. Novick from Long Island, Karla Cook and Kelly Feeney from New Jersey, and Emily DeNitto and Susan Stewart from Westchester.