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CYBERFAMILIAS

Salad Days for the Internet

By [MICHELLE SLATALLA](#)

THE other afternoon, my husband and I were drinking beer on the front porch and already feeling a little dirty about what we planned to do later — grill a big fat steak brushed with butter. Then a terrible thing happened.

We saw a registered dietitian power-walking down the block. Toward us.

“Nancy Bloom alert,” I hissed, slouching behind the porch rail. “Don’t make eye contact.”

Too late. “Hi, guys,” said Nancy, pink-cheeked from eating whole grains. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” my husband said, warily.

“What’s for dinner?” she asked. Toying with us.

I couldn’t tell a lie: “We’re getting ready to eat enough red meat to send our cholesterol levels through the roo...”

“What she means,” my husband said, cutting me off, “is that we were just discussing how to add more local, organically grown vegetables to our lives.”

Nancy beamed at him, as if he was just another faithful follower of the [Michael Pollan](#) School of Sensible Eating, adhering to the author’s mantra: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.”

Mr. Pollan’s philosophy, which he laid out in his book “In Defense of Food,” has turned into a lifestyle in my health-conscious Northern California town. Everywhere I turn, people are eschewing processed groceries in favor of the locally produced foods their grandparents ate.

“I get a box of vegetables online every week,” Nancy said, calling over her shoulder as she headed off at a brisk pace, “from [Spud.com](#).”

Buy food online to eat locally? It sounded unnatural, or at least counterintuitive.

But the phenomenon is growing nationwide. Now a number of sites — including [Greenling.com](#) in Texas, [Naturaldirect.com](#) in Illinois, [Organicstoyou.org](#) in Oregon and [Mypersonalfarmers.com](#) in New York State — deliver seasonal products from nearby farms to the doorsteps of customers.

These Web sites differ from the earlier generation of produce-delivery ones for two reasons: they all deliver products from local farms to nearby customers (whereas in the past it was rare to find an online organic produce delivery service that didn't rely solely on a wholesaler). Second, these new sites all allow users to easily customize their standing-order box weekly.

The peer pressure got to me. After Nancy walked away in a haze of good health, I rushed inside to sign up for [Spud.com](#) (whose name stands for Small Potatoes Urban Delivery).

After I registered, Spud.com recommended I buy a \$50 basket, based on the number and age of the eaters in my household, and allowed me to choose to limit purchases to items — including green onions, grapefruit and strawberries — grown within 500 miles of my house. (The price included delivery.)

Shopping online to eat locally is not just about the food. With oil prices so high, making an effort to reduce the energy costs associated with transporting food from farm to table can be a political stance.

“When one of our vehicles sets out filled with 80 orders, that's like emptying a whole parking lot of cars that didn't drive to the store,” said David Van Seters, the founder of Spud.com, which operates delivery facilities in 12 West Coast regions, including Canada. “A grocery-store chain might need 12 stores to service a whole area and present items in open coolers under warm lights for several days. Over 90 percent of our items leave the warehouse within 24 hours, and everything is kept in coolers in the dark right up until the time it's packed.”

Some online delivery sites go even further to save energy. In Sarasota, Fla., for instance, the owner of a tiny new company called [Harvestcycle.com](#) relies on bicycles alone (pedaled by himself and his sister) to deliver DeSoto Lakes organic produce from a nearby farm to eight customers in a nine-mile radius.

“We're not business people, we don't have any money, we don't have a \$30,000 car to take care of or to gas up at a cost of 50 cents a mile,” said Andrew Noune, the founder of Harvestcycle.com, which started in February. “I work in the fields, and one day my friend had this idea I should deliver produce on my way home. My friend said, ‘Dude, you should totally set up a Web site and have people shop online.’ ”

Like many services, Harvestcycle.com also sells a broader selection of products distributed through an organic wholesaler, but allows customers to micro-manage orders to a degree unheard of even a few years ago. Customers can order only what's local (loosely defined as having been grown or raised within a day's drive) or only what's in season or only organic — or a mix adjusted each week.

Linda Abbey, who receives a weekly delivery in the Austin-San Antonio area, is one of 625 customers of Greenling.com, whose customer base has increased 20 percent in the last 3 months. “This week we got a really beautiful goat cheese brie, and half a dozen heritage chicken eggs, blue and brown speckled,” said Ms. Abbey, a marketing manager for the [University of Texas](#) Libraries.

“What did you do with it all?” I asked.

“You learn to cook with what you get,” she said. “That night I made a chard frittata.”

A few days after I placed my Spud.com order, I found a blue plastic bin on my doorstep containing 18 kinds of produce — ranging from apples to tomatoes — grown in California.

Whereas Ms. Abbey might have looked into the bin and seen, say, a wonderful pesto sauce, I saw only a lot of plants.

My husband broke off a celery stalk. “Tastes good, though,” he said, as we stood there munching and tried to get used to the idea of eating it all before it spoiled.

I spent the next 30 minutes washing greens, rinsing apples and trying to find room in the refrigerator for bunches of chard, cilantro and basil.

“Goll-ly,” said my husband in a Gomer Pyle voice. “We sure have a lot of sprouts.”

I felt panicky. So I phoned Mr. Pollan, figuring that he got me into this mess, so he owed me a pep talk. And sure enough, he made me feel better about buying too much produce online.

“Ideally, you want to look the person who is growing the food in the eye, and then you really know where the food came from and how did the chicken that laid the eggs live,” Mr. Pollan said. “But not everybody wants to meet the chickens. So we need some surrogates to meet the chickens for us, particularly in parts of the country where you might live far away from farmland. We’re inventing different possibilities for that, and the Internet is one of them.”

For sticklers who want to buy directly from a single farmer, Localharvest.org enables users to search by ZIP code for Community Supported Agriculture farms that sell subscriptions, entitling buyers to receive regular delivery of a portion of an entire season’s crops.

This sounded like such a good idea that after I hung up, I also signed up for a Community Supported Agriculture share from Farmfresh toyou.com.

Then in the interests of self-preservation, I went online to pare back my next Spud order. The last thing I wanted was to end up wasting produce. To avoid that, I intended to make batches of pesto, tomato sauce and steamed broccoli and freeze them.

“Now what?” I asked my husband.

“Salad for dinner,” he said. “And salad for breakfast. And lunch.”

Note to Nancy Bloom: We’ll be leaving a little salad on your doorstep. Just to say thanks.

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