

"Think globally, eat locally"
Boston Globe
Anthony Flint
August 15, 2004

AT THE BISTROS AND CAFES all along Main Street in Great Barrington this summer, it's hard to find a menu that isn't boasting food that is grown, raised or made within about a 30-mile radius.

The mesclun, salad greens, and herbs are from Equinox Farm in Sheffield; the butter hails from High Lawn Farm in Lee. There's mushrooms from Housatonic, lamb from Glendale and grass-fed beef from Hancock, Berkshire blue cheese on burgers and South Egremont chevre on artisan bread. A diner might feel embarrassed not ordering something traced to somewhere nearby.

This is no summertime fad. The way backers of the "local food" movement see it, it's the next big thing for the ecologically conscious consuming produce, dairy, and meats from farms within a state or a region or a part of the country, just as long as the products haven't had to be shipped great distances. In this more self-contained food system, energy is saved and transportation-related pollution is minimized. And small family farms stay in business, rather than selling fields to developers. Who would have known that by buying the southern Connecticut peaches, you were doing your bit to curb sprawl?

The menus in Great Barrington reflect the efforts of Berkshire Grown, an organization that helps line up stores and restaurants as steady customers for local farms. A dozen similar groups operate all across Massachusetts, keeping weekend farmer's markets stocked and local produce on the shelves at Whole Foods supermarkets around Boston. The movement claims activity from California to Michigan to New Jersey. Ten states have even passed laws requiring that schools, prisons, and other state institutions buy a percentage of food from local farmers, though a similar bill died in the Massachusetts Legislature earlier this year.

"Changing the way people eat is not easy, but changing just one percent [nationally] would inject millions into the local economy," says Amy Cotler, a chef, cookbook author, and until last year head of Berkshire Grown. "People can wrap their minds around this and understand the food system in a tangible way."

There's some terminology to clear up before going any further. Local food is not necessarily organic food, and the local food movement is distinct as well from the slow food movement, which has its roots in Italy and champions home-cooked meals made from local raw materials, with nothing pre-processed. The sole standard for local food is that the salad in your bowl doesn't come from a farm thousands of miles away, or from another country. Enthusiasts don't care what you do in the privacy of your kitchen, as long as the stuff you're working with comes from nearby. "Organic is great for the environment and the health of workers and I'm all for it," says Corby Kummer, senior editor and food columnist for *The Atlantic Monthly* and author of "The Pleasures of Slow Food" (*Chronicle*). "But the first priority is buying local, supporting economies around you, and trying to keep local farms resisting industrialized farming and real estate pressures."

Buying local soon will become as natural as recycling, backers say, or not smoking or driving a hybrid car. But the movement is struggling to bust out from its reputation as a boutique phenomenon. Not practical, its organizers frequently hear, especially in a country with such a modern, efficient food system, and urbanized areas that cannot all have accompanying acres of farmland. Who but unrealistic and nostalgic ex-hippies would suggest a return to medieval times,

when walled cities were sustained by the bounty of surrounding fields? Too pricey. Too much work for the consumer. And, across vast regions of the country, too little to eat in the winter. . . .

Of course, all food can't be local. The amount of local food available is inherently limited by such factors as development patterns, land values, zoning regulation, population growth and the number of people who find it more profitable to be farmers rather than factory workers or doctors or computer programmers. Sheer agricultural economics make it impossible for every resident of Massachusetts to dine on hamburgers made from local beef on buns made from local wheat, dressed with local lettuce and mustard ground from locally grown mustard seeds.

Consumption of local food varies widely across categories. By the late 1990s, Massachusetts produced 33 percent of the vegetables it consumed and 65 percent of the fruit, but only one percent of meat and poultry and 14 percent of dairy, according to a report by the Department of Resource Economics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

There are signs that local producers are having an impact. Between 1975 and 1997 (the most recent figures available), the state's overall level of food self-sufficiency rose from 14 to 18 percent. For New England as a whole, it remained steady at 28 percent. According to the state's Department of Agricultural Resources, Massachusetts farm production was 80 percent wholesale and 20 percent retail 20 years ago, but now that ratio has exactly flipped. And by the late 1990s the long decline in farm acreage had begun to reverse slightly, state officials say.

Today, Massachusetts leads the nation in terms of farms selling directly to consumers \$24,873 in sales per farm, up from \$13,815 in 1997, according to Daniel Lass, one of the authors of the UMass-Amherst report. "Some of that is inflation, but that's a sizable increase," Lass says.

Fruit, vegetables, milk, and cheese are local leaders, while some products, like meat, will probably always come mostly from out of state.

"It's doing what we do best, and it all comes down to comparative advantage," says Bill Gillmeister, agricultural economist at the Department of Agricultural Resources. "Are we standing here all by ourselves as an island, not importing any beef, making it all right here, and allocating land and labor and feed and slaughterhouses? No. That takes a lot of land, which is one thing Massachusetts doesn't have a lot of."

As for the climate, local food activists insist that a huge range of edibles can, in fact, be produced even in northern latitudes, thanks in part to hothouse technology.

"There's actually a lot of diversity in the type of products that can be grown in an area," says Patty Cantrell, director of the Entrepreneurial Agriculture Project at the Michigan Land Use Institute, an anti-sprawl think-tank. "People think of Michigan as cold, but it produces the second greatest variety of products behind California. What we produce depends on how much we invest, and the market."

"The single most daunting obstacle to making local food more readily available," says Michael Rozyne, founder of Red Tomato, a Canton, Mass.-based local food broker, is the transportation and distribution system, which remains stacked in favor of large agribusiness suppliers and long-haul trucking. Thanks to the global distribution system and its resulting economies of scale, it can be easier and cheaper to buy fish from South America or tomatoes from California. But, Rozyne says, the distribution system makes it hard for even a little more of your grocery bag to be filled with local equivalents.

"We have a global food system that is accustomed to handling truck-sized quantities and not much else," Rozyne says. "There's tons of small-farm activity, but when you want it on demand, it's hard to find a truck to take it from point A to point B. All across the US, there's resounding new interest in eating things locally grown. But we're all waking up to the fact that the infrastructure is gone..." For all the increased consumer interest in local food, policymakers have found it plenty challenging to change the system. Consider the bill requiring that schools and other state institutions buy 10 percent of their food from Massachusetts' 6,000 farms, which failed to pass thanks to opposition ranging from bottom line-minded purchasing departments to local governments worried about the zoning implications of more farmstands, which the bill also would've encouraged. The failure of the bill to pass was especially surprising to Stephen Burrington, who wrote the measure while at the Conservation Law Foundation and then was in a position to push it from his perch as top policymaker in the administration of Governor Mitt Romney. But Burrington remains hopeful, because of the expanding grass-roots infrastructure for local food cooperatives, farm-to-table chefs' collaboratives, farmers markets and community-supported agriculture agreements, where consumers sign up for the agricultural equivalent of a magazine subscription with area farms and receive baskets of fresh food through the growing season.

"This is about culture, a diversified rural landscape, and access to fresh distinctive foods that are best produced locally," says Burrington. "We still have a New England where a lot of people city kids, suburban families, sixth-generation farmer have some involvement in growing or harvesting food, where the landscape features fields and orchards as well as forests, and where you can eat corn, berries, apples picked the same day. If we can still say that in another 20 years, the local food movement will have succeeded."

Anthony Flint is a member of the Globe staff. He can be reached at flint@globe.com