

Locavore Revolution



Food localism is becoming a movement, and its adherents have a name: “locavores.” Some are liberal environmentalists, others conservative or libertarian-leaning farmers. All share a passion for community, transparency, and quality—values decentralized farming brings back to the dinner table.

Merriam-Webster defines a “locavore” as “one who eats foods grown locally whenever possible.” In practice, “local” definitions can be ambiguous: for Alisa Smith, author of *The 100-Mile Diet*, a “locavore” only consumes food from within a 100-mile radius. In Congress’s 2008 Food, Conservation, and Energy Act, “local” produce must travel less than 400 miles from its origin or else stay within a state. Vermont law defines “local” items as those originating within 30 miles of the point of sale.

Just how far food localism can go is the movement’s central question—and it’s not just about distance, but the scale of the locavore economy. Can food localism be a viable business, as well as the crux of community?

Several examples suggest it can. In 1961, Joel Salatin’s parents bought a small farmhouse in the hills of Swoope, Va. Since then, Salatin has turned Polyface Farm into a \$2 million a year enterprise. He adopted direct sales to consumers—literal consumers of his food, that is, not just processing plants—at the farm’s inception, and he applauds locavorism for upholding this practice.

“What the locavore movement has done most is to create an economic drive, dumping dollars into the local farm economy,” he says.

And that economy is growing. The USDA Economic Research Service reports that from 1997 to 2007, direct agricultural sales increased by 105 percent. The number of U.S. farmers’ markets rose from 1,755 in 1994 to

6,132 by 2010. Community-supported agriculture, or CSA, a system in which consumers invest in a farm's harvest and receive a share of its produce, has grown, too. In 2005, there were 1,144 CSA's in the U.S.—up from 761 in 2001 and just two in 1986—there are now over 2,500. Local farmers, so often outmatched by corporate agriculture, are in flourishing demand.

Patricia Glaeser's husband "always wanted to farm," but a 27-year naval career put that dream on hold. After retirement, the couple began Faith Like a Mustard Seed farm in Leesburg, Va. They are building a barn in the next few months and will open a farm store within the year. Glaeser teaches cooking classes on the side—she used to work as a private chef to wealthy clients.

"I worked with some amazing chefs, and we always knew the best food to get was from farmers," Glaeser says. "It's easy to be a chef when you're using stuff that tastes so good naturally."

Other chefs appear to agree: the National Restaurant Association reports that 89 percent of fine-dining operators served local produce as of 2008. The association's top two dining trends for 2014 are locally sourced meat and seafood and locally sourced produce.

For Vermilion, an upscale restaurant in Alexandria, Va., locavorism is the backbone of an ethos. Chef William Morris's mother bought fresh produce from the local market every day. She grew up in South America, and this heritage shaped his understanding of food.

"You get what you want, and use what you get," he says. He estimates that Vermilion is 95 to 99 percent local. They even have their own mushroom forager.

Morris believes all restaurants can adopt locavore menus, if they are careful. He avoids waste by using as much of a given product as possible. When clients like a dish, he makes it regularly. "You're not going to make it rich," he said, "but if you make clientele happy, they'll keep coming."

To cut the cost of buying local, Glaeser recommends that consumers think like Morris: how much of this product can I use? She planned to make head cheese the week of our interview since her butcher refused to buy this particular cut of the hog. Most people refuse to eat "mysterious" cuts of meat. "You can still eat local and not spend a lot of money," she says, "But you have to look outside the box."

According to Salatin's research, 50 percent of the world's edible food production is never eaten by humans. People discard much of that percentage, including useful meat and produce. Locavorism can be accessible to people of all incomes with better consumption practices, Salatin believes. His family buys cheap 50-pound bags of flour and makes their own bread from scratch. "That's called taking charge of your own life," he says. "You have to decide this is a priority."

More and more Americans are making that decision. In a Food Marketing Institute study, consumers cited freshness, support for the local economy, and contact with producers as reasons to buy local. While farmers and consumers once shared a close relationship, this link was severed with the rise of factory farming and food processing. Salatin believes that locavorism can fix this.



Joel Salatin at Polyface Farms in Virginia

“You can’t have integrity without transparency, and you can’t have transparency without a short chain of custody,” he says. “The locavore movement is really a rebellion against the adulteration and abuse of the industrial food system.”

“It’s a very primal instinct to want that connection to the earth and our food,” says Rachel Bell, owner of Tide Mill Creamery in Edmunds, Maine. “The disconnect is recent, and people are wanting that connection back.”

The connection she has in mind is about more than a label, and there’s a contrast here with the movement toward “organic” foods. Bell shares her land with her brother and five cousins, who are all 8th-generation family farmers on the property. Although Bell has organic certification, she believes her locality means more to customers.

Many farmers who “don’t bother with the certification process” still work in a sustainable fashion, she says. “It’s important, in some ways, to be certified so that people truly know what your practices are,” she notes. “But it’s a lot of paperwork. It can be frustrating to farmers who just want to grow food.”

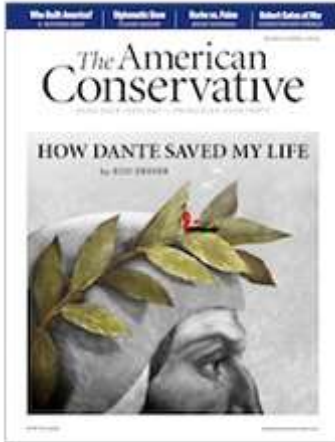
In many respects, the techniques of locavore and organic farmers are similar. Both focus on natural, sustainable practices. But Hope Hall, owner of Sunflower Farm Creamery in Cumberland, Maine, says organic farming has undergone a “sad twist” as its popularity has grown. Many organic enterprises have adopted the careless commercialism they once fought. And Salatin believes the federal government has “hijacked” the organic movement. Accountability has weakened as a result. The mystique of organic certification remains intact, but standards have eroded.

Procuring organic certification is often expensive, too. The Glaesers already pay \$600 a month for GMO-free chicken feed. If they were to go further and “went organic,” the cost difference would trickle down into the price of the eggs. “That’s a jump a lot of people don’t want to have to make,” Glaeser says. And no one has complained about the eggs’ lack of organic certification. “It seems to me that a lot of people are not wanting the organic stamp as much as they want things to be done the right way.”

Glaeser says farms should be small enough to foster relationships and quality, yet big enough to be reliable. “We’re not huge, but we’re big enough where we can take requests anytime, any day.” The farm’s walk-in freezer holds 3,000 pounds of pork, ready for any restaurant or customer who might call.

The Glaesers hope their barn store's consistent hours will enable consumers to stop by on their own schedules. "You have to be able to have people count on you," Glaeser says.

Salatin agrees. His farm is by no means small, and he believes other farms should consider a viable scale. Too many farmers' markets, he says, sell "boutique relish in baby jars." It's an expensive and time-consuming practice.



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But some of that can't be helped. Hope Hall thinks locavorism speaks to something deeper than a desire for quality food. "We never feel connected to our moment," she says. "We're always busy. But when people come to buy cheese at the farm, I can see their blood pressure drop."

Customers often stay, chat, and help feed the goats. "It's human nature to be drawn to a farm," she says. "It appeals to a real human need people are craving."

Salatin agrees. "If there's one bipartisan bridge, it's food," he says. "Because everyone has to eat. The message is really community."

Gracy Olmstead is associate editor of The American Conservative.