

## The many benefits of 'eating locally'

The faintest whiff of blossomy summer garden first drew me near. Juicily translucent in the morning sun, it was a redder-than-red late June tomato, sliced in quarters. "Picked about two hours ago," the Farmers Market guy said.

I tried a sample and went weak in the knees as the flavor brought back memories of farm kitchens and the almost unspeakable richness of eating truly fresh food.

That "real" tomato marked a turning point for me in wanting to understand what has happened to my food, particularly produce, and why much of what is widely available is monotonous, bland, and of questionable purity.

As long as we have enough, does it matter how or where our food is produced? I learned, from such sources as the Union of Concerned Scientists, Oxfam America, and the Small Farms Program at Cornell University, that it matters very much.

We owe the relative low cost of food in this country to a handful of global farming corporations using an industrial model that puts a high priority on yield. This model has been looked at favorably for its provision not just of enough food for the United States but for expansion of the farm export market and the growth of affiliated chemical and pesticide industries.

The bounty at the supermar-

WENDY SKINNER/GUEST COLUMNIST



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ket takes on much less appeal, though, when we look at the disturbing consequences of industrialized farming.

Of particular concern is monocrop farming, or monoculture, that features large-scale growing of just one plant such as the potato McDonald's uses for its fries. This practice crowds out genetic diversity, a fundamental strength of natural systems.

In some areas, these megacrops are depleting vast aquifers — the earth's finite underground water sources — and each of these crops requires its own specialized set of fertilizers and pesticides. These chemicals run off into water that finds its way into homes and human bodies. Antibiotics are routinely fed to industrially raised animals; in turn these drugs become less effective against human disease in people who eat the meat.

The appeal of industrialized crops and animal products includes early harvest, long

shelf life, resistance to shipping damage, and uniform appearance. As consumers, we have become accustomed to the engineered sameness of these products.

Although I grew up in farm country and had relatives who farmed, I guess I became "industrialized," too, because as a habitual supermarket shopper, I accepted the vaguely stale and decidedly boring quality of these foods. Over time, I forgot what good food tastes like. The chemical, hormone, and antibiotic content I just plain ignored.

The issues surrounding industrialized agriculture are far more extensive than this short article can cover, but we can have an influence on how our food is produced by buying a better product. Healthy, flavorful food is available right here in the community. It's produced on small farms that use more sustainable methods of

agriculture.

Small farmers tend to see themselves as stewards of the earth and guard their limited amount of natural resources. Because they bring their products to market directly from the farm, they don't have the shipping and shelf-life concerns and can support many more genetic varieties. Animals can be raised in humane and healthy conditions on small farms.

It may be overwhelming to contemplate changing a global industry, but changing a few food shopping habits is within reach. Here are some tips I learned in my quest for a tastier tomato:

- Shop at the local farmers markets and farm stands.
- Join a community supported agriculture (CSA) buying group to receive weekly deliveries of locally-grown seasonal products.
- Pick your own fruit at "you-pick" farms.

- At the supermarket, read

the labels and buy seasonal or locally produced food.

- Ask food stores and restaurants to buy more local food.

- Make an "all-local" dinner for friends.

- Carpool or offer to buy for neighbors to reduce trips.

The reward of feeling really good about the meals you make and eat, and of knowing that you're consciously choosing the best food, is well worth the effort.

If you are interested in other ways to have a healthier, calmer, more sustainable lifestyle for yourself and your community and want to discuss how to bring about real change, Sustainable Tompkins is offering a series of "welcome salons" now through next May.

Community members are invited to come and talk in a relaxed setting about issues such as renewable energy, green building, appropriate land use, preserving finite resources, social and economic equity, and health and well-being for all.

The first salon will be at the Wownet Café, 111 North Aurora Street, Ithaca, from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m., on Thursday, Sept. 23.

For more information call 277-7611 or visit [www.sustainabletompkins.org](http://www.sustainabletompkins.org)

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