

## A 100-mile Thanksgiving

This November, celebrate a 100-mile Thanksgiving. Prepare a feast of turkey or choice meat, vegetables and desserts, with ingredients *all* raised within 100 miles of your dinner table. That's the message from a coalition of "eat local," sustainable agriculture groups including [100MileDiet.org](http://100MileDiet.org), Local Harvest and [EatLocalChallenge.com](http://EatLocalChallenge.com). And they have an attractive pitch. It's that a Thanksgiving of local ingredients will put fresher and healthier food on your table than lots of industrial-scale, long-distance produce. The local food will also, claim these groups, support nearby small-farm operations most likely to:

- Pay their workers a living wage;
- Grow a diversity of crops, often without pesticides;
- Slaughter their animals in a humane fashion;
- Sell only locally, recycling dollars into the economy of your own region, restoring some measure of the direct, city-country relationships that are so often lost in today's overwhelmingly conglomeratized, globalized food-manufacture and -distribution system.

The 100-mile pitch is parallel to a column I wrote using the spinach *E. coli* scare to ask why we ship — on big trucks spewing greenhouse gases — fresh produce as many as 3,500 miles cross-country, destroying markets for local farmers.

Not everyone, in turns out, agrees. My (e-)mailbag was soon flooded with messages proposing I eat crow because global efficiency and vagaries of local markets doom close-to-home agriculture anyway.

Why? Customers, they note, go first for the low prices that the familiar chains — Safeway to Wal-Mart — deliver best. Who wants a winter of canned and frozen vegetables and fruits, when California can keep fulfilling our desires from lettuce to grapes to kiwis? Anyway, my critics said, sprawl has eaten up the choicest farmland around cities — do we really believe, for example, that New Jersey is still the "Garden State"?

Are some of these arguments correct? Yes. It's unrealistic to expect resurgent local farming to make a big dent fast against today's super-efficient agribusiness/mass food marketing machine.

But that's not to say agriculture that's scaled more thoughtfully, more to the states and metro regions where we live, can't have a strong future. Not at all.

First, consumers want choice. And increasingly, they value health. Many of the freshest (and most vitamin-packed) tastes *are* local — qualities easily lost in long-distance transportation. Think heirloom tomatoes, sweet corn and fresh berries.

Many of us will select (and pay additionally) for meats and poultry raised in normal local farm conditions rather than in agribusiness' brutally packed body-to-body animal-production facilities.

Second, economics: Local agriculture creates jobs and recycles dollars in a home region, rather than shipping them out to distant suppliers.

Third, there's also a strong social side: Direct farmer-to-buyer ties strengthen civic cohesion and civic capital across a metropolitan region.

And finally, the environment: Viable farms preserve relished greenspace.

The real challenge isn't total system change; instead it's finding a balance, a start to moving the needle back a few notches to *regionally* diverse agriculture and food distribution. One solution: a proposed \$9.5 million state government investment starting with intense marketing of fresh Michigan foods to Michiganders. Other suggested steps: start up a state farmers' market association, increase food stamp use by farmers' markets, offer low-interest loans for cooling, storage and packing equipment, and move aggressively to get state and local government agencies to expand local food choice by school cafeterias, child-care centers, universities and prisons.

Parallel efforts in the other 49 states could trigger a major rebalancing of American food policy, complementing urgent national needs from farm and land conservation to healthier eating habits and less obesity. Not a bad bargain! Mechanized, long-distance, shrink-wrapped agriculture still rules the roost in America. But we can all be rebels. Think about it as you plan your Thanksgiving dinner.