

Palo Alto's Pantry: A Guide to Finding Local Food

Where once the consumer chose blindly from the finite shelves of the supermarket, now consumers are more concerned with the origin of their food. Did it come from my country? My state? My town? These questions spawned the local food movement, the desire to have food that is in season and can be procured within a certain distance from one's home. These two variables, seasonality and locality, make each region unique. The United States has a myriad of climates within its borders, to cite some extremes: the tropics in Hawaii and, the tundra in Alaska, rainforest in the Northwest. This country has the ability to grow pretty much anything somewhere, yet our main agricultural commodity, corn, is not even grown so we can eat it but rather so it can be processed (FAO Statistics). Naturally, there are major nutritional issues with this style of living. As such the local food movement has become a national issue. The USDA, when confronted with the question of how to define local stated that there is no generally accepted definition, leaving it up to the consumer to decide how local they define local (USDA).

I am lucky to live in Northern California, which has a Mediterranean climate that is perfect for growing produce year round. Noted as the "jackpot" for agriculture by agronomist JR Harlan, it is the ideal place to see if one can live on local food entirely (Harlan). In my hometown of Palo Alto, finding a variety food that is accessible to me seasonally or year round is possible if one has the time and dedication to seek out local growers and pay extra.

The Menlo Park Safeway on El Camino has a local section for fruits and vegetables, though the manager cannot say for certain where the produce comes from only that it's from California. That's 163,707 square miles to come from. So before I embark on trying to find local food for my table, I need to define my local area. The popular 100 Mile Diet group suggests drawing a circle from my home with a 100 mile radius. This would take me far enough east to bump up against the Sierras but so far west that about a third of my area is Pacific ocean. So I have decided to warp 100 Mile Diet's idea and use the 31,000 or so square miles of land and having my circle be oval shaped area of land that extends from the Sacramento Valley starting in Chico and traveling down to Fresno and out to the coast (See Appendix 1).

From my hometown I do not have to travel more that fifteen minutes by car (20 by bike) to get to the supermarket for my food, even less time if I only need staple goods that can be provided by my local grocer. The fact is that the Palo Alto area is full of popular supermarkets like Safeway, specialized grocers like Trader Joes or Whole Foods as well as local markets like

Sigona's Farmer's Market, Roberts Market, and JJ&F. These establishments are open all week and provide a variety of foods for a variety of prices. On the weekends the official Farmer's Market opens with vendors coming from all over the bay area and Sacramento valley. Clearly I don't have to travel much to get my food be it highly processed or not, however; how far does my *food* have to travel so I can have it so conveniently located?

In order to determine exactly how much food one should eat and can be supplied I looked at the USDA food pyramid. As a picky eater, I've always managed to weasel out of eating the USDA's recommended four and a half cups of fruits and veggies a day. This has lead me to believe that most people don't follow the exact serving sizes, but rather that to have a healthy diet one needs fruits, vegetables, meat, grains and dairy products sometime in the day. So in order to eat locally I need to be able to find all these products.

Fruits and Vegetables

Probably the easiest of the food pyramid's categories to find at the farmers market is the fruit and veggie vendors. The Palo Alto Farmer's Market is open year round except for a few weeks in January. Here one can find beans, beets, spinach, avocados, oranges, mushrooms, carrots, lemons and many more any weekend as they grow year round in the Mediterranean climate. These are just the fruits and vegetables that are available year round. Seasonally one can find strawberries, avocados, tomatoes and even guavas that have been found to grow locally. If one chooses not to go to the farmer's market during the weekend market day, Sigona's Market, the permanent Farmer's market is open seven days a week and provides fruits and vegetables from many of the same farms. This is also the only category I would go to Safeway for my local food, I can be fairly certain that the produce is coming from the Sacramento Valley as the majority of California's produce is grown there. Though probably I'd just go to my local grocer, JJ&F, who is more reliable and closer.

Meat, Poultry and Seafood

I am in a prime location to get my meat. The easiest place to get the local beef and poultry would, as always, be at the farmer's market. Pampero Ranch sells grass feed beef from their farm south of Chico. In addition to Sigona's and the Farmer's Market, the community gardens in Palo Alto usually have some laying chickens, and if one joined the Stanford community garden they could barter some zucchini or other veggie for some fresh eggs. In the

Stanford mall Schaub's sells meat fish and poultry, one would have to ask which were local, but Schaub's generally has local cuts.

As noted earlier, my local area includes the San Francisco Bay as well as much of the California coastline giving a variety of shellfish and both fresh and saltwater fish. As always the Saturday and Sunday markets are supplied by Paravannos' fish stand, an excellent place to have some of whatever fish is biting. If one needs fish for a hastily planned meal Cook's seafood is the next stop. Cook's commonly has dungeness crab, shrimp, oysters, sanddabs, and local wild salmon along with the expertise to tell you how to prepare your fish or suggest a side dish. Cook's is conveniently located on El Camino, but if you are coming from 280 a quick stop off the Woodside Rd. exit will drop you off at Robert's market, where they sell local wild salmon. The meat and seafood is a category where finding one's food is more challenging, but once one finds a place they like a commitment can be made to eat locally in this category.

Grains

One of the most challenging slices of the food pyramid to find would be the grain family. Because most wheat is highly processed off the farm and grown mainly in North Dakota, Montana and Minnesota, grains are rarely sold in small portions directly from the farm to the consumer (US Wheat). Historically, Californian wheat became unpopular once the midwestern states could produce wheat in such large quantities and harvest mechanically. Recently Sonora wheat, a strain native to California since the missionaries, has become popular in farms north of Sacramento where they both harvest and mill the wheat into flour that can be used for breads and pastries (Duggan). Full Belly Farm comes to the Palo Alto farmers market on Saturdays selling flour and wheat berries. If you are not a baker, Esther's German Bakery provides pre-made treats next to other pastry vendors.

More accessible alternatives to bread include rice and pasta. Brown rice grown on Lundberg and Massa Organic farms sell their rice to California Rice, which packages them to be sold in large supermarkets like Safeway, Whole Foods and Trader Joes. The label names and places of venue are posted on calrice.org. White rice is also grown at Koda farm, a tribute to the Asian influence in California. Fresh made pasta is available at Sigona's, JJ&F's and, for higher end or specialized pasta, Draeger's grocer. Pasta is a touchy subject, the pasta may be made close by, but the origin of the flour is unknown so if strictly adhering to eating foods grown locally: buying one's own flour and making the pasta at home is an alternative. One may note that eating

locally can mean setting aside more time to prepare the food as it often does not come as processed as Kraft's three minute Easy Mac 'n Cheese.

Dairy

I may be a picky eater, but I like my dairy products. Cheese especially. So it is with great joy that I inform you that Cowgirl Creamery and Spring Hill Jersey Cheese sells cow, sheep and goat cheeses at the Saturday and Sunday farmers market. If you happen to miss out on these days, or find yourself in need of more, Sigona's has a wonderful cheese arrangement next to their fresh cream and butter. Draeger's also has its traditional high-end local cheeses next to their imported Belgian and French wheels. Milk is a dairy product that cannot be found locally. Pasteurization and government regulations lead most dairy farms to give their milk to large processing plants, which then distribute their milk under brand names like Clover and Lucerne.

Other Products

No matter how fresh and tasty the raw ingredients basic herbs, spices and oils should be included in any cooks shopping list. Herbs such as mint, basil, and oregano can be bought or grown in a home garden. Sugar, olive oil, salt, pepper and vinegar are just a few of the extra ingredients we add routinely to our dishes. The Mediterranean climate just is not suited to grow many of these spices. Sugar is not grown locally, though honey is a popular product sold in the farmer's market that can be used as a sweetener in some pastries. The California Olive Oil Council (COOC) is dedicated to providing California grown and pressed olive oil products through providing their own certification. There are a few stores in San Francisco and Berkley that sell this local olive oil, and more can be found on the COOC website. The Saturday market boasts vendor Triple J from Santa Cruz who sells specialty vinegars, though the market only has occasional olive oil vendors. Spices like cinnamon, vanilla and nutmeg are exotic, there's a reason the spice trade used to be so lucrative. Even if I felt that extending my local area to all of the west coast I would not be able to find a place that could supply such a variety of spices. One way to circumvent this issue of locality is to have a local supplier. The Spice Rack in downtown Menlo Park has an array of spices that they buy independently, however, their cost is substantially higher than Safeway. The cost issue is true in all categories of the food pyramid, to commit to the local food movement one would have to see how much they are willing to pay for local products as they are usually grown on smaller farms that need to charge more in order to compete with large industrial growers.

Conclusions

The two main challenges I have found when embarking on eating locally are time and cost. As a member of an affluent family I can afford to spend extra money to purchase at the farmer's market, which is sadly only open two days a week. The alternative grocers and markets, Sigona's and Draeger's, though they carry local food products cannot compete with Safeway's low prices and locations. They are both located near my home, but traveling more than an hour out of one's daily routine defeats the purpose of eating locally and cutting down on the carbon emissions of the food. This time commitment extends beyond just getting the food, food preparation take an enormous amount of time. Some fruits and vegetables can be eaten raw, but for the most part one would have to find time to prepare the food at home. A solution to time preparation at home would be for markets to sell marinated steaks or precooked vegetables. This solution may regress into the beginnings of a new kind of packaged foods that are loaded with preservatives that one is trying avoid by eating locally.

In committing and the local food movement, seasonality is also challenge. One must remember that as a society that is accustomed to getting what we want when we want it. The Mediterranean climate has the amazing ability to extend fruition periods, but only to a point. Fresh fruits and vegetables are wonderful when they are in season, but having jelly or jam instead of strawberries in February is an alternative. So are salted and smoked meats that will last longer in the pantry than fresh meat. These alternate ways of storing food would have to become essential if the local food movement had to accommodate more people.

The Palo Alto area is unique; the area has been dedicated to the locavore and foodie movements and attracts small growers, butchers and bakers. Google had an entire food court devoted to eating food grown within 150 miles (Café 150). However, Palo alto is a bit of a bubble, the small town attracts enough attention for two separate farmers markets from an area that holds three major cities and a population of over nine million (FAO Stat). Trying to feed this many people on only locally grown food is impossible at this time. Population is not the only problem with eating locally on a large scale; the greatest problem for farmers is the land itself. This is the area of the Silicon Valley and the dot com boom, from a real estate perspective it is one of the most expensive areas to live. The land in some places more profitable than any crop. Despite these challenges Palo Alto survives in its bubble as a place I can sustain myself year round from local producers.

Work Cited

- "100 Mile Diet: Local Eating for Global Change Â» Find Your 100 Miles." *100 Mile Diet: Eating for Global Change*. Web. 21 Nov. 2010. <<http://100milediet.org/get-started/map>>.
- "Buy Locally." *Palo Alto Farmers' Market*. Web. 21 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.pafarmersmarket.org/buylocally/index.html>>.
- Cook's Seafood Restaurant and Fish Market | 751 El Camino Real, Menlo Park, CA 94025*. Web. 18 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.cooksseafood.com/fishMarket.html>>.
- Duggan, By Tara. "Bay Area Wheat Makes a Comeback." *Featured Articles From The SFGate*. 10 Dec. 2008. Web. 21 Nov. 2010. <http://articles.sfgate.com/2008-12-10/food/17130233_1_hard-red-winter-wheat-flour-bread/2>.
- "Esther's German Bakery." *Palo Alto Farmers' Market*. Web. 21 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.pafarmersmarket.org/buylocally/esthers.html>>.
- "FAO Statistics." *Http://faostat.fao.org/site/339/default.aspx*. Web. 24 Nov. 2010.
- "Full Belly Farm." *Palo Alto Farmers' Market*. Web. 21 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.pafarmersmarket.org/buylocally/fullbelly.html>>.
- "FV Anne B." *Palo Alto Farmers' Market*. Web. 21 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.pafarmersmarket.org/buylocally/fvanneb.html>>.
- Harlan, Jack. 1992. *Crops and Man*. Madison, Wisconsin. American Society of Agronomy, Inc.
- "Pan-o-rama Bakery." *Palo Alto Farmers' Market*. Web. 21 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.pafarmersmarket.org/buylocally/panorama.html>>.
- "Santa Clara County - 2007 Census of Agriculture." Web. 19 Nov. 2010.
- Spataro, By Kurt. "Find Brands Near You." *California Rice Commission*. Web. 21 Nov. 2010. <[http://www.calrice.org/Cuisine/Foodservice/Suppliers and Brands.htm](http://www.calrice.org/Cuisine/Foodservice/Suppliers%20and%20Brands.htm)>.
- Spataro, By Kurt. "Suppliers and Brands." *California Rice Commission*. Web. 21 Nov. 2010. <[http://www.calrice.org/Cuisine/Foodservice/Suppliers and Brands.htm](http://www.calrice.org/Cuisine/Foodservice/Suppliers%20and%20Brands.htm)>.
- "Spring Hill Jersey Cheese." *Palo Alto Farmers' Market*. Web. 21 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.pafarmersmarket.org/buylocally/springhill.html>>.
- "United States Wheat Production." *Http://worc.org*. Web. 21 Nov. 2010.

"Who We Are." *Sigona's Fruit for Thought Fruit Baskets for Corporate Delivery in California*. Web. 21 Nov. 2010. <http://sigonasfft.com/pages/who_we_are>.

Wu, By Olivia. "Now Google's Cooking / Internet Giant's Free, Gourmet Global Cuisine Powers Its Workforce While Offering Chefs and Producers a Place to Shine - SFGate." *Featured Articles From The SFGate*. 01 Mar. 2006. Web. 21 Nov. 2010. <http://articles.sfgate.com/2006-03-01/food/17285203_1_food-service-google-culinary-team>.

Appendix A

