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Eating close to home

One family's experience with local, seasonal food

By Robert Gardner

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The heart and soul of [Oak Park](#), besides liberal politics, is the weekly farmers market.

Like a lot of villagers, we started going for the doughnuts, the long gladioluses and the music. Over time, however, the market seduced in a profound way. We started seeing it not just as great food but as a food community.

There was the vendor who always gave my kids a box of berries and the older couple who rewarded my curiosity in black walnuts by selling me the whole box.

Mr. and Mrs. Nichols offered three colors of beets, 10 types of potatoes and 20 versions of apples. Strawberries were red - that's right, red -- and tasted like nothing before.

We began buying more of our produce there until finally we wondered: Could the Oak Park farmers market be our sole source of fruits and vegetables?

That was three years ago, and the term "localvore" (or "locavore") was not yet invented. The Eat Local movement had not yet blossomed. And I was wholly unaware of the idea of tracking how many miles it takes to put food on my plate.

To me, our commitment to the local farmers market was about honoring the marketers. It was about communing with ancestors who never knew the taste of a peach shipped from South America.

With a bit of cajoling, the family agreed to try to live as a Chicagoan would have, say, 50 years ago. We would eat what was grown here, what was made here, or what could be reasonably transported here.

In other words, if our grandparents regularly ate it, we could.

Now, I am a modern man. I blog, for crying out loud, so this commitment to going local is not a rejection of



all things modern.

Nor is it unique, as I found when I started parading on my blog my affection for eating local. I found a religion out there, with a lot of co-religionists, and I learned that there was a lot more to eating local.

We gave up supermarket meat for a cow parked in our freezer. We found a mill in northwest Indiana for grains. We found [Wisconsin](#) cheese at Costco and Wisconsin potatoes at the dollar store. We saluted our efforts with shots of vodka made from [Michigan](#) grapes. We shopped often at farmers markets, and we got a box of produce each week from Vicki Westerhoff of Genesis Growers, who coaxes delicious vegetables from a plain-looking farm in St. Anne, near Kankakee.

We are not absolutists. We consume chocolate and coffee and wine. We flavor with spices, cook with olive oil and survive with salt.

Still, our basic premise is, if it is available in our area, we will get it only from our area. That's seasonal eating. That's preserving the harvest.

So what does that mean for right now, as the ides of March approach? It means we are eating a lot of root vegetables. And apples -- thank god my kids never tire of apples.

Eating local might seem an affectation suitable only for [California](#). The Midwest growing season is limited, after all. Our markets wait until May to open and close in October.

I tell you, however, that it can be done. This is our third year of eating local, and we are getting better at it.

It takes time to get an idea of what will be needed come winter and how to store it. Oak Park bungalows do not come with root cellars. But they do have canning rooms and attics. Over late fall, we stocked up on carrots and parsnips, onions and apples. These supplemented the vegetables we had been freezing all season. This year, we have been eating out less.

Can we last the hungriest months? Well, April is around the corner already. But as I always say, don't ask me how the eating local is going now, ask me in a month.

I am an eater, a foodie. I appreciate the impact that eating local has on our climate and our economy, but eating local satisfies me most in the gullet.

My children -- honest -- can sniff out a local peach over an import. They are snobs now.

Local food tastes better because it can be picked fresher. You eat varieties, such as heirloom tomatoes, that cannot survive modern commerce. Your food vocabulary expands to sunchokes and rutabagas. You find them surprisingly good.

What you give up is ease. Eating local means dealing with foods in their rawest states. I believe that the rutabaga was pushed from the kitchen because of the burden of peeling.

But this is a small burden. A lot of the burdens of eating local are small, and they diminish the longer you do it, the better you get.

We are now firmly entrenched on the path of local. We appreciate the effect it may have on our environment. We appreciate the effect it has had on our enjoyment of eating. And, mostly, we appreciate the effect it has had on connecting us with the people who produce our food.

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