



Locally
Grown
Food

The Healthy Choice

Buying local is good for your regional economy, and for your health.

With every bite, you're promoting wellness while also supporting area farmers. Here's why.

EATING FRESH

Fresher produce is healthier produce. Vegetables and fruits begin losing vitamins like A, B, C and E as soon as they're harvested. Shipped produce is typically picked before becoming fully ripened in advance of a long trip to store shelves. Along the way, exposure to air, changing temperatures and artificial lights also lead to a decrease in nutrients. These foods are still healthy choices, even if picked a week or more ago — or even when frozen or canned, just to an increasingly lesser degree. Local growers allow their produce to fully ripen, then immediately bring it to you.

BALANCING DIETS

The fact is, we eat better when we eat locally grown foods. So much of the excess caloric intake associated with poor diets is found in processed foods, unhealthy snacks, fast food and point-of-purchase candy. You won't find junk food at the local pick-your-own farm or farmers market. Instead, you'll be surrounded healthy greens, fresh fruit and lean proteins.



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You'll also cut down on the number of stops along the way where potential contamination can occur.

NO PRESERVATIVES

Produce and other goods have to be prepared for the long distances they travel to distant stores, and that usually involves chemical additives. Some of these biological and

non-biological components have been shown to produce long-term negative impacts if over consumed, according to a number of studies. The nitrates used to cure meats, for instance, has been linked with cancer. Locally grown foods are also usually either low in pesticides, or completely pesticide free — another potential source of negative

health outcomes. That creates a safe space for local wildlife and birds, too.

INCREASED SUSTAINABILITY

Since local food travels a shorter distance, there are fewer emissions and less pollution associated with the process. There's less waste in packaging, since the produce

doesn't have to withstand long-distance shipping. You can also bring your own reusable bag to the farmers market or pick-your-own farm, further cutting down on plastic use. A healthy local farming community helps maintain critical green space, boosts biodiversity, promotes clean water and air, and protects critical pollinators.

Buying Organic Produce

The definition of “local” isn’t always precise — but “organic” is different.

USDA-certified organic foods must meet strict federal guidelines across the entire growing process. Here’s a look at how organics work:

DEFINING ORGANIC?

Federal regulators closely follow soil quality, pest and weed control, animal-welfare practices and any additives. Organic producers much use national substances, and can only employ certain regulated farming methods. Synthetic substances are essentially banned, though some exceptions are made in the case of vaccines, for instance, since they prevent infectious disease. Toxic substances, even if they are naturally occurring, are also prohibited. Produce can be called organic if it’s been grown in soil without prohibited substances like most pesticides and fertilizers for three years before being harvested.

MULTI-INGREDIENT PRODUCTS

Foods that are prepared or processed and thus include more than one ingredient must meet complete-ingredient organic standards, can not include artificial flavors, preservatives or colors. Some non-agricultural ingredients are allowed, but only in a very narrow set of circumstances



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— as with baking soda in baked goods or enzymes in yogurt.

Multi-ingredient products listed as “made with” organics must include at least 70% certified ingredients.

WHAT ABOUT GMOS?

Genetically modified organisms are prohibited by USDA regulations. They’re principal-

ly used to correct yield issues due to weeds or insects, according to a Purdue University report, and haven’t yet been conclusively shown to be unsafe.

Nevertheless, organic-food growers can’t employ GMOs in any way, and must also ensure that their products aren’t cross-contaminated by nearby non-organic crops or farms.

COST CONSIDERATIONS

With all of that in mind, the cost of meeting these standards is understandably high — or organic foods often cost a little more. These foods are also made in small batches, so prices rise with increased demand. There are additional costs in keeping organics separate from non-organic foods during transport, as well. Considerations

also must be made for organic livestock and poultry, and that adds in front-end costs. Farmers must ensure that they live in pasture-based systems designed to support natural behavior and well being. The organic sector as tripled in size since the USDA first implemented these regulations in 2002, but demand shows no sign of lessening.



Canning and Preserving

Want to stock up on seasonal favorites? Here's how.

Locally grown food doesn't have the same self life associated with grocery-store versions, since it does not include the same preservatives. Canning and preserving can help extend their life.

HOW IT WORKS

If done properly, canning is a safe method of storing your food for later consumption. Place your locally grown produce, proteins or fruits in jars, then heat them to the point where microorganisms that present health or spoiling hazards are eliminated. Heating drives air from the jar, another element that leads to spoilage. A vacuum seal is formed as the jar cools, preventing recontamination from air and microorganisms.

PROCESS ISSUES

It's important that suggested instructions be closely followed, in order to prevent food-borne illnesses. Botulism is a particular risk: There were 210 outbreaks over a 20-year period through 2014, and 145 were linked to unsafe home canning. The jars have to be properly pressurized, and you must remain

vigilant when looking for signs of spoilage. Clostridium botulinum bacteria is destroyed by canning at 240 degrees or above, for a specified length of time. Because this temperature is above water's boiling point, pressure canner are usually recommended. Also, be aware that where you live might impact the required steps: Canning recipes are typically designed for altitudes up to 1,000 feet. If you live in a place that's above this altitude, research needed adjustments.

COMMON METHODS

The bath method involves heating the jars completely under boiling water, and is safe for high-acid fruits, pickles and jams, jelly and other preserves. Some canned goods, like figs and tomatoes, may require additional acid like lemon juice. The steam canning method, where jars are placed on a rack above boiling water, can also be used with properly acidified or naturally acidic foods — but not low-acid foods such as meats or vegetables. This process may be preferred because it uses less water and reaches the required temperatures faster, so less energy is required. Pressure canning is the only safe method for vegetables, poultry, meats, and seafood. Jars are placed in 2-to-3 inches of water, then heated to at least 240 degrees to eliminate the danger of botulism.

What Is Heritage Produce?

Before produce became so homogenized there were many, many more choices.

That's sparked an interest in heirloom plants, since these heritage varieties are linked back to produce that was grown historically.

CHANGING TIMES

Food crops were once far more diverse, as growers saved cuttings and seeds for future plantings in the eras before large-scale modern agriculture. As a result, there were many different kinds of vegetables and fruits that we might not necessarily have easy access to anymore. After World War II, mass-product techniques led to a more consistent results, but the focus was on durability through a long process of picking, travel and processing rather than novelty or taste. As a result, biodiversity has dropped by as much as 75%, according to some estimates.

DEFINING AN HEIRLOOM

Experts generally agree that heirloom varieties date back at least to the end of World War II. The heritage seeds often were handed down the old-fashioned way, from one generation of family growers to another. Some seed companies have also preserved older lines of food for future crops. Your personal locale will have



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its own specific historical varieties, based on local taste and suitability of conditions. They may not look like the typical vegetables and fruits you'd find at a hometown grocery store, with different colors (there are white-fleshed watermelons featuring red seeds, and jewel-colored corn), or unusual shapes.

WHERE TO FIND THEM

Today, growers can join seed exchanges, or shop at local seed banks. Organized gatherings devoted to heirlooms are increasingly common; gardening clubs also sponsor sales. Notable commercial companies involved with the trend include the Seed Savers Exchange (Decorah, Iowa), Seeds of

Change (Rancho Dominguez, California), Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds (Mansfield, Missouri) and Territorial Seed Company (Cottage Grove, Oregon), among many others. Just remember, these unusual varieties may ripen at different times of the year, and often boast unusual characteristics. They can also have intriguing

histories: Old Greek Melons, for instance, were introduced when early-20th century Greek immigrants settled in Utah in search of mining jobs. You might just stumble upon these unique fruits or vegetables at your neighborhood farmers market, where adventurous area growers mix and match the old and new.

Slow Down for Food

Interested in breaking the fast food habit? Join this global initiative.

The slow food movement sounds like what it is: An effort to encourage people to take the time to prepare, serve and eat whole foods. Locally grown produce and proteins, and the desire to preserve culture and food heritage are the central pieces in this lifestyle.

HISTORY OF THE MOVEMENT

Carlo Petrini founded the slow food initiative as in the '80s as fast-food franchises began arriving in Rome, describing it as a threat to native traditions. He hoped to stem the tide of hurried consumption and rootless foods, while promoting hand-made meals and cuisine that had been passed down from generation to generation. Other slow food organizations began popping up throughout Europe, followed by international fairs, and then worldwide campaigns, initiatives and projects. There are now thousands of slow food groups, called "convivia," and one of them is likely near you.

SLOW FOOD OBJECTIVES

Slow Food USA has maintained the movement's original goals, including the preservation of local culture and emphasizing the joys of a great home-cooked meal, while also expanding to focus



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on more far-reaching environmental, health and labor concerns. Farmers and ranchers have retained key roles, as they boost sustainability while sharing the locally grown foods that create a foundation for this movement. For instance, SFUSA stands against factory farming, instead recommending the customers buy meat from smaller farms

that meet higher welfare standards. SFUSA also supports GMO labeling initiatives, but farm products do not have to be certified organic to meet slow-food standards.

HELPING FARMERS

The slow food movement has been a boon to local growers, since it seeks to lead people away from mass-produced

food. Their initiatives could also lead to better health outcomes, since farm-to-table products usually have fewer added preservatives and sometimes-dangerous fertilizers. Fast food restaurants and industrial agriculture have also been plagued more recently by disease outbreaks that could often be avoided by simply increasing our patron-

age of farmers markets and pick-your-own farms. Where ever you shop, we could all lead healthier lives by incorporating slow food principles like avoiding processed foods, seeking out free-range and grass-fed protein options, cooking from scratch with natural ingredients, and maintaining critical awareness of food sources.

Pick Your Own

Ready for some fun memories and even better food?

Consider visiting a pick-your-own farm, where you can enjoy quality time outside while selecting the perfect produce or fruit to complete any meal.

FIND THE FARM

Pick-your-own farms are increasingly common, so there's likely one in your area. You might also need to search for "choose-your-own," "u-pick," or "cut-your-own" farms. If the internet doesn't immediately turn up an area option, visit your local ag extension office, chamber of commerce or tourism bureau. They'll have more details on which farms are open to the public, and often will offer additional information on their produce selection and any additional amenities. Call ahead before you drive out, since their offerings are seasonal and that may impact operating hours. Ask in advance about pricing and parking. PickYourOwn.org notes that some farms have quantity limits.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Pack as you would for any other day trip, including snacks and plenty of water to drink. PickYourOwn.org also recommends bringing personal containers large enough to carry your picked vegetables and fruit around the farm, and back to your vehicle. Popular



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options include tree fruit like apples, peaches and cherries, along with strawberries, blackberries, blueberries and raspberries. Pumpkins are a favorite in the fall. Be weather aware, however, in case sun protection or an umbrella is needed. Dress casually, since you'll likely get a little dirty out there.

SPECIAL ETIQUETTE

Ask about any special instructions when you arrive, and follow all posted signs. Remember that the place you're visiting is both a workplace and home for local farmers. Stay away from their equipment, since there is always a danger of injury — in particular for those who are

unfamiliar with how common farm implements work. Step carefully across rows, and never walk on their plants.

HEADING HOME

Newly picked fruits and vegetables must be kept dry and cool, so make any visit to a pick-your-own farm the last stop of the day. Your locally

grown food will need to be transported home as soon as possible.

Once there, put away any produce that won't be consumed over the next few days, either as canned goods or frozen items. Date everything that goes into long-term storage, so you can easily identify the oldest items.

What's In Season?

Getting into the locally grown food mindset can require a bit of research.

Decide which fresh fruits and vegetables you love, and you're half way there. Next, you'll have to determine when they're available throughout the year.

CALENDAR CONSIDERATIONS

Harvest times depend on our changing weather. Certain foods are best picked in spring, while others may ripen in the summer. Your area and climate also determine when a foods are in season. Pick and eat things at their peak, and you'll not only be getting the best-tasting vegetables and fruits, but you'll also be enjoying these foods when they have the maximum health impacts. The amount of nutrients soar, and a shorter timeline from farm to table lessens the need for preservatives and other chemicals. Freezing and canning allows us to enjoy produce throughout the year without introducing harsh additives, but some freshness and nutrition is inevitably lost. So learn when your favorite foods are in season in order to best support local farmers and a healthier lifestyle.

LEARNING MORE

Local gardening groups typically sponsor informational events. Area ag centers will



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have a broad range of details, often including printed materials. Internet resources may include university-based extension services. Local farmers markets also offer a wealth of information on any local community's seasonal foods. If you see it there, it's in season. You can also learn more from growers at each

booth, including their predictions for how certain crops are expected to do this year. If they're looking for a bumper crop, that might influence your future menu ideas.

SEASONAL EATING

Seasonal eating means buying and eating foods that were harvested as they come to

market. In the spring, that typically means artichokes, asparagus, fava beans, snap peas and snow peas, among others. In the summer, you'll likely see more blackberries and blueberries, cantaloupes, chickpeas, corn, cucumbers, mangos, peaches and plums, tomatoes, watermelons and zucchini. Buying locally

grown foods supports community farmers, and lessens the environmental impact of transport. But there are also huge nutritional considerations: One review from California found that peas and green beans lost between 15 and 77% of their Vitamin C content in just the first week after being picked.