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If It's Fresh and Local, Is It Always Greener?

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I'VE been feeling pretty smug lately about zipping over to the farmers' market or the local Whole Foods for some New York apples or New Jersey spinach and ferrying it home in my reusable grocery bags.

Take that, petrochemical cabal!

I'm not the only one feeling so righteous. Unless you have been stuck in the processed-food aisles of your local grocery store for the last couple of years, you have probably noticed that **local food** is all the rage.

Union Square in Manhattan may offer one of the most popular farmers' markets, but Des Moines isn't far behind, and top restaurants and college campuses are now demanding **local food** on the plate.

Books and magazines about **local food** are selling big, too.

Barbara Kingsolver ate locally produced food on her Virginia farm and wrote a best-selling book about it. So did Michael Pollan, who bagged a wild pig and grubbed for mushrooms in Northern California in a quest for the perfect meal (and readers).

And then there was the Brooklyn guy who turned his entire backyard into a miniature farm complete with corn stalks and a chicken coop, and wrote about it in New York magazine. Slaughtered chickens and fresh eggs in Flatbush? How cool is that?

The **local food, or locavore**, movement has so much momentum that some of the food glitterati have declared that such food is better than organic.

But now comes a team of researchers from the University of California, Davis, who have started asking provocative questions about the carbon footprint of food. Those questions threaten to undermine some of the feel-good **locavore** story line, not to mention my weekend forays for produce. (A carbon footprint is a measure of the impact of human activities on the **environment** in terms of the amount of greenhouse gases produced.)

While the research is not yet complete, Tom Tomich, director of the University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, said the fact that something is local doesn't necessarily mean that it is better, environmentally speaking.

The distance that food travels from farm to plate is certainly important, he says, but so is how food is packaged, how it is grown, how it is processed and how it is transported to market.

Consider strawberries. If mass producers of strawberries ship their product to Chicago by truck, the fuel cost of transporting each carton of strawberries is relatively small, since it is tucked into the back along with thousands of others.

But if a farmer sells his strawberries at local farmers' markets in California, he ferries a much smaller amount by pickup truck to each individual market. Which one is better for the **environment**?

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Mr. Tomich said a strawberry distributor did the math on the back of an envelope and concluded that the Chicago-bound berries used less energy for transport. Maybe. Regardless, the story raises valid questions.

An Iowa State University study in 2003 found that most produce travels about 1,500 miles before it arrives in Iowa homes. But as the strawberry story suggests, some of it creates higher amounts of greenhouse gases than others. Transporting food by container ship or rail is relatively energy efficient. Shipping it by air or a 25-year-old pickup is not.

It gets stickier. If a low-carbon diet is your goal, Mr. Tomich suggests, it may be more effective to change your diet than to focus on eating local. After all, a plant-based diet tends to have a much smaller carbon footprint than a diet that includes meat. That is because a pound of steak requires many more pounds of grain as feed -- and all the carbon emissions associated with that, from fertilizers that are derived from fossil fuels to the fuel for the combines used for the harvest, he said.

And if you insist on eating meat, as I do, then perhaps it's better for the **environment** to eat poultry rather than red meat and grass-fed rather than grain-fed. Mr. Tomich's team is trying to sort that out.

Here are a couple of other puzzlers: Are canned tomatoes a better environmental choice in the winter than fresh tomatoes from abroad? If a product that contains heavy packaging reduces the amount of food waste, is that a better choice than one that is lightly packed and spoils quicker?

Gail Feenstra, a food system analyst at the Davis campus, says her group hopes the research will help consumers decide if buying local is better than buying organic food that has traveled hundreds of miles. "Maybe you can buy organic within a certain geographic range, and outside of that the trade-offs won't work anymore," Ms. Feenstra said.

At some point, the ethical maze can make you dizzy. But there was one line of inquiry from the California researchers that hit particularly close to home: the carbon impact of shoppers themselves.

Some people walk or take the subway to buy their groceries and then compost what they don't use. But, let's face it, most of us drive and toss the leftovers into the garbage disposal or the garbage can. In doing so, we may be contributing nearly a quarter of the greenhouse gases associated with our food, research has shown.

Here's why: Instead of going to the grocery store once a week and stocking up, many consumers are driving for groceries several times a week, if not every day, to all sorts of different stores. I'm no exception. My wife and I shop for groceries at Costco, Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, ShopRite, Starbucks, the farmers' market and the local delicatessen.

"THE old idea where our mother goes to the store on Wednesday or Thursday with all the coupons to buy all our groceries has changed," said Harvey Hartman, who tracks consumer behavior as founder and chief executive of the Hartman Group. "Now we are on our way home from work and we say, 'Oh, geez, what are we going to have for dinner?'"

If all the driving wasn't producing enough greenhouse gases, Mr. Tomich points out that an even bigger factor may be the amount of food that is tossed out, wasting all the energy that was used to produce and transport it.

Europeans are way ahead of us on this issue. Already, some grocery stores in England offer airplane labels, signifying that a product was shipped by air, or carbon reduction labels, showing that the manufacturer vows to reduce carbon emissions. Both labels will inevitably make their way to American stores.

Certainly, there are many reasons for eating **local food** -- from supporting local farmers to a desire for fresher, potentially tastier food. The research in California, however, offers the prospect of a more nuanced debate on eating a low-carbon diet. In the meantime, Ms. Feenstra said, the research has already led her to one conclusion:

Don't drive your sport utility vehicle to the farmers' market, buy one food item and drive home again. Even if you are using reusable bags.

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO: Produce at the huge Hunts Point Market in the Bronx. Researchers at the University of California, Davis, have been challenging assumptions about the carbon footprint of **local foods** versus those that are transported long distances.(PHOTOGRAPH BY JOYCE DOPKEEN/THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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