THE LOCAVORE'S DILEMMA

Growing evidence suggests that buying from farmers' markets isn't always a *healthy home run.* Matt Shea investigates

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVEN CHEE/BAUERSYNDICATION.COM; GETTY IMAGES

It's 10am on a Saturday and Brisbane's Davies Park is jammed with people. They stream through the gates pulling shopping trolleys and carrying empty canvas bags. A group of twenty-somethings coalesce excitedly around a coffee van, while scruffy young men, reeking of bad decisions from the night before, line up for gourmet sausages.

Thirty-year-old Lauren Johnson picks her way through the crowds, heading deep into the maze of stalls in search of fresh produce. Johnson lives just a short walk up the road and her reasons for shopping at Davies Park are simple. "They're smaller sellers and there's a personal touch. The other day I bought taro and the man told me how to cook it," she says. "I'd rather give my money to him than to an enormous company."

Davies Park Market is one of a growing number of community and farmers' markets springing up around the country. And Johnson is one of millions worldwide turning away from giant chain supermarkets and embracing the "locavore" lifestyle (a term coined by California-based chef Jessica Prentice) in an effort to reduce their carbon footprint, improve nutrition and support local farmers.

While the concept of eating locally is as old as humanity ("At one point in history, everybody on the planet ate locally," Prentice says), the past decade has seen a resurgence. By the mid-2000s, numerous dissenting voices (from the scary to the sensational and everything in between), were promoting the local movement. From Michael Pollan's 2006 bestselling book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, to the 2008 documentary film *Food, Inc.*, which examines corporate food production, snubbing the supermarket in favour of the neighbourhood food stand suddenly became the thing to do.

ELLE HEALTH KICK Discover five detoxifying foods at ELLE.com.au

But research doesn't quite back this momentum. Take the carbon footprint, perhaps the most pointed of associated issues. Think locally grown foods are always more eco-friendly than their imported cousins? Think again.

"People believe they're helping the environment when they consume local foods," says Steve Sexton, assistant professor of agricultural and resource economics at North Carolina State University. "But the accumulated evidence – which I would say isn't quite conclusive yet – suggests that they aren't." A 2006 life-cycle assessment by Lincoln University in Dunedin found that New Zealand lamb shipped 18,000km to London produced a quarter of the carbon dioxide emissions of lamb raised in the UK. It's an alarming statistic, but comes from the discovery that more than 80 per cent of carbon emissions associated with producing lamb take place on the farm, rather than during transport.

"PEOPLE BELIEVE THEY'RE HELPING THE ENVIRONMENT WHEN THEY CONSUME LOCAL FOODS, BUT THE ACCUMULATED EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT THEY AREN'T"

And that's before you take into account the extra land needed to grow foods in a system of total local production. This, in turn, leads to proportionately more carbon sources – fertiliser, insecticide and fuel use – and less space for carbon sinks (anything that absorbs more carbon that it releases) such as rainforests.

So if the market's harvest is not more eco-friendly, surely it's healthier? Well, not necessarily. In reality an apple is an apple is an apple. "It's an over-simplification to assume you'll always find better nutritional quality at the local market," says Elizabeth Mitcham, director of the UC Davis Postharvest Technology Center, who points to studies that show food maintains its "just-picked" freshness for quite some time when properly handled. "In one experiment, broccoli was stored for seven days at 0°C, and there was no loss of vitamin C," she says.

And large-scale producers – unlike local growers – have well-established procedures to safely pack their produce after harvest. "Take strawberries," Mitcham continues. "In California, they're generally picked right into the shipping container and palletised in the field, usually forced-air cooled down to 1-2°C within two hours of harvest and then shipped at 0°C. We monitored cross-country shipments and the temperature span remained quite good. Locally produced products could be handled just as carefully, but a lot of growers don't as they're so close to market that they don't feel it's important." The debate can also be seen through the prism of economics. Sexton is concerned about what he sees as the logical fallacies in the local food movement, starting with how a less specialised, more localised food production system may have a detrimental effect on the economy and health.

"Fruits and vegetables are particularly sensitive to their growing conditions," Sexton points out, hence why Idaho grows 30 per cent of America's potatoes and tropical Queensland produces 90 per cent of Australia's bananas. "Only at a very great cost can we overcome temperature, climate, rainfall, soil quality, pestilence and so forth. If we move crops into areas that aren't well-suited to growing them, then it will require proportionately more inputs and their prices are going to rise. A system of local production is going to increase the cost of food, which is going to cause consumers to shift towards less nutritious diets."

Sexton doesn't begrudge anyone for his or her choice of local foods ("I frequent farmers' markets myself") but claims that ignoring interstate and worldwide trade flies in the face of the basic principles of free market economics. "The gains from trade are probably greatest in agriculture because they're based upon natural resource endowments that are immutable to human powers," Sexton says. "The virtue of trade is that it benefits both parties. A local production system will not just impoverish the local community, but also their trading partners."

So what does this mean for Johnson and the millions of other people who hit up the local markets regularly? Probably not much. Unlike supermarkets, they're more than just an annoying stop on a list of Sunday errands.

"There's so much more on offer than fruit and vegies," says Amy Simpson, 28. "The environment allows for open dialogue between a consumer and the grower or maker. Seeing what they're doing with the local produce and having the opportunity to engage with them about it is infinitely more inspiring than reading from a recipe."

Johnson agrees. "I love the atmosphere," she says, as music and laughter drift across the park. "You come down, sit with your friends, meander at your own pace. It's a ritual." With obesity rates in Australia on the rise, healthy rituals have never been more important – but if you don't make it to the market one weekend, don't begrudge a trip to the grocery store. It may actually be back in fashion soon – and who doesn't want to be ahead of the trends? □