

The Rise of the Locavores

By Sophie Braccini

The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors has been working with the County Agricultural Commissioner and County Health Services Department to develop a food purchasing policy that maximizes the use of locally grown fresh foods at County hospitals and other facilities. Are they implementing a “locavores” mandate? Not quite, but they seem to be in sync with many residents, retailers and restaurants in Lamorinda who strive to consume (or sell) locally grown food as often as possible.

The term “locavore” was coined about three years ago by a group of four Bay Area women who wanted to eat only food produced within one hundred miles of their homes. The movement grew, rapidly surfing on the wave of the call for fresher, tastier food that does not require too much energy to produce. Most “green” movements promote “locavoring.”

“I try to be a locavore,” says Bart Carr, co-founder of Sustainable Lafayette, “the very best is to eat from one’s garden and we’ve grown summer crops over the past years.” When his garden is not operational, the Lafayette resident goes to the Farmers’ Markets in Walnut Creek or Moraga, and when shopping in supermarkets he asks for the origin of the organic foods that are available there. Another of his favorite spots is the Hurst farm on St Mary’s Road (across from the baseball field). The Hursts grow and sell vegetables in season from their half-acre plot.

This local family farm is one among a few others in Lamorinda. The Hauser family in Moraga cultivates a small farm on a one-third acre property. They sell their produce at the Moraga Farmers’ Market on Sunday mornings.

Wannabe locavores have a large range of motivations, which can be health related: “Eating locally provides a good variety of nutrients as the available fruits and vegetables change from season to season,” says real estate broker and Moraga resident Ben Olsen. “As a vegetarian family that prefers organic food, we end up being locavores almost by default. We get the majority of our produce from our garden, from a community garden or from local vendors at the Farmers’ Market.” Olsen feels blessed to be living in a place that is surrounded by some of the greatest food and beverages on Earth. Here we can get nearly any food item from the Central Valley, and have access to wonderful wines from Napa and beers from the dozens of breweries in the area.

For others, eating local foods is part of a deeper experience. “I go to the Farmers’ Market each Sunday morning for the sense of community it affords,” says Moraga resident Rob Lucacher.

“It provides a closer relationship with the people who grow our food, a better understanding of how our food is grown, and the role that food plays in binding us together as a community. I especially like to peruse the fish stall at the market as it gives me a real time understanding of what’s happening on the water when I can’t spend the day fishing myself.”

Lucacher confides that improving his carbon footprint comes only as a second thought and he is not the only one who questions the energy efficiency of locavoring. Surprisingly enough, from the University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program came the news that local foods are not necessarily energy efficient.

Gail Feenstra is a food system analyst for the Program; her task is to evaluate the carbon footprint of food. “It’s not straight forward,” says the researcher, “we have to calculate the energy that goes into fertilizers and pesticides, whether the crop is grown outside or in a hothouse, what packaging and transportation system was used, or the possible wastes. The fact that a food is local is only one of the components.”

As a rule, Feenstra believes that organic food is less energy consuming, but the low yield of this kind of agriculture can throw the balance off. “There are other things that people need to be thinking of when it comes to their eating habits,” she adds, “a vegetarian diet has less impact, and among meats, red is the most energy consuming.”

In spite of the doubts and ambiguities, she believes that the locavore



Richard Hauser of Moraga at his booth at the Moraga Farmers’ Market

movement has a positive impact, “it’s making people more aware of the limits of our natural resources, and shows them that we have the opportunity to change our behaviors,” Feenstra concludes.

The carbon footprint is not the foremost concern of the Board of Supervisors; locavoring makes sense because it supports local farmers. Katherine Lyddan, who participates on the County’s task force, is the Executive Director of the Brentwood Farming Land Trust.

For Lyddan, a Moraga mom, convincing people to eat locally produced food is a matter of survival. Brentwood is the largest farming region closest to Lamorinda, totalling 12,000 acres, but according to Lyddan, “The farmers were having a hard time making a living in local small farms on the urban edge.”

She highlights that local food is fresher, has a higher nutrient value, creates a strong relationship with the seasons and the environment and reduces the distance that food travels. “As a matter of national and food security it is important to feed ourselves,” insists Lyddan. “To feed the Bay Area, we probably need the Central Valley,” she believes, “but not strawberries from Chile.”

The recent incident of salmonella-contaminated tomatoes supports the argument that it is safer to know from where your food comes.

If health, national security, local economy, energy efficiency, a sense of place and connection to the earth are not enough reasons for you to become a locavore, most locavores will tell you that locally grown food just tastes better.

Locavore Resources:

- Local nurseries to get your garden going.
- Farmers’ Markets, Orinda on Saturday morning, Moraga on Sunday morning.
- Supermarkets: Safeway gets its corn from Brentwood, ask for other products; some Longs Drugs try to get their dairy and produce locally, ask the management; Diablo Foods, Trader Joes: Check labels and ask management to encourage local products.
- Restaurants: Gigi, Chow, Amoroma and Terzetto advertise use of local products.
- Individual farms: Hurst family, St Mary’s Road. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) delivers individual baskets weekly to subscribers. “Outside the Box” in Walnut Creek has a drop off in Lafayette. Brentwood Land Trust, for U-picks and visits: www.brentwoodaglandtrust.org