

“Eat local” may be a catchy slogan but there’s a lot more to choosing sustainable food. **Sue White** untangles a tricky topic.

GOING THE *extra mile*

100-mile foodies. Canadian couple Alisa Smith and James MacKinnon set themselves the challenge of sourcing their food from within a 100 mile (160 km) radius of their home in Vancouver. They documented their experiences in a best-selling book.

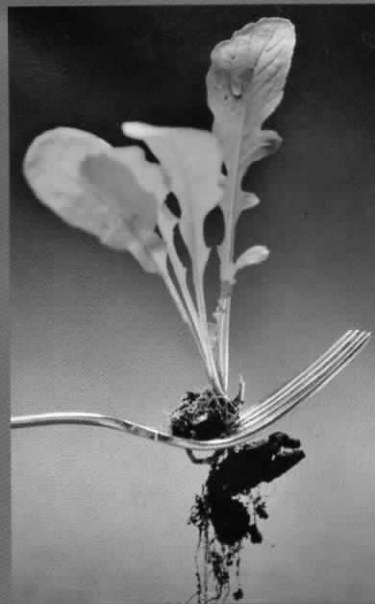
Food Connect, a delivery service which matches hungry residents in Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide with local, organic produce, factor kilometres into the equation but don’t adhere to strict cut-offs.

Sydney Food Connect representative Julian Lee says that while local produce is defined as that within a 5-hour radius, the fruit and vegetables that turn up in Sydneysiders’ boxes typically travel less than 200 km in total. So he’s not overly concerned about the few times a year a mango or pineapple from up north makes its way to their customers.

MILE HIGH VS LIFE CYCLE

The overriding criticism of food miles as a sole measure of a food’s environmental credentials is that the distance food travels forms only a small fraction of its total environmental impact. New Zealand knows only too well how the food miles concept can work against an otherwise efficient industry.

In a 2007 report, researchers at New Zealand’s Lincoln University found that if life cycle analyses were used to compare the environmental impact of products like apples, onions, lamb, and dairy instead of food miles alone, NZ’s exports suddenly looked a whole lot more eco-friendly. Energy-efficient production processes and less pesticide use saw all 4 products come up trumps over the emissions of their European counterparts, even once transport was factored in.



What to do?

If you really want your food choices to count, you need to continually ask questions of your supplier about the entire process, not simply where something was grown.

Ask the buyers at your food cooperative, supermarket, or farmers’ market, how was this farmed? Did you use sprays? What’s the impact of this produce over its entire life cycle? How are workers cared for and how is the land supported in the long term?

If the answers come back from a source that you trust that the item in question is certified organic, local and sustainable overall, fantastic. If not, prioritise buying certified organic and fair trade while you continue to investigate options.

You may not be able to satisfy all your ethical requirements with one supplier, but asking questions will prompt them to consider the issues, creating a greater chance of your choices impacting the supply chain over time. True, it’s a process that fills your mind before your belly, but this active inquiry may just be the most important food journey you can take.



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It surely wasn’t always the case that tucking into a hearty meal involved a strenuous session of mental gymnastics. But for today’s eco-conscious eaters the competing ethics of organic production, fair trade principles, sustainability and locality present a quandary: what to serve on a planet-friendly plate?

To food mile converts, also known as locavores, the answer is obvious. Eat local. The movement has gained significant traction by highlighting the transport emissions generated by shifting food from the farm and factory to your plate. It’s no wonder then, that farmers’ markets selling locally grown seasonal produce are experiencing a renaissance and that eco-conscious restaurants have begun to boast local menus.

The simplicity of food miles is almost a relief for consumers: calculate how far your food has travelled using the assumption that food from far-flung locales is bad, while food from nearby is good. Right? Hmm, maybe, sometimes, well, it depends.

HOW IS ‘LOCAL’ DEFINED?

First, definitions of local are elastic. Australia’s locavores likely enjoy slightly looser boundaries than the original

G TIP

WHAT ABOUT ORGANIC?

If that isn't enough to set your brain spinning, there's another angle to consider.

The chair of the Organic Federation of Australia, Andre Leu, says that while there are many benefits to local food (particularly its freshness), he believes a holistic view is vital.

Local is not always organic, and it's important to consider that organic farming brings significant environmental benefits, aside from the obvious elimination of harmful sprays.

"Every 1 per cent increase in organic matter in the soil is equivalent to water storage of 160,000 L per ha," says Leu. "If you look at Australian

farms, most store 160,000 L in a season, but a good organic farm can catch 800,000 L in a season."

PLAYING FAIR

In the last issue of **G**, Cameron Neil from Fairtrade Labelling Australia and New Zealand pointed out that Kenyan farmers are being unfairly discriminated against thanks to the food miles concept.

Their cut flowers, produced with sun, water and people rather than the chemical- and energy-intensive European methods have been struck off UK shopping lists as unsustainable because they're grown far away, despite their overall impact being 20 per cent less emissions intensive.

"Food miles aren't actually taking us towards the type of system we need to achieve in terms of climate change, food sustainability, food security or outcomes for farmers and workers," says Neil. "We can't allow lazy, easy concepts to take hold with unintended consequences."

While using food miles as the single criteria for sustainability is problematic, the concept of local food can be valuable, Neil says, if the issues involved are clearly understood by the consumer. "It doesn't mean buying from the multinational on the corner. It's about the guys from the Mornington Peninsula benefitting from your purchase. It also involves local communities being developed, and fair trade is about that."

*Sue White is a regular contributor to **G** who is looking forward to growing her own fruit and veg in her local community garden.*

Food miles aren't actually taking us towards the type of system we need to achieve in terms of climate change [or] food sustainability.

Brush up on your eco-labels and certifications so you can sort the greenwash from the real deal.

Grow as much of your own food as you can. This way you can be sure it's grown sustainably (presumably under fair trade conditions!) with zero food miles attached.

GREENEST

Do your research and find suppliers who stock organic, local and fair trade food.

GREENER

When faced with the choice between local or certified organic food, opt for organic.

GREEN

ISTOCKPHOTO

Local food low-down

LOCAL IS:

- In Australia, within a 5-hour radius of the point of purchase.
- More likely to be seasonal (which means it needed less artificial coaxing through the production cycle).
- A wonderful way to connect the food on your plate with a tangible person or process.

LOCAL ISN'T:

- Food on demand. Buying local connects you to the seasons. Eating this way means recognising that food is not something that simply appears from an anonymous location on command.

LOCAL MAY NOT BE:

- Sustainable, organic or produced under fair trade conditions. Being closer to the source makes it easier to ask these questions (and hopefully, have them answered). If the item you want is all of these things as well as local, you're onto an eco-winner, so spread the word!