

Eat local organic food if you like, but don't kid yourself that it's 'green'



Don't get me wrong, I love farmers' markets. I love going to the fashionable one in Borough, London, and that wonderful rich feeling you get whenever you don't buy anything. And I love going to the one near me in south London and bantering and haggling with the fish man till he succumbs to giving me some amazing bargain like five decent-size Dover sole for a tenner.

I also really like the idea of putting money direct into the farmer's pocket rather than helping finance yet another bloody edge-of-town Tesco. And I like the espresso man with his espresso machine. And the jolly sausage ladies. And the free-range eggs. And the Eastern European man who gives me a discount on the veg. All these are the kind of good reason as to why one might support one's local farmers' market. But what isn't a good reason is this notion many people have that by shopping local they're helping to save the planet. Because they're not. Quite the opposite is true, in fact.

People obsessed with shopping locally — I learn from the US blogger and columnist Stephen Budiansky — are called 'Locavores'. Locavores shop at their local farmers' market with much the same smug, sanctimonious air some people wear in church — and for much the same reason. They believe that they are doing the Lord's work. (Or, perhaps, in this case, Mother Gaia's work.) They are lowering their carbon footprint. They are living 'sustainably'. They are boosting the local economy. They are — by promoting self-sufficiency — doing their bit for 'food security'. And in every case they are almost entirely wrong.

Of course one can quite see why Locavores think this way. Not only is it the kind of guff that's fed to them by all those features in weekend supplements about City couples who've quit the rat-race and just look how marvellously apple-cheeked their curly-headed Boden catalogue kids are now! But it's also what I call a perfect 'I reckon' argument: one of those truths so self-evident that if you were down the pub

you wouldn't even need to check up the facts via the internet on your iPhone. You could just begin your statement with absolute confidence: 'I reckon...'

Because really, it stands to reason dunnit? Of course green beans air-freighted in from Kenya have got to be less eco-friendly than the tough but worthy organic ones grown just down the road. Of course we need to encourage our local farmers and boost self-sufficiency.

Let's deal with the 'food miles' argument first. You hear this one touted a lot by celebrity chefs promoting 'seasonality'. It's a disgrace, they say, that we should have out-of-season raspberries flown in from Chile or asparagus from Spain. We should do what our forebears did in the good old

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days and eat only in season. That way we can recapture the magical excitement of that glorious moment in summer when the first English asparagus appears in our greengrocer's. That way we can reduce our carbon footprint, blah, blah di blah.

Well I'm with them on the asparagus, though in my view whether or not one eats it in or out of season should be a personal lifestyle choice rather than a compulsory diktat imposed according to the whim of Gordon Ramsay or Hugh Fearnley Whittingstall. But the 'lower food miles = more virtuous' part is an utter nonsense, as several research papers have demonstrated.

One of the key points to remember is that, of the total energy costs of producing food, transportation from producer to retailer (from farmer to shop if you prefer) represents only a small fraction — around 4 per cent according to a 2007 study in the US. If you're worried about carbon footprints, the real menace is your car journey to the shops. According to research by the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural

Affairs (Defra), consumer shopping trips accounted for 48 per cent of 'food miles' in Britain. Air freight amounted to less than 1 per cent.

What the 'I reckon' argument also overlooks is comparative advantage. Which is to say that hot, sunny countries can often grow food (and other plants, like flowers) more cheaply and efficiently than cold, overcast ones. For example, growing British tomatoes under heated glass emits four times more CO₂ than growing Spanish ones outdoors; roses grown in Kenya have a carbon footprint six times smaller than those grown under glass in Holland. And even more amazingly — as Matt Ridley records in his *The Rational Optimist* — a New Zealand lamb requires as quarter as much energy to get on to a London plate as a Welsh one.

The self-reliance argument doesn't stand up either. As Budiansky points out: 'Nothing is more vulnerable than self-reliance: one storm that destroys the crop one year, one local outbreak of an insect pest or blight — and if you have no other source to shift to, the result is famine. This was the story throughout human history before modern transportation and commerce networks.'

Budiansky's historical point is well-made, as too is his argument that by shunning intensively produced food which has been grown in countries with the most suitable climates or using artificial fertilisers and technologies such as GM, Locavores are actually helping to destroy the rainforest: 'Without modern farming, we literally would have cut down every acre of rainforest just to grow the staple food crops that feed the world.'

Yet the Locavores refuse to understand that by rejecting GM and making such virtues of 'local' and 'organic' they are part of the problem, not the solution. So by all means, as I do, support your local farmers' market. But do so with a shudder of guilt rather than a warm glow of self-righteousness — for, remember, you're killing the planet.