

Beyond Local

by Frances Forrest, Kerr Center Intern

When it comes to agricultural sustainability, most of us will readily agree that eating as locally and organically as possible now will save our children from the dismal food future that industrial agriculture all but guarantees.

A Google search for “local foods” brings up endless blog postings, organizations, and editorials, which all affirm that consumers care now more than ever about where their food comes from, and are often more well-versed in food miles and carbon footprints than livestock management or soil science.

Though it’s not often recognized, these are interrelated aspects of the same system. I can’t help but ask if the local food movement – if any movement – alone will be the panacea it is sometimes made out to be.

The nature of most movements makes it too easy to address the symptoms of a problem but ignore the solution. As Americans, and as humans, we are in desperate need of a paradigm shift regarding how our food is grown and by whom.

To most people, especially in cities, local is just added to a mental list of things to look for at the supermarket, along with organic, natural, free, whatever the dietary fad may be these days. The language of the movement appears to limit local food to a purchasing choice, a bumper sticker, a pamphlet.

As far as I can see, the local food movement does not cultivate in minds the kind of holistic, thoughtful approach to eating (which, as Wendell Berry points out, is an agricultural act) our communities drastically need. We need to go beyond local.

As an avid proponent and practitioner (to the extent that I know how) of sustainable agriculture, I cannot help but applaud the efforts of those who choose to go through the trouble and expense of seeking out locally grown food from farmers in their community.

I am ever grateful for the market gardener who unfailingly shows up every Saturday morning to “pile it high and kiss it goodbye.”

I am consistently astounded by the ability of the Oklahoma Food Cooperative to distribute food from over one hundred different in-state producers to its nearly two thousand members each month, relying only on the volunteers and the invisible yet persistent pull of the market – the aggregate of likeminded buyers and sellers who comprise it.

Very few of these individuals would object to being called a “locavore,” a term coined in 2005 to describe members of various movements centered on eating close to home (although “Oklavore” may be a better term).

But amidst all the good being done to preserve the invaluable relationship between farmer and consumer and to ensure the legitimacy of local, place-based food systems and communities, there are

also prodigious commercial and political entities fighting to maintain the status quo. Frustratingly, these entities are becoming harder and harder to recognize.

Just as “organic” was co-opted by the food industry to serve its own needs by the creation of pervasive and often cumbersome certification processes for small farmers, now even a word as seemingly unambiguous as “local” is becoming subject to the semantic whims of advertising campaigns intended to corner an even bigger sector of the market.

This May, snack food giant Frito Lay announced a dubious new ad campaign – “Local Lay’s” – which ostensibly highlights the more than eighty farms (in states as distant from one another as California to Florida) from which the company buys potatoes for its chips.

In a recent press release regarding the new marketing of the popular snack as “local food,” the company’s vice-president of potato chip marketing, Dave Skena, reveals that “we are closer to home than people might expect.” Presumably Skena is referring to cases in which at least some of the potatoes bought are grown and processed in the same state.

A number of short regionally aired TV ads spotlight several unpretentious-sounding farmer types extolling the virtues of local food; the proximity of Lay’s processing plants to their potato fields is a “natural fit.”

Infuriated and somewhat confused about the company’s interpretation

of “local,” I puzzled over what exactly was at the heart of this expensive-looking campaign.

The last time I checked, Oklahoma was just as far from Florida as it ever has been. If nothing had changed in terms of location or production, and the states hadn’t moved, how were the familiar foil packages lining gas station and supermarket shelves now suddenly “local?”

Utilizing one of the company’s nifty online gadgets that allows users to determine the location of different potato suppliers and processing plants across the nation, I saw that out of the 2.8 billion total pounds of potatoes purchased by Lay’s last year, Oklahoma grew 7 million pounds.

However, no plant exists in the state to turn these potatoes into chips; they are generally, though not necessarily, taken to Kansas or Texas and processed there. For the really dedicated, the “Chip Tracker” will pop out the location of the plant where any given bag was made with a simple entry of its UPC.

Call me traditional, but I’ve always taken “local” as referring to, at the very least, a thing which was grown or fashioned from the resources immediately surrounding a place – a locality, in effect. Most importantly, the term is user-defined; what’s local for one person or community won’t be local hundreds of miles away.

The existence of potato chips grown and fried in the same state doesn’t negate the existence of potato chips fried in distant states. “Lay’s Local” has taken the idea of locally sourced food and subverted it, where in this

case “local” doesn’t necessarily mean that a product was grown or processed somewhere nearby, but simply *somewhere*.

When the idea of local food ceases to denote anything but food that is grown locally, it can mean anything, which is to say it means nothing at all. The practice of subverting meaning has become a hallmark of agribusiness and the food industry, and it serves well the ends of these co-evolved entities.

Some of the intended market of this ad campaign saw through the corporate doublespeak with which it attempted to enchant them, but it stands to reason that at least a few “locavores” slept better at night, dreaming of all those saved food miles.

In his essay, *In Distrust of Movements*, Wendell Berry insists that we must “enlarge the consciousness and the conscience of the economy. Our economy needs to know – and care – what it is doing.” Knowing and caring about the way the world is used would appear to go hand-in-hand, but between the marketing schemes, corporate spin, and downright lies, a huge disconnect exists between what we are doing and what we *think* we are doing.

The economies of developed nations have become synonymous with “industry,” which, in its unwavering commitment to unfettered growth and “progress,” erases to the consumer any history its products might bear, be they televisions or potatoes.

As globalization tightens its grip on the world economy, the distance

between the person who grows the food and the person who eats it continues to increase, while the ability of either party to do anything about it all but disappears.

Chances are you’ve by now received much instruction in the language of one popular movement or another, promoting well intentioned solutions to ameliorate the symptoms of a corporate food economy – buy local, buy organic, “know your farmer,” ad infinitum.

Joel Salatin, a farmer in Virginia who has risen to the status of demi-god in the world of sustainable agriculture, describes his 550 ecologically-farmed acres as “beyond organic.” Rejecting the popular notion that “organic” can be an end in itself, Salatin laments the dilution of organic agriculture from a holistic philosophy of responsible farm management to a government certification process fraught with fees and inspectors at every administrative level.

The diversity of his aptly named “Polyface” farm simply doesn’t make sense in an industrial context, much as some of his practices (such as a transparency policy in which one can come visit Polyface for oneself, anytime) could just bring Big Ag to a screeching halt.

In much the same way, we should attempt to go “beyond local” by regarding local food as a necessary means to an end – healthy, sustainable communities – and less as yet another adjectival designation to scout for on the stickers our food bears from the supermarket.

It is the latter mindset that is satisfied with misleading marketing stunts, that asks no more questions, and that continues to funnel money into an industry that systematically destroys viable communities.

The former mindset, to the extent that it can, asks questions about how farmland is used, not just how far food has traveled. It feels an even greater sense of duty to be the most discerning of local food, especially animal products, because it realizes the consumer and the farmer share the same air and water.

In going “beyond local,” as it were, it of course it acknowledges that consumers can do a limited amount of good in the context of an industrialized economy, and demands an economic system will allow for the existence of small, diversified farms and artisan producers.

Mr. Berry reminds us that, “in modern times, every one of us is a member of the economy of everybody else.” Like it or not, potatoes have to come from somewhere, and everywhere is someone’s local.