

Getting What You Pay for: Affording Healthy Food

Today's food-insecure and hungry Oklahomans face a web of paradoxical barriers in their attempts to eat enough, and eat right, on limited incomes. (See Chapter 3 for a definition and discussion of food insecurity).

The people with the least money to spend on food are often also among the most likely to suffer from obesity and all its related health risks. They pay the highest prices for food, yet can least afford it.

Such self-contradictory obstacles to community food security are woven from several closely connected causes: some economic, some geographic, and some educational.

Enough to Go Around?

The first obstacle to food security is the dollars-and-cents kind: how much money do people need to afford a healthy diet? The affordability of good food is perhaps the most commonly recognized (and most debated) barrier to food security, as food-aid advocates battle budget cutters in state and federal governments.

The question is a crucial one for the future of Oklahoma, as is a related one: What can individuals and communities do to make it possible for low-income people to eat a healthy diet? Is it just a question of money, or are there other approaches that would help?

**For produce, fresh offerings
are often cheaper. . .**

Oklahoma needs to find answers. The state leads the nation in some measures of hunger, and ranks well above national averages for several obesity-related diseases. [1] In Oklahoma, only 15% of adults eat the recommended five-a-day of fruits and vegetables.



Empty Pockets, Empty Calories

People with less to spend tend to go for whatever's cheapest – and in the U.S. food system, the cheapest calories are definitely not the healthiest. For instance, according to USDA research, fats and oils are the foods that most need cutting back in the U.S. diet. [2] Yet these are also the cheapest products on this country's supermarket shelves. [3,4]

In contrast, people in the United States don't eat enough fruits and vegetables, and low-income households consume fewer still. Part of the reason is cost. [3] With less money to go around, people on lower incomes spend more of their disposable income on food, but less per person on fresh fruits and vegetables.

Households in the lowest 20% of incomes in the



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country spent about 50 cents per person per day on fruits and vegetables, compared to 68 cents for people in the top 20% income bracket. [5,6]

However, the proportion of lower income households' food spending that goes to fruits and vegetables (17.9%) is about the same as that of someone in a higher income tax bracket (17.5%). The actual dollar amount spent in that category – and thus the amount of those food consumed – is lower simply because less affluent people spend less on food overall. [5,6]

Recent studies back this up. The USDA's Economic Research Service found that "there were major income-related differences in the consumption of lettuce and lettuce-based salads, melons, berries, and other fruit." Women in the highest income group were twice as likely as the women in the lower-income group to eat salad and fruit on a given day. Other USDA surveys have also found that higher quality diets went hand in hand with higher income. [7]

This begs the question: Given the lower amount of money available to them, can low-income people afford to eat a healthy diet?

Opinion among public health researchers and advocates is divided. Some say it may be necessary to spend more money, [7] while others point to education as key to achieving a healthy diet.

Not What You Make, But How You Spend It

Because lower income people are less likely to eat healthy diets, they therefore suffer from some of the highest rates of obesity and Type II diabetes. They stretch their food budgets by buying so-called "energy-dense foods" – foods high in sugar and/or fat (such as potato chips, chocolate and doughnuts) which are cheap and also well liked. [7]

Because the cost of food is an important factor in food-buying decisions, especially for low-income people, [8] some government and private programs attempt to educate low-income consumers about how to make the most of their food dollars through careful shopping.

In fact, some USDA research suggests that it may be possible, by choosing the right items, for shoppers to spend just 12% (for low-income shoppers, 16%) of their daily food expenditures on fruits and vegetables – while still meeting dietary recommendations (three servings of fruit and four servings of vegetables per day). [9]

These researchers say that careful grocery shoppers can zero in on certain fruits and vegetables that cost less than other seemingly cheaper, and assuredly less healthy, options.

They also point out that high per-pound prices can cause shoppers to perceive fruits and vegetables as more expensive than other choices. But because many fruits and vegetables contain several servings per pound, they are more affordable than the price tag might seem to suggest (see table).

The form of food also influences its purchase price. For produce, fresh offerings are often cheaper than canned, frozen, or other preserved alternatives. [9]

Thus, while fruits and vegetables are still not always the least expensive offerings on grocery store shelves, many are much more affordable than they are commonly perceived to be. Apples and bananas (at

In Comparison: Price of Fresh, Frozen, Canned

Cost per pound and cost per serving for a few popular fruits and vegetables that can be grown in Oklahoma. In most cases, the costs of fresh, frozen, and canned are also compared.

Prices per serving are after adjusting for waste (non-edible rinds, seeds, etc). A pound yields anywhere from two to fourteen servings. Based on 1999 average prices. [9,17]

	Fresh		Frozen		Canned	
	\$/lb.	\$/serving	\$/lb.	\$/serving	\$/lb.	\$/serving
Blackberries	3.94	0.66	2.97	0.66	2.71	0.92
Spinach	1.35	0.21	1.15	0.41	0.62	0.30
Peaches	0.97	0.21	1.99	0.73	0.93	0.25
Green beans	1.07	0.19	1.70	0.32	0.75	0.18
Pears	0.88	0.21	-	-	0.95	0.25
Zucchini squash	1.42	0.24	-	-	-	-

In *How Much Do Americans Pay for Fruits and Vegetables?* researchers from USDA's Economic Research Service used 1999 household purchase data from all types of retail outlets to estimate an annual, national retail price per pound and the price per serving for 69 fresh and processed fruits and 85 fresh and processed vegetables.

More than half of the fruits and vegetables were estimated to cost 25 cents or less per serving in 1999. Eighty-six percent of the vegetables and 78% of the fruit cost less than 50 cents a serving – that's 127 different ways to eat a serving of fruits and vegetables for less than the price of a 3-ounce candy bar. (The authors estimate today's prices would be about ten percent higher on average.) [17]

eleven and seventeen cents per serving, respectively) are some of the cheapest fruits; potatoes and cabbage (six and four cents per serving) are others. [9]

While fruits and vegetables are still not the least expensive offerings on grocery store shelves, many are much more affordable than they are commonly perceived to be.

Even when considering a single food item, the price differs depending on who's selling it. The places that are commonly perceived as offering the best deals can actually be more expensive.

As a comparison of fresh produce prices at Tulsa-area retail food stores with those at the Cherry Street Farmers' Market found, super centers and supermarkets charge more per pound for most fresh produce items than local farmers selling direct to the consumer. [10]

In one study of three Massachusetts community-sup-

ported agriculture (CSA) programs, where consumers bought directly from farmers, supermarket produce cost 60 to 150% more than the same items purchased through a CSA. [11]

That observation opens one path for lower-income families with access to home food preservation equipment to stock up on affordable, nutritious food items while they're in season, and freeze or can a surplus to continue eating well during the winter months.

A Penny Saved Is a Mouthful Learned

While cost is certainly a factor in what low-income Oklahomans buy at the grocery store, research shows that other factors also impact food choices.

One important reason that people with less to spend end up eating fewer healthy foods is that they live further from more affordable sources of those foods. In both rural areas and inner city neighborhoods, food retail outlets with more affordably priced produce are scarcer than in affluent suburban zones, [12] as are farmers' markets. (See Chapter 5.)

Other barriers that keep low-income people from eating healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables include the time and effort needed to prepare them, lack of cooking skills, lack of storage space, and just plain not liking them or being unfamiliar with them. [12]



Oklahoma Grown for 5 (or More) A Day

Oklahoma produces an abundance of fresh produce - so much that it ships large amounts of some crops to buyers outside the state. Yet Oklahomans' diets are deficient in many of the nutrients supplied by these same fruits and vegetables.

What if Oklahomans got two of their two to three recommended daily servings of fruit from Oklahoma blackberries during the month-long blackberry season?

Per capita consumption of blackberries would rise from 0.5 servings to 8 servings of blackberries per person per year.

That increase in demand would take the acreage of blackberries in the state from 130 to 660, and boost sales from just over \$1 million to more than \$5 million.

Likewise, what if Oklahomans got one-third of the recommended six weekly servings of dark green vegetables from spinach grown on Oklahoma farms?

People would need to eat 83 more servings of spinach on top of the 17 that they're currently putting away in one year.

With that increase in spinach consumption, an additional 2,800 acres would be needed to grow spinach, over and above the 1,500 already used for spinach farming. Sales would soar from their current \$6.7 million value to \$19.1 million. [18]

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Addressing these barriers through education is a good first step to healthful eating. Exposing families to unfamiliar foods through taste testing a variety of fruits and vegetables is one strategy, as is teaching quick and easy ways to prepare them. [12]

Such tips are the stock in trade of the Community Nutrition Education Program (CNEP), which works to get such knowledge into the hands and minds of the people who need it most. [13] The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service also has a wide range of educational materials available to assist lower-income people with dietary decision-making.

Some Oklahoma-based food aid groups also engage in education. With each of its weekly deliveries of food to needy families, the Oscar Romero Catholic Worker House also leaves a copy of its *Better Times Almanac of Useful Information*, a compendium of smart strategies for buying food and recipes for preparing it. [14]

The Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma boasts demonstration gardens and runs Oklahoma City's community gardening program, on the principle that the best deal of all on food is growing it yourself. [15]

There's little doubt that education pays off, literally, in bringing adequate, healthy diets within reach of people of more limited means. Surveys have found that education has a stronger effect on quality of diet than income. [7] One USDA study found that the single largest factor in countering the trend toward reduced spending on fresh fruits and vegetables, regardless of income, is a college-educated head of household. [16]

Grasping the thread

Oklahoma's present tapestry of food insecurity is woven of paradox, knotted with complicated problems. Yet a community food security perspective helps to identify certain economic and educational threads that, when pulled, can bring down the whole sorry curtain, creating opportunities to weave a new food system that makes healthy food affordable for all Oklahomans.

The Teacher Only Sets the Table: The Community Nutrition Education Program

Knowledge, the old saying has it, is power. Seen through the lens of community food security, knowledge also means empowerment, by way of improved nutrition.

With precisely those ends in mind, a dedicated group of Oklahoma health and nutrition professionals are working to spread knowledge of healthy eating among the state's lower-income families.

Their program, called the Community Nutrition Education Program, or CNEP, teaches limited-resource families how to eat healthy on a tight budget.

Every week, CNEP educators in 39 Oklahoma counties, both urban and rural, visit one-on-one with families, usually in homes, and occasionally in small "learning circles" in churches, vo-tech schools, extension offices, commodity sites, and whatever other locations present themselves. (See map.)

Over 90% of participants recorded changes toward a healthier diet as a result of their CNEP education.

Each visit covers a lesson on a topic chosen by the participants, from a list including topics like food safety, meal preparation skills, food budgeting, and general nutrition. All the lesson topics cover the general theme of eating a healthy diet on a limited budget.

Families participate voluntarily, and can opt for a long- or short-term CNEP enrollment. The long-term program is meant to provide an in-depth education to families who are committed to better health. It runs for six to eleven months, during which participants complete at least 16 lesson topics.

The short-term program helps families who are more

mobile, or otherwise unable to commit for a longer period, with short-term nutritional and resource management needs. Over a two to five month term, participants complete lessons on the food guide pyramid, label reading, budgeting, meal planning, food safety, and one of three optional topics.

On average, participants who complete a CNEP program are enrolled for seven months and finish 15 lessons. CNEP doesn't consider its mission complete if participants only improve their knowledge of nutrition. Rather, the program tracks the effect that knowledge has on the food and nutritional choices – and changes – that they make in their daily lives.

The Power of Change

Those impacts are significant. To measure them, CNEP uses two main tools. One of these is the 24-hour food recall, in which participants list the foods they've eaten during the past day.

The other main measurement tool is the CNEP survey, which records participants' practices in resource management, food safety, and nutrition. Participants measure their nutritional know-how once when they enter a CNEP program, and again when they finish.

The changes are impressive. In 2005, CNEP reached nearly 6,000 Oklahoma families, including nearly 14,000 youth. Over 90% of participants recorded changes toward a healthier diet as a result of their CNEP education.

CNEP graduates' consumption of fruits, vegetables, and calcium/dairy foods went up by an average of 32%.

Forty percent of graduates had enough food to make it to the end of the month more often than before, and nearly one third reported that their children ate breakfast more often.

Their intakes of important nutrients, such as iron, calcium, and vitamins A, C, and B6, all increased.

Up Close and Personal

A good part of CNEP's knack for effecting this kind of change in the lives of the families it serves is its unique teacher pool. The teachers, called "Nutrition Education Assistants," or NEAs, come from the same community as their pupils.

Often, NEAs have received public food assistance themselves in the past, and many are graduates of CNEP educational programs. This gives families enrolled in CNEP programs the comfort and connection of knowing that their teachers have faced similar straits in their own lives.

The close contact of in-home visits reinforces that bond. "Very few programs actually go into the home," says Garrard. "It's more of a teachable moment – in their kitchens, on their turf."

Some of these strategies are as simple as persuading kids to snack on fresh fruits instead of processed sweets.

Teaching in this setting, she explains, allows NEAs to become intimately involved as family "nutrition coaches," enabling them to devise any number of personally tailored strategies for overcoming the obstacles that limit lower-income families' access to healthy food.

Some of these strategies are as simple as persuading kids to snack on fresh fruits instead of processed sweets. Others are a shade sneakier, such as adding corn to chili, or grating carrots into the peanut butter part of a PBJ sandwich.

While the cost of food does constitute a barrier to healthy eating, there are ways to lower it, and those are another major focus of CNEP's teaching. Many food stamp recipients, for instance, simply do not realize that their food stamp allotment is not intended to cover their entire food budget.

Others may receive such a small allotment that they let it go unused, feeling that it won't buy enough food to make it worth their while. So one common



CNEP demonstration is to show just how many meals' worth of food \$10 in food stamps can purchase. ("Several," says Garrard.)

Transportation can be another major obstacle to food access, particularly in rural areas where residents may have to travel several miles to a small grocery store that has trouble simply keeping fresh fruits and vegetables in stock.

For program participants who make infrequent food shopping trips, CNEP educators are trained to point out how buying a mixture of types of fruits and vegetables can alleviate this difficulty. Fresh produce can be eaten early on, with frozen and canned varieties making up that portion of the food guide pyramid's recommendations toward the end of the month.

Though CNEP's programs are focused on improving the lives of their participants, these aren't the only people who benefit. The NEAs receive their own continuing training program as well.

For some NEAs, the job with CNEP is often a leg in their own journey from aid recipient to sought-after recruit for other jobs. Beatrice Perez, of Lawton, was first exposed to CNEP as a program participant. She went on to become an NEA, moved from that position to one as director of Lawton's Child and Adult Food Care program, and is currently interning to become an elementary school teacher.

As CNEP's investment in education and nutrition enhances participants' ability to contribute to the economy, the productivity of the entire state improves.

Money Where the Mouths Are

That investment comes from varied, and limited, sources. CNEP's teaching involves two distinct programs. One is the thirty-year old Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), which is funded by the federal government through USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service. EFNEP serves families with young children who receive any kind of federal food aid, such as WIC, food stamps, or free or reduced school lunches.

EFNEP also reaches out to youth in counties where half or more of school students receive free or reduced-price lunches. Among the more than 10,000 third- and fourth-graders the program educated in 2004, 18% improved their ability to select nutritious, affordable foods, and 12% became better at food preparation and safety.

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*– Debra Greene-Garrard,
CNEP Coordinator*

CNEP's second program is the Oklahoma Nutrition Education (ONE) Program. In its fifth year of operation, ONE offers nutritional education to people who receive, or are eligible to receive, food stamps or commodities, as well as some WIC recipients and seniors. ONE's sponsors are the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, and the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, which oversees the state's food stamp program.

One of CNEP's greatest challenges, according to Garrard, is maintaining the resources necessary to support the intensive, one-on-one nature of its



educational outreach. For example, the national level of funding for EFNEP only allows the program to reach 2% of the eligible participants.

CNEP's monitoring of its results shows greater behavioral changes in participants the longer they stay enrolled, so another ongoing struggle is the search for ways around the circumstances that limit the amount of time that families can afford to devote to participation in the program.

CNEP thus becomes something of a role model for its participants, as it is forced to practice what it preaches about stretching every dollar as far as possible. CNEP's strong record of success at improving the food budgeting and dietary choices of Oklahomans in limited circumstances makes it a strong model for programs to increase community food security in the state.

Meeting the Food Stamp Challenge with Local Foods: Slow Food for Low and Moderate Income People

Oklahoma Food Cooperative president Robert Waldrop took on the challenge of eating for a week on a food stamp budget, using as much food as possible from local sources. In this article, he discusses the results. Detailed information, showing the meals, ingredients, and prices, is at www.bettertimesinfo.org/challengetable.htm.

In November a “food stamp challenge” was posted on the Community Food Security listserv: eat for a week on a food stamp budget. We decided to do this using as much food as we could from local farmers, so we expanded the challenge to show how the combination of (1) frugal supermarket shopping, (2) preparing meals from basic ingredients, (3) buying local foods, (4) gardening, (5) food storage, and (6) home preservation of food could add up to a healthy, affordable, practical, and environmentally sustainable meal plan, even though the local meats, eggs, and dairy products are typically more expensive than typical supermarket fare.

And the food had to be satisfying and taste good too; otherwise, what’s the point? Call this the Slow Food for the Poor Challenge.

I am happy to report that we succeeded on all accounts. Here’s the summary of our results:

Total spent on food for week:	\$60.43
Food stamp allowance, 2 people 1 week	\$61.87
Amount under budget	\$1.44
Food cost average amount per day	\$8.63
Amount bought from farmers	\$44.18
Amount from supermarket	\$16.80
Percent of local foods	73%
Percent of supermarket foods	28%

Besides coming in under budget, we had at least two more meals of leftovers in the fridge. We had apple pie filling in the freezer for later. [1]

The meats we ate during the week were buffalo,

100% grass-fed beef, and pork. Yes, we ate a lot of ground meat (sausage, beef, and buffalo) but we also had a great pot roast for a festive weekend meal. The meats ranged in price from \$2.95/lb (ground buffalo wrapped in butcher paper) to \$4.50/lb for the buffalo round roast.



Robert Waldrop

We ate ground meat nearly every day, and some might ask, “Wasn’t that boring?” No, because we fixed it many different ways. We had Redneck Salisbury Steaks (ground buffalo patties browned in a skillet, and then cooked in gravy in the oven), homemade spaghetti sauce with ground buffalo and pasta, rice pilaf with ground buffalo, and beef stew made with hamburger.

Ground meat can take on many different flavors, depending on the herbs used with it, and we made liberal use of our garden-grown dried herbs that week. If we had tried to eat unseasoned hamburger patties for a week, it would have gotten boring very fast. Instead one day we were south of the border, and the next we were dining in Italy and the day after in southwest Oklahoma.

We were liberal with our use of herbs, onions, garlic, hot red peppers, habanero pepper salsa, and chipotle peppers, all from our garden with us-ens doing the processing (smoking for the chipotles, boiling water canning for the habanero pepper salsa, dehydrating

for the peppers, curing for the onions and garlic).

All of that work was done earlier, in the summer and fall, now we get to eat these items all year thanks to a couple of hours of work in the summer or fall.

Our eggs were from certified organic, free-ranging hens, bought directly from a farmer through the Oklahoma Food Cooperative, costing \$3/dozen. Every day we had home baked rolls or biscuits made with 100% certified organic stone ground flour, made with Oklahoma wheat.

We made intelligent use of leftovers, by design. Sunday's supper was a delicious hearty winter soup. It had leftover cabbage and the broth from cooking the cabbage, leftover beans and bean soup, some of the rice pilaf, and the gravy from the pot roast, simmered for a couple of hours, and served with fresh baked whole wheat rolls.

We would not have had such nice treats (apple pie and apple cobbler) if we had not preserved apples during the summer that were given to us by a friend who had picked and preserved so many for her family she was out of room in her freezer. So we sliced, dipped, and froze several bags of apples and each month we have apple treats.

We did not cut any corners on quality. We used olive oil and butter, not shortening and margarine.

Our garden and home preservation skills made a major contribution to our diet. Home grown and/or preserved items we used during the week included spaghetti sauce, corn on the cob (bought from a farmer in the summer and frozen), green beans, peach and plum jam, chipotle peppers, habanero salsa, dried herbs, cured onions and garlic. We had fresh greens (chard) from the garden. Food processing techniques that contributed to our menu that month included jam making, boiling water canning, dehydrating, freezing, smoking peppers, and curing of alliums.

The meats were bought through the Oklahoma Food Cooperative. Our meat and egg prices are higher than supermarket fare, but they are lower than what is generally found in health food stores and natural groceries.

Supermarket items included pasta, white flour (for thickening gravies and sauces and for the pie crust, the cobbler was made with whole wheat flour), sugar, salt, rice, cabbage, carrots, potatoes, celery, dried beans, canned tomato sauce (we used the last of our frozen sauce this week, sigh), butter, and milk. We are hoping to add carrots to our list of "we grow all we eat" items next year but in the meantime we buy them at the supermarket.

Food storage proved its utility, in that I didn't have to buy anything except cabbage, carrots, potatoes, and celery; everything else was on hand.

Preparation

It is a myth that this kind of cooking takes a huge amount of time. Generally I spent about 15 minutes active preparation time, on average, for these meals. The actual cooking time was often longer, but if something is in the oven, or if dough is rising, I don't stand around watching it and doing nothing.

One of the real time saving techniques we used was planning leftovers.

Conclusions

My conclusion is that depending on the access to local foods, feeding your family a high quality diet using many local ingredients is absolutely do-able. This experiment integrated

- frugal supermarket shopping
- use of many local foods
- preparing meals from basic ingredients
- food storage
- gardening
- home preservation of foods.

Each of these six areas was essential to our ability to stay within the food stamp budget.

Recommendations:

Based on this experiment, encouraging/helping low and moderate income people in these areas seems to me to be most promising of success. I think people should start with their situation as it is, and over time add the six basic areas of food security until

they all work together. People will be better able to take advantage of local foods, for example, if they have already learned to prepare meals from basic ingredients. They also need easy access to local foods.

This project grew out of my own personal experience with poverty. For the 20-year period 1977-1997, there were only 3 years when my income was higher than \$10,000. The recipes and menus I used were often based on recipes and menus I used during that long period of poverty, and it is still the way our household generally eats today. They are basically peasant foods, typical fare of rural Oklahoma.

A Note About the Amount of the Food Stamp Challenge:

The weekly amount of food stamps for two persons is based on households without any income at all. If the household has some outside income, the amount of food stamps available to them drops radically.

The Cost of Good Food

Goal: All Oklahomans, including those with low incomes, should be able to afford to buy healthy food. All Oklahomans should be “food literate”: knowledgeable about what healthy food is, how, when and where to buy it, and how to cook it.

Public Policy Priorities:

- Improve low-income Oklahomans’ acceptance and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables.
 - Expand food education programs such as the Community Nutrition Education Program.
- Encourage government agencies, charities, churches and civic groups to help make fresh produce affordable by
 - Subsidizing shares for low-income families in CSA farms.
 - Organizing farmers’ markets and farm stands in low-income communities and subsidizing costs.
 - Establishing and supporting food buying clubs and co-ops, such as the Oklahoma Food Cooperative.
 - Providing incentives/support for farmers and farmers’ markets to provide recipes, nutrition information to customers, and to conduct cooking demonstrations.
 - Emphasizing the affordability of Oklahoma-grown produce in promotional campaigns such as the Grown in Oklahoma Programs.

Fresh and Affordable: A Comparison of Farmers' Market and Grocery Store Prices

In an effort to determine whether the prices at their stand at the Tulsa Cherry Street Farmers' Market were more expensive than neighboring grocery stores', farmers Mike Appel and Emily Oakley of Three Springs Farm decided to find out for themselves. The following is a revised version of their article, which appeared in the September 2005 issue of Growing for Market, www.growingformarket.com, the national monthly journal for direct market farmers.

We love almost all aspects of farming. But there is one challenge we are never quite sure how to deal with – farmers' market customers who complain about the price of local food.

The overwhelming majority of our customers are extremely loyal, supportive, and excited about the opportunity to purchase farm-fresh produce. They make farming joyful, and their positive comments far out-shadow the few skeptics. We frequently hear encouraging remarks such as, "What a bargain!"

Yet each season there are a handful of customers who feel our prices are too expensive when compared with the supermarket.

We have even had the same gentleman return two years in a row around the start of tomato season to try to pick a fight about the price of our just-off-the-vine, juicy, ripe tomatoes. "I can go to Wal-Mart and get these for a lot less," he tells us.

Does he know the tomatoes in the grocery store were picked green?

Listening to criticism about local food prices bothers us on more than just a personal level. We have chosen farming as our profession in order to give our community an alternative to the food available in grocery stores. When someone grumbles about prices, it hurts more than our feelings. It hits right at the soul of why we do what we do.

We began to wonder, are our prices really that much more expensive? They do not seem outrageous to us. We decided to put that question to the test.



Emily Oakley (right) of Three Springs Farm

We selected three area supermarkets with which to compare our farmers' market prices: Wild Oats, an organic/health food chain, as we grow organically (though not certified); Albertson's, the most widespread grocery store in town, with eleven locations throughout the city; and Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market, with their reputation for low prices. The produce at the two conventional grocery stores was not organic (except for the cauliflower at Wal-Mart).

We visited all three stores once in May and once in July of 2005. We went to each store on the same afternoon, as we realize produce prices fluctuate from day to day. With each visit, we made a list of the items on our farmers' market table that week and noted the grocery store's price.

We started our project in early May with the Wal-Mart

"Analyzing the data on a price per pound basis yielded interesting results. While much of what people buy in the grocery store has a cheaper price tag than what they purchase at our market stand, in nearly every case the grocery store food weighed significantly less."

– Emily Oakley

Neighborhood Market. The first item on our list was romaine lettuce. At the lettuce section of the produce aisle we saw that they were charging \$1.38 a head while we were charging \$2.50 (which includes sales tax).

On the surface, Wal-Mart seemed cheaper, but those were tiny lettuce heads. We took the lettuce over to the scale, and were shocked to find it barely weighed one pound. Our romaine weighed three pounds, and was greener, had fewer culled outer leaves, and had none of that tell-tale sign of old produce-wilt. Thus, we refined our research by noting both the price and the weight of each item.

When adjusted to a price per pound basis, Wal-Mart's lettuce would have cost \$4.49 if it weighed as much as ours did.

We compiled the weight and price of 22 spring items and 20 summer crops that we and the grocery stores offered in common. From this data we created a table that calculated the price per pound.

Analyzing the data on a price per pound basis yielded interesting results. While much of what people buy in the grocery store has a cheaper price tag than what they purchase at our market stand, in nearly every case the grocery store food weighed significantly less.

For the spring crops, our produce was the cheapest option – eleven of the 22 items were cheaper at our stand. (See Appendix A.) Only two were most expensive at our stand – broccoli and cauliflower. For the summer crops, again we had more items (eight) cheapest.

Our results reveal that it is perception rather than



Busting a Myth: Farmers' Market Produce is Fresh and Affordable

The following items grown by Three Springs Farm and sold at the Tulsa Cherry Street Farmers' Market in 2005 were either cheaper than or comparably priced* to produce sold at Tulsa supermarkets.

*25 cents or less per lb difference between the cheapest of the grocery store prices and the farmers' market price.

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Basil | Romaine lettuce |
| Beets | Green peppers |
| Bok Choy | Red bell peppers |
| Green leaf lettuce | Yellow bell peppers |
| Chard | Poblano peppers |
| Green garlic | Salad mix |
| Green onion | Patty pan squash |
| Lacinato kale | Yellow squash |
| Leeks | Heirloom tomatoes |
| Red leaf lettuce | Vine-ripened tomatoes |
| Butterhead lettuce | |

For a table with a complete price comparison see Appendix A.

Selected produce price comparisons (\$/lb.), Tulsa-area farmers' market and supermarkets.

	FARMERS' MARKET	WAL-MART	ALBERTSON'S	WILD OATS
SPRING				
Romaine Lettuce	\$0.76	\$1.38	\$2.65	\$4.55
Turnips	\$0.91	\$1.46	\$0.99	\$1.99
Green Onions	\$1.63	\$3.26	\$4.21	\$5.96
SUMMER				
Vine Ripe Tomatoes	\$2.74	\$2.84	\$2.99	\$2.99
Red Bell Peppers	\$2.74	\$4.48	\$5.31	\$7.99
Eggplant	\$1.83	\$1.54	\$1.99	\$2.29



Farmers' Markets – Pricing

In 2001 and 2002, Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Oklahoma State University, the Kerr Center and the Oklahoma Farmers' Market Alliance collaborated on a survey of farmers' market customers, producers and managers. The surveys paint a picture of farmers' markets in Oklahoma and point to ways to increase their success. [1]

From the Survey

How Do Farmers Think About Pricing?

The most common methods of setting prices at the farmers' market:

- 27% Grocery store comparisons
- 22% Matching other vendors
- 19% Cost of production plus mark-up

The top reasons farmers sell at a farmers' market:

- 58% Receive retail value for products sold
- 38% Customer interaction
- 25% Convenience
- 19% To advertise products
- 19% To sell surplus produce from garden

How do shoppers expect produce at the farmers' market to compare to produce purchased elsewhere?

- 84% Higher quality
- 47% Greater variety
- 44% Same price

fact which influences the assumption that grocery store food is always cheapest. It turns out that even that gentleman who thinks he can get vine-ripened tomatoes for less at Wal-Mart was wrong.

But the point of this article is not to convince the public that local food is cheap too. Your local farmer is not the place to look for a bargain. If anything, we should be getting a premium for providing the invaluable service of food truly picked fresh. When farmers' market prices are too cheap, the farmer is in essence subsidizing his/her customer's grocery bill, making their food artificially discounted.

Moreover, the grocery store prices do not include the hidden costs of that food. Conventional produce in particular is subsidized by university and industry research, health care and clean up costs of pesticide pollution, and substandard wages for farm laborers. Much of the organic produce comes from a similar agribusiness model that takes advantage of low wages and minimal regulatory oversight in developing countries.

The reasons for buying locally produced food are compelling. These include the benefits of eating fresher, tastier, and more nutritionally intact food, reducing air pollution and fossil fuel consumption through decreased transportation miles, greater variety selection, preserving farmland and open space, and keeping money within the local economy. Grocery store food from half-way around the world can never compete with the benefits of eating food from your neighborhood.



Mike Appel on Three Springs Farm, near Tulsa.