

Deepening Our Sense of What Is Local and Regional Food

By: Gary Paul Nabhan, RAFT founder

Now that *Time* magazine has done a cover feature article on the local foods movement and a book on the same topic by bestselling author Barbara Kingsolver and her family is poised to climb up the *New York Times* top-ten non-fiction list, we might want to ask what actually is it that we want to promote by using phrases like “*Buy Fresh, Buy Local*”. I can assure you that there will be increasing criticism of the so-called local food movement, building on the Hudson Institute’s feeble attempt to discredit it last fall in a variety of newspapers, with added absurdities being published in *The Economist*. On the other hand, a reputable ethicist, Peter Singer, fears in his co-authored book *The Way We Eat* that 1) an emphasis on purchasing foods locally in U.S. communities will disadvantage needy producers in foreign countries-- as if India’s producers of Basmati rice actually gain much of the retail dollar spent on their rice in the U.S.--- or 2) the unethically raised beef or chicken will suddenly take over farmers markets and CSAs---as if Conagra and Tyson execs will soon be hanging out in overalls selling antibiotic-laced breast meat on Saturdays at their local farmers markets. I can predict, however, that more substantive critiques will arise, and I, for one, welcome them. It is time that we deepen our sense of what we mean by *local* and *regional*, offer others better reasons as to why these concerns matter, and steadfastly resist any pressure to endorse simplistic formulas such as a 100-mile diet or an in-state diet.

Here are some ways we can deepen what we promote by the terms local and regional:

1. *Local* means from a farm, ranch or fishing boat that is locally-owned and operated, using the management skills and the labor of local community members. A farm that is owned all or in part by an extra-local corporation, and which uses migrant workers who live outside the community does not benefit its community economically or culturally as much as it should.
2. *A regional food* is one that has been tied to the traditions of a particular landscape or seascape and its cultures for decades if not for centuries. If the same mix of mesclun greens is grown in greenhouses across the country and sold in every farmers market from Maine to New Mexico, it is more like a franchised product (from a seed company) than it is a local or regional food. Yes it may be produced five miles from your home and thereby reduce food miles, but its seeds are not saved and adapted to local or regional conditions, they are bought from afar every year.
3. *The miles a food travels* (“*food miles*”) must be placed in the size and volume of the mode of transport, its source of fuel, and its frequency of travel. Using biodiesel in a larger truck may be more efficient, and leave less of a carbon

footprint than using leaded gas in an old clunker. One in every five kilocalories in the American food production and delivery system now underwrites transportation, as well as packaging and cooling while in transit, so this will be an increasingly important issue to solve by using alternative fuels, cost-efficient volumes, and ensuring that vehicles holding their full capacity in both directions, perhaps by carrying compost back to farms where the vegetables originated.

4. *On farm energy and water use matter.* If a farm near Tucson Arizona is irrigated from a canal that transports Colorado River water hundreds of miles (and at high ecological cost to wild riverine species), or if it uses fossil groundwater set down during the Pleistocene pumped by fossil fuel set down in Iran during the Pennsylvanian era, what is to be gained by promoting its food?
5. *Other on-farm inputs matter just as much.* Where are the sources of hay for livestock, compost for garden crops or nitrogen for field crops? They should be locally if not regionally-sourced. Why call lamb locally-produced in Idaho when its flock has wintered part of the year in California and its hay comes in from southern Colorado?
6. *Fair-trade with other cultures, localities and regions is fair game.* Circumvent the globalized economy for the items you truly need from other regions by establishing fair-trade exchanges. It is not that we don't care about farmers and ranchers elsewhere, we simply don't wish to see middlemen gaining more of each consumer dollar than the producers do. Producers inevitably plow money back into their communities and lands, intermediaries seldom do.
7. *Invest in the foods unique to your region that cannot or should not be grown anywhere else.* The attached RAFT map reminds us of ancient food traditions based on climate, soil and culture, involving both native and immigrant foods that have adapted and been integrated into particular places. Because the U.S. currently lacks the geographic indicators such as denominations of origin that reinforce the links between place, culture and genetics of a particular food, these place-based foods are truly threatened by globalization. Invest in them and their original stewards.

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About the author

Dr. Gary Paul Nabhan is Director of the Center for Sustainable Environments at Northern Arizona University, and a founder of Native Seeds/SEARCH and the Renewing America's Food Traditions campaign. His twenty books include *Gathering the Desert*, *Coming Home to Eat*, and *Why Some Like It Hot*. He was one of the contributors to a book co-sponsored by MNA and NAU, *A New Plateau: Sustaining the Lands and People of Canyon Country*.

RAFT Map

America's Place Based Food Traditions



Renewing America's Food Traditions (RAFT)

RAFT brings seven of the country's most prominent education, conservation, and food organizations together to document and restore America's agricultural biodiversity. From Buckeye chickens to Creole cream cheese, Ozette potatoes to Pacific rockfish, RAFT initiatives bring food producers, chefs, and consumers together to develop and promote conservation strategies, sustainable food production and awareness of the endangered foods and food traditions of the United States.

Learn more about our local tasting events, workshops and grow-outs at www.slowfoodusa.org/raft.

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