Reviving Local Food

By Dr Lucy Nichol

LOCAL WORK

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Introduction

In recent years 'local food' has become increasingly popular with consumers and government alike. In an age of fast and well-travelled food, where we know 'we are what we eat' and we don't always trust what we buy, local food appears to offer something more wholesome, more ethical, and fashionably good for the countryside. It is reviving traditional styles of eating: fresh, earth-covered foods, food that is cooked from raw ingredients rather than tumbled out of microwavable plastic trays. It represents pleasure rather than drudge shopping. Our continental neighbours have long protected their regional gastronomies, but British farmers and food groups are hastily resurrecting traditions and constructing new ones. After decades of subsidies encouraging overproduction, the impending reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) will promote environmental stewardship, rural development, diversification, co-operation between farmers and the re-connecting of farmers to consumers through direct sales and the internet. Farmers, however, will view these changes with varying degrees of enthusiasm. So who is local food for, who benefits, who produces it, and what implications does it have for the countryside and those who govern it? This Local Work offers some suggestions.

What it is and who is doing it

A 'local product' is simply something produced in the area where it is sold or traded. In the small British Isles, 'local food' tends to mean food consumed within around 30 miles of where it was produced. It is 'food with a story': always traceable to the place of production and often marketed on the basis of special farming methods, the principles or even the personality of the producer. Farmers are beginning to forge new ways of accessing consumers directly, missing out the middleman to secure a greater proportion of the retail price. Strategies adopted by local food producers include:

- growing for specialist markets (organic, biodynamic, gluten-free);
- producing unusual goods (snails, llamas, ostriches, herbs);
- processing to make secondary products (cheese, sausages, wine, cider) and
- selling directly to the consumer (farmers' markets, farm shops and box schemes).

Outlets for local food:

- Farmers' markets
- Womens' Institute country markets
- Farm shops and farm gate sales
- On-farm butcheries
- Local produce in local shops
- Local food and drink on pub and hotel menus
- Public procurement: school meals etc.
- Box schemes (delivery of local produce to your door)
- Community supported agriculture (like box schemes but consumers pay in advance of the season and have the option of getting involved on the farm)
- Community owned farms
- City farms and community gardens
- Community orchards
- Allotment shop or allotment produce auction
- Food co-ops and community buying groups
- Pick your own
- Door to door deliveries
- Roadside stands

Local food, small issue?

In Britain more than two thirds of all food is bought at five chains of supermarkets and half from just 1000 giant stores.[1] In this context local food is small fry: small speciality producers selling small amounts through small outlets. However, it is changing the way

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we think about food and the countryside. Concern that food should be healthy and cheap is being supplemented with more magnanimous concerns about the environment, animal welfare, fair-trade and where food comes from. The Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food (2002) predicted that in the next few years local food will enter the mainstream, stating: 'From a commercial point of view, we have heard from several supermarket retailers that they see local food as the next major development in food retailing'.[2]

Contrary to stereotype, local food is not just for the middle classes and those with gourmet tastes. Projects across the country are combining local food with education, health and anti-poverty initiatives. In Cumbria there are 30 food co-ops supplying community centres on low-income estates with weekly deliveries of vegetables. Volunteers divide these up for over a thousand households who pay just £2 for a bulging carrier bag. At St Peter's Primary School in Nottinghamshire, dinner lady Jeanette Orrey convinced teachers, governors and the Council to opt-out of the centralised supply system, and now serves local and often organic food instead.[3] Not only are they making a profit, but 80% of children now have school meals at St Peter's.

Location, location, location: why where food comes from matters

Radical green ideology may lie behind arguments for localisation but local food generates support from across the political spectrum because it can bring an array of economic, social, cultural and environmental benefits (for a comprehensive account see the Foundation for Local Food Initiatives, 2002).[4] The most obvious benefit is the reduction in the distance between farm and fork, known as 'food miles'. Transporting food long distances – particularly by air freighting – causes both global and local environmental damage through the emissions of climate-altering greenhouse gases. Jones (2001) calculates that each kilogram of imported food bought at the supermarket is responsible for up to 5485g of CO_2 emissions, whereas locally-sourced foods have much lower transport emissions: just 17g of CO_2 per kilogram of product for home delivery of goods from a farm (one van journey); 183g if bought at a farm shop (car trip) and 187g for goods bought at a farmers' market (van plus car).[5] Jones notes that Government statistics on CO_2 emissions ignore the transport of food outside our borders. If these were included, an extra 1.1 tonnes of CO_2 per person would have to be added to the Government's figure of 9.63 tonnes per person per annum.

Local production flies in the face of global market economics. Rather than locate production at the site of best comparative advantage in terms of climate, soils, cheap workforce etc., production takes place near to consumers without necessarily minimising production costs. Inefficient, small-scale and logistically archaic, localisation defies notions such as economies of scale. The new localists contend that locally-owned small firms bring more economic benefits to an area than major corporations, because money circulates more, resulting in less 'seepage' from the local economy. A study in Cornwall for the New Economics Foundation confirmed this, using a leaking bucket analogy to demonstrate that £10 spent on food from a vegetable box scheme is worth £25 to the local economy, whereas £10 spent in a supermarket is worth only £14 to the local area (Boyde, 2001).[6] (See *Local Work* no 49.)

City greening through food growing

The imagery surrounding local food is often rural but it can be grown in urban areas too: in private gardens, on balconies, rooftops and tracts of urban green space. Such plots are not just decorative additions to urban regeneration but can have important social and ecological functions. They are 'green lungs' that provide improved air quality, recreation, environmental education, a place to grow special vegetables for ethnic cuisines, training opportunities for the unemployed and therapeutic activities for those with physical or mental disabilities (for instance at the allotments managed by Restore in Oxford).

However urban food production clashes with other aspects of green urbanism such as infilling, recycling brownfield sites and building high-density homes with small or no gardens. Ultimately this 'Compact City' ideal will fail to deliver sustainable lifestyles unless mechanisms are provided to reduce the impact of city dwellers' consumption of energy, food and resources. Planners concern themselves with reducing 'shopper miles' (the round trip to the shop) with policies restricting out-of-town stores, but neglect the far more significant 'food miles'. In the city *we* may not have to travel far, but a global cornucopia of food is being transported *to us* at enormous ecological cost. A car emits 1.83kg of CO_2 on a typical 8.3km shopping trip, but emissions attributable to food miles from a single basket of shopping amount to 81.85kg.[7]

A green use for green belts

A city cannot be internally sustainable; it requires the importation of vast quantities of food, energy and other resources. For green urbanism to succeed in environmental terms, cities will need to forge links with their hinterlands. The countryside around towns could be used for market gardening to supply the urban population with vegetables, eggs, milk, honey and mushrooms. Not long ago land around Britain's major cities was used for precisely this purpose. Ironically, land that once held the main market gardens of London is now home to Heathrow airport, which receives imported vegetables and flowers flown in from across the globe.

The Town and Country Planning Association (2002)[8] has called for green-belts to be re-conceived as 'eco-belts, so that land around towns becomes a zone for a range of ecological and sustainable uses, such as smallholdings for organic market gardening, community woodlands, composting projects, wind farms and small-scale biomass power stations'. They suggest radical new planning policies to allow the construction of 'low-impact' live-work units for people engaged in local food production and woodland crafts. Low impact development refers to buildings that use natural and where possible local materials such as straw bales, wood or cob (earth) for the walls, with roofs of turf or thatch, and where renewable energy and water are harvested on-site in place of connections to mains services.[9] These ideas for the urban fringe have yet to be implemented by any Council, but have been discussed by Bradford Metropolitan District Council.

By localising its suppliers a city's metabolic rate can be slowed and its ecological footprint reduced. In effect, a sustainable society will need both green urbanism and green ruralism: compact cities coupled with a countryside populated with land-based enterprises that provide local food, energy and woodland products.

A farming industry in transition

As part of a doctoral research project at Oxford Brookes University, I investigated 165 (mostly rural) local food producers, found through local food directories. The results revealed new styles of agricultural production and new types of agricultural lifestyle emerging. Many producers were engaged in diverse business operations and mixed styles of farming e.g. 22% were producing three or more different categories of product such as meat, vegetables and eggs. Many sold through a range of outlet types and combined selling locally with selling through conventional non-local channels (which makes it difficult to talk of a local food 'sector'). 18% farmed less than 10 acres (4.0 ha) and 61% less than 100 acres (40.4 ha). Gross sales figures were low, with 37% of food businesses selling less than £10,000 a year, and yet each business had a relatively large number of workers (an average of 2.8 full-time, 1.6 part-time and 1.5 casual workers). At these levels it would be difficult to pay the minimum wage, which suggests that lower-earning businesses rely on the unpaid labour of producers and their families.

Who are the local producers?

Perhaps more interesting than the products or production processes were the producers themselves. Local product businesses are normally conceived of as existing farmers who have diversified into local food, but this is not whole story. In fact around a third (29%) of those I studied were new entrants with no background in farming or food production. This is significant because the population of farmers is ageing and local food may be one of the few areas of farming providing opportunities for new entrants, particularly at the smallholdings end of the market where I found the proportion of new entrants to be 47%. They came from all walks of life: there were teachers, engineers, lecturers, accountants, technicians, administrators, a doctor, nurse, pilot, bank clerk and a gardener. Most were in their 40s (34%), there was a substantial tranche in their 50s (31%), 19% were in their 30s, and only 15% were over 60.

These findings suggest that a new chapter of social change has begun, involving land changing hands away from the traditional farming community. It challenges the idea that existing farmers are the only people who can farm or even the best people to look after the countryside. New entrants bring skills from their former lives and may be more in tune with the concerns and desires of consumers regarding the environment and animal welfare. Many keep their previous type of work going part-time, some engaging in flexible freelance work, others organising their work by the seasons, working in conventional jobs in the winter and outside in the summer. Others had 'downshifted' or taken early-retirement to run a local food business. Some do not need to make it financially viable because it is a hobby or part-time enterprise, and they can cross-subsidise the farm from other income, which could save the taxpayer money in farm support and countryside management.

Planning for local food

Whilst examining the barriers to local food, planning was cited as a problem by over half of those questioned (53%). This was surprising, as it has received little attention in the press as a barrier to artisan food production, while Food Hygiene regulations (44%), Environmental Health (39%) and Trading Standards (35%) have featured strongly for a number of years. Both existing farmers and new entrants reported difficulty obtaining consent for the new buildings and changes of use required for local production.

Local food can involve preserving and enhancing landscapes but it can involve changing them too, introducing new 'undesirable' features such as polytunnels, sheds, hen houses, caravans, farm shops, processing units, eco houses and compost heaps. A revival of market gardening, mixed farming and smallholdings will mean more 'shackery' and smaller holdings. Whether this is welcome in rural Britain will be controversial.

Another barrier to local food is the deeply held convention in British society regarding who owns and manages rural land. The planning system has helped maintain this by selectively granting permission to build new farmhouses, sieving applicants for background, lifestyle and farming credentials using the functional and financial tests. The phenomenon of people from non-farming backgrounds choosing to work on the land, and part-funding their lifestyle by

producing goods for the local markets, could therefore have a significant effect on farming (and planning) in the UK. These new entrants challenge the received wisdom about who belongs in the countryside and what agriculture should be like.

Newly-established farm businesses on bareland plots face a particular challenge because of the rules restricting new rural dwellings. Planning policy draws a distinction between existing and new farmhouses in the open countryside, and in effect 'holds the line' against the new. Those with financial resources can buy existing rural property and historic farmhouses, and commute to work in the City if they so choose. Neither the planning system nor any other regulatory body questions who they are, how they live or where they work. In contrast, those without sufficient capital to buy but who want to start up new farms face a comprehensive investigation into their activities and finances. Planners have to guard against attempts to abuse the system and their scepticism is particularly acute when operations are small-scale, part-time or unconventional in their approach to cultivation or animal husbandry. Currently someone engaged in indoor rearing of poultry or pigs can pass the tests more easily than someone with a low intensity ecological farming enterprise.

Planning the infrastructure for a local food economy

Rather than simply overseeing the demise of conventional farming, policy-makers could be actively intervening to assist with the structural changes involved in a shift to sustainable land management, albeit sometimes part-time, multi-activity and small-scale. There is a need for strict but *different* controls, which welcome those who see their role more as environmental stewards and nature reserve wardens than profit-maximisers.

Planners could help install the infrastructure and services necessary for a local food system. Working in partnership with Regional Development Agencies they could help co-ordinate and locate a network of abattoirs, cutting plants, livestock markets, local food centres, and co-operative 'farm shops' in towns. They could allocate sites in local plans for farmers' markets, perhaps using them as the centrepiece of regeneration schemes in town centres. Special policies could be instituted to protect outlets selling local food, including village shops, independent butchers and pubs, which often suffer pressure to convert to higher-value uses. Councils could adopt policies that encourage the establishment of processing and retailing facilities run by farmers' co-operatives such as on-farm butcheries, smokeries and farm shops. The Bridport Centre for Local Food provides serviced office space, rentable kitchens, processing and storage facilities for new local food businesses. If every Bridport resident spent just 36p a week on local food, the multiplier effect would produce £1.2 million for the local economy; spending £1 each week would save £795,132 a year on the environmental costs of intensive farming practices and food miles.[4]

Conclusion

The localisation of food offers a compelling range of social, cultural and environmental benefits and there has never been a better time for its renaissance. The crisis in British farming and reform of CAP are leading farmers to become open to alternative agricultural systems whilst the demand for organic, welfare-friendly and local food is at an unprecedented high. There are opportunities both for existing farmers to convert to local production and for new blood to enter farming. There are plenty of people who would like to manage some land, and in many areas not enough local food to meet demand. Planners have a key role to play, and will be increasingly important to farmers as they restructure their land holdings and diversify into food processing, marketing and retailing.

Note

For an extended account see Lucy Nichol's 2002 report 'How Can Planning Help the Local Food Economy? A Guide for Planners', available to order from Oxford Brookes University on 01865 483491

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