

GRIST FOR THE MILL



About a year-and-a-half ago, I started hearing about something called the “100-mile diet.” Vancouver journalists Alisa Smith and J. B. MacKinnon coined the term during their one-year mission to eat only those foods that had been grown and produced within a 100-mile radius of their home. Smith and MacKinnon created a blog to chronicle the project, attracting worldwide attention; 100-mile dinner parties soon became commonplace. Their book, *The 100-Mile Diet: A Year of Local Eating*, was published last spring. It’s a great book, and I respect the authors tremendously for the “experiment” they undertook.

The “100-mile diet” has since become an expression used frequently in discussions about eating locally, and it’s a term I’ve come to dislike a great deal. I believe it creates boundaries that are much too rigid and makes the sourcing of local foods unnecessarily restrictive. And it seems to me that it can actually turn people off of the idea of “eating local,” since it might create the illusion that it should be all or nothing.

Many consumers have been asking for a definition of what “local” really means when it comes to food. There is no cut-and-dried answer to what defines our local foodshed. Some, like Smith and MacKinnon, believe it pertains to food grown or produced within a 100-mile (about 165 kilometres) radius, while many would put it closer to 200 miles (just over 300 kilometres). Others consider it to be the distance a farmer or fisher could easily drive between the farm or the lake and the urban market to sell his or her products and then return home by a reasonable hour. I tend to fall into this latter category, especially when I consider Andrew Akiwenzie (see page 5), a Wiarton fisherman who makes the six-hour round-trip journey to Toronto farmers’ markets three days a week.

The determination of what defines local is a personal one, and it is up to consumers to take the time to learn all they can in order to make informed decisions based on their own beliefs and lifestyles. Likewise, the extent to which an individual “goes” local is a matter of choice. Most of us are not likely to give up spices, olive oil, rice, oranges, coffee and chocolate, nor should we feel guilty for consuming them: These are staple goods that are simply not grown in our climate. But we should feel ashamed about buying apples from New Zealand and Washington state, garlic from China and Argentina, and peaches from California and Chile.

Another question I’m often asked is, “Local or organic?” Last spring’s *Time Magazine* cover story titled “Local is the New Organic” had many of us locavores cringing. Does it have to be one or the other? Again, making informed decisions is critical here. In an ideal world, local AND organic would be the best choice. And it doesn’t rest only on these two words: Many farmers in our region are growing produce and raising animals using sustainable, humane and organic farming methods, but they are not certified as such. This is why shopping at farmers’ markets, farm stands, natural food stores, and independent grocers and butcher shops is so important: You get to find out how the foods you’re buying for yourselves and for your families are grown and produced. And then the decision is in your hands.

With warmest regards,

Gail Gordon Oliver

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PUBLISHER AND EDITOR

Gail Gordon Oliver

PRODUCTION AND DESIGN

Cheryl Koehler

Stephen Munshin

Mary Ogle

COLUMNISTS

David Cohlmeier

Elizabeth Driver

CONTRIBUTORS

Samantha Albert

Laura Berman

Christina Campbell

Charmian Christie

Gavin Dandy

Judith Finlayson

David Garcelon

Bryn Gladding

Gail Gordon Oliver

Sunday Harrison

Vicki Lass

Chris Lowry

Mary MacIsaac

Mary Luz Mejia

Corey Mintz

Ezra Title

Carole Topalian

Mark Trealout

Ireen Wieditz

Lea Zeltserman

CONTACT US

P.O. Box 85528

Toronto, Ontario M5N 0A2

Phone: (416) 481-7474

Fax: (416) 488-0035

Email: info@edibletoronto.com

www.edibletoronto.com

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