

Your Food Mileage May Vary

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*A Swedish study of food miles used the ingredients from a Swedish breakfast (apples, bread, butter, cheese, coffee, cream, orange juice, and sugar) to sum the distances that each food traveled from the producers to consumer. **The mileage estimated for the meal was equivalent to the circumference of the earth.** (24,901 miles - equator)*

Now, your mileage may vary, but the food on your table probably travels a lot farther than you realize. It's not difficult to cook up a 25,000-mile dinner. In fact it's nearly impossible to avoid high mileage meals. Seems we have gotten ourselves into something of a long distance shipping pickle when it comes to supplying food. There's not much of local origin in the supermarkets since they are dialed into the industrial agriculture system and depend almost entirely on those long distance supply lines. And now days the traditional organic supply lines are not much shorter.

The U.S. has been relinquishing its local food systems for national and global long haul ones during the last 60 years as though local was for "poor-folk" and on the bottom line all that mattered was money. As the food miles have increased freshness and nutrition have decreased along with flavor. However, we now can have hothouse tomatoes from Europe any time of year and the Almeria Province along Spain's southern coast has been, in only 4 years, totally transformed into a 49,000 acre sea of greenhouses growing out-of-season produce for a world of eaters hooked on having what they want, whenever they want, at the cheapest price possible.

"So what?" you may ask, and legitimately so. The answer to that will become more apparent as oil prices increase and supplies level off or decline. Food systems consume about 17% of the total energy used in the United States, and just transporting food to consumers requires 11% of the total food system energy.

So why are we paying for food of lower quality that's transported around the world? This is not an article about "peak oil", but it's a good idea to keep our energy consumption and supply in mind. There are many other reasons to seek out and support local foods, but the primary reward is the quality of food and community that it creates. After all the statistics are quoted and the intellect is either convinced or overwhelmed the real rewards emerge; fresher, better tasting food, satisfying personal relationships with your food grower and a renewed sense of community. The added benefit is a sustainable community where more food dollars remain and re-circulate to maintain small businesses and healthy economies.

Are you thinking about reducing your energy consumption by installing solar heating or trading in the SUV for a mini or hy-bred? Well, those are good ideas, but there is no greater way to reduce your energy footprint than by changing the way you get your food. Consider for a moment the amount of oil energy required to plow, plant, fertilize, harvest, process, package, advertise and transport your food and then compare those amounts to what you would use if food came from your garden. (You knew I would get food gardening in here somehow) Or compare those amounts to the energy required to grow and market food locally.

Recent studies reveal that locally grown food travels an average of 54 miles from field to table, and that the same 'agribusiness' food travels 1500 miles from field to table. If you eat fruit, figure that at 2,300 miles. Get the picture? Food from you own

garden travels maybe 40 yards and is eaten within an hour or less of picking. With nearly zero energy consumption and maximum freshness does it get any better than that?

Let's get concrete!

Here's an example of a real deal meal that I actually prepared and ate a couple of days ago with sources and food miles estimated for you. (The quiche was delicious!)

Potato, Zucchini and Goose-egg Quiche

(concocted to fit ingredients available from the farmer's market and my garden)

Several small new potatoes	garden	0 miles
2 medium sized zucchini squashes	farmer's market	12 miles
1 cup of bitter lettuce	garden	0 miles
1 small onion	garden	0 miles
Several cloves of garlic	garden	0 miles
English Thyme	garden	0 miles
French Tarragon	garden	0 miles
1 fresh goose egg	farmer's market	12 miles
1 fresh chicken egg	farmer's market	12 miles
Local half & half	Coop	40 miles
Half cup of grated cheese	Albertson's	1,500 miles

Total food miles - 1,576 miles

Same meal prepared from the global food system – 10,430 miles

So, if you wish to increase the freshness and nutrition of your diet while reducing your energy footprint – Go Local – Get Gardening!

You can find more about food miles, local food sources and instructions for figuring your food miles on my web site (www.darrolshillingburg.com) in the new Local Food Page.