

Waterloo Region Record

Save the planet - buy California berries

Fri Sep 18 2009

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Section: Editorial

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Illustrations: Food produced locally, such as that sold at markets in Waterloo Region, isn't necessarily better than food that comes from far away. Peter Lee, The Waterloo Region Record

One of the hallmarks of good journalism is the courage to reveal facts contrary to received wisdom or entrenched interests.

By this standard veteran local agricultural writer Jim Romahn rose to the top of his class with his recent column: "Ontario farmers must earn local buyers' loyalty."

To quickly recap, Romahn compared the quality of local produce with similar imported items. With a few exceptions, it was bad news for area food. Local cherries were too soft. Local peaches were too hard. Local corn was starchy. Local strawberries were already rotting in their containers. Foreign items were all consistently good.

Romahn's free advice for Ontario farmers was to do a better job harvesting, culling and storing their output: "buy-local campaigns will fail, and even backfire, if farmers fail to provide customer-satisfying quality," he concluded.

For his effort, Romahn received a blast of opprobrium in letters to the editor and the op-ed column. Many readers were outraged anyone would dare question the quality of local produce.

Certainly Romahn doesn't need me to defend his work. But there are a few more myths about the local food movement that need puncturing.

In writing to defend the honour of local fruits and vegetables, Peter Katona, executive director of Foodlink Waterloo Region, claimed Romahn had overlooked the vast benefits of local food that stretch far beyond the mere eating experience. "There are many reasons to purchase local farm products . . . health reasons, environmental reasons," Katona listed.

Certainly Waterloo Region spends considerable tax-funded effort promoting this notion that local food is a good thing for everyone and the environment. Over the past few years the public health department has published a "redundant trade" study on food imports, a report on food-miles, a food-flow analysis and a community food system plan. Regional government has also created an environmental lesson plan for area high schools called Local Food, Globally.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but the bible of the local food movement The 100-Mile Diet was last year's community book selection for Waterloo Region.

The crux of these alleged environmental benefits to local food consumption is that it saves energy by shortening the distance from farm to table. The regional report Food Miles: Environmental Implications of Food Imports to Waterloo Region claimed that if we all ate local produce, it would have an effect equivalent of removing 16,000 cars from area roads.

Too bad it's not true.

Pierre Desrochers, a geography professor at University of Toronto, and economist Hiroko Shimizu have carefully studied the energy use of food production. Last year they wrote a report on the subject for the Mercatus Center at George Mason University in Virginia that perfectly skewered the food miles argument.

"The local food movement simply misses the bigger picture," Desrochers observes in an interview. "It has become an emotional, almost religious, topic for many people. But when you look at the facts, some places are just better at growing food than other places."

Desrochers cites strawberries as an example. In southern Ontario a typical hectare of farmland can produce approximately 2,000 kilograms of berries. In California, that same hectare can yield 34,000 kg annually.

This vast difference is the result of a more favourable growing season, genetic research on better varieties and more intensive production. It means California resources are 17 times more efficient at producing strawberries than here in Ontario. Fewer chemicals can be applied. Warehouses and equipment are more productive. Workers can have year-round jobs.

If you are really concerned about the global impacts of food production, Desrochers has some simple advice: "Buying California strawberries in southern Ontario is probably the best thing you can do for the environment."

But what about cutting down on all those food transportation miles?

"Transportation is only a small fraction of the overall energy required to produce food," Desrochers says. Specifically, it's about 10 per cent. The vast bulk of total resources are consumed in the growing. Which is why the conclusions of the regional food miles report are entirely bogus.

Even still, car transportation to and from the store tends to be a bigger factor in overall energy use than bulk transportation from farm to store.

A British report cited by Desrochers found more carbon was released by consumers driving 10 kilometres to a supermarket to buy green beans from Kenya, than flying those beans from Africa.

"People forget it's not just the distance travelled, but the volume carried and the mode of transportation used," reminds Desrochers. "The rule of thumb is that if you drive your car past a grocery store on your way to a farmers market, you are probably hurting the environment." Words to live by, if you love the Earth.

In anticipation of another flood of complaints from angry local food lovers, none of this should be seen as criticism of area farmers. If you find good-quality local produce at a good price, buy it. If you simply enjoy the experience of a farmers market, then go have fun. But stop pretending those activities provide any greater benefit to the environment.

Local food helps local farmers. It does nothing for the rest of the world.

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