

Local Food: A Fad that won't Last

Pierre Desrochers, CBC Commentary, February 15, 2010

If you want to know the future of local food in the coming decade, look to the past.

Opposition to imported food is probably as old as long-distance trade itself. There's obviously a mistrust of relying on foreigners for your food supply and farmers never like low-cost competition. In many ways, today's 'buy local' movement echoes central Pennsylvania's in the 1910s when railroad expansion saw local farmers undercut by produce shipped from Maryland and other states with better growing conditions.

The campaign gathered support, but ultimately fizzled out as price ruled the day.

This is the way of the modern world: People specialize in what they do best and trade with one another.

Yes, of course there is a place for competitive local farm products – my wife and I sometimes shop at local markets and love to go the Niagara region to buy wine directly from producers. But we do so for the experience. Most people, most of the time, don't want to pay more when the quality is comparable.

Nor would I take encouragement from the fact that it has become fashionable to support otherwise uncompetitive local farmers. This is just a form of charity and I would not want to base a business on sympathy.

Sustainable economies must have an advantage. Peru, for example, is the largest fresh asparagus exporter in the world because of warm weather, loose soil, and abundant agricultural labour. Its asparagus yields are 3.7 times higher than in the United States. And it requires less energy to grow and air freight these asparagus to Ontario than to grow them locally or in nearby Michigan and then ship them by trucks to consumers.

Despite the increased shipping distance, the environmental impact is often much lower because it is production – not transportation – that is by far the most energy-intensive part of food production.

The past decade was a prosperous one, and many consumers could afford to pay a premium for food that had a nice story to go with it or made them feel virtuous. But with tougher economic times upon us, expect many of them to opt for the cheaper alternative.

So my advice to farmers who are making money from the local food fad is simply this: Enjoy it while it lasts.