

Eat Local Challenge

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August is Eat Local Month, a collaborative effort between the NH Department of Agriculture, Markets and Food, farms, businesses, organizations and individuals to promote local food. A number of events from garden tours, to dinners, to film discussions have been planned throughout the month to encourage all of us to explore and enjoy what our local food system has to offer. As part of the month, the Littleton Coop issued an *Eat Local Challenge*.

I have seen eat local challenges advertised over the years, but I have never participated. While I like the theory, I ate local for years when I lived overseas and I found the effort and creativity involved to be a MASSIVE chore punctuated by a great deal of irritation. However, given my job and my interest in strengthening the local food system, I decided it was time for me to stop avoiding. After all, a week is pretty short.

Step one was to decide what my rules were. There are two main reasons to participate in an eat local challenge. One is to explore and support the local food economy, the other is to decrease the carbon footprint of your food. If the former is your goal, you might decide restaurants are okay as long as the menu includes some local food, or that local bakery items are okay even though some of the ingredients are not local because by patronizing these businesses you are still supporting the local food economy. If you are primarily interested in the carbon footprint of your food, you would limit yourself to items with all locally grown ingredients.

I decided I was primarily interested in the local food economy and that I would deal with the carbon footprint issue by defining “local” very stringently. The Littleton Coop had suggested defining it as anything grown or produced “within 100 miles of home”, I decided on 50 miles.

The Coop had also suggested allowing “Marco Polo” exceptions, and lifelines. The Marco Polo exception means that salt, spices, sugar and oil are okay, and the lifelines are non-local items you allow yourself to have. I went with the Marco Polo exceptions, although where possible, I substituted butter for oil and maple syrup for sugar. Instead of lifelines I decided beverages didn’t count as food – I really like coffee.

I was actually surprised at how easy it was, although looking back, I shouldn’t have been surprised. I live in the perfect town for an eat local challenge. On my ride home from work, I pass two farm stands with fruits, vegetables and eggs, one dairy store that also sells local bread and donuts produced by other local businesses, and a store that sells locally raised meats. If I go a little out of my way I can find two restaurants that offer local food. And for big shopping trips there are 10 farmers markets, at least 5 Coops and grocery stores with some local foods, several more farm stands and restaurants with a commitment to local, and one fudge maker all within a 50 mile radius.

That said there were challenges. I like to snack and one of my favorites is cottage cheese. Unfortunately the brand I like is produced 150 miles away. I also found myself eating the same things over and again, which is fine for a week, but not all the time. Some items were more expensive, for example maple syrup was a great sweetener for coffee but it costs more than sugar. And of course August was probably the easiest month for me to do this, because I like vegetables. A winter time eat local challenge would require more drastic change.

So what did I learn? Eating local is not as much of a chore here as it was when I lived overseas. That was actually really nice to learn, but at the end of the day, we don’t need to eat all local all the time to make a

difference. New Hampshire produces about 6% of the food needed to support our population, and our local agriculture and food manufacturing sector currently contribute \$560 million per year to our state economy and employs (as of 2007) 81,000 people*. It's reasonable to think increasing that to 10 or 15% would create jobs and increase income for local farms and other businesses without requiring massive change or additional expense on our parts.

So what can we do? I actually committed to buying all my dairy and eggs locally about a year ago; after this challenge I decided to add bread to the list. One of my colleagues said he and his wife buy all their fruits and vegetables locally once the farm stands open for the season. And another colleague gives local foods as holiday gifts. At Extension here in Grafton County, we offer at least some local food at our agricultural events, as individuals we could also do that when we are invited to a potluck or have friends over for a meal. There are plenty of options, so have fun exploring the ones that appeal to you.

*Home Grown: The Economic Impact of Local Food Systems in New Hampshire, Current Status and Prospects for Growth by M. Magnusson, R. Gittell and J. Carter, 2010. http://www.nh.gov/agric/publications/documents/HomeGrownReport_final.pdf

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