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## Home Cooking

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The classroom at the El Centro Culinary Institute was jam-packed with eager foodies. The second I stuck my head in the door, I sensed disorganization. The two volunteers at the check-in desk were flustered. “We’re oversold,” one said with a big smile on her face. “We’re gonna have to add more tables.”



**CHOOSE LOCAL:** Many major grocery stores display signage to denote regionally grown products. *photography by Kevin Hunter Marple*

Her smile said so much. Nobody really cared if this event, the Texas Cheese Plate, started on time (6:30 pm, in 15 minutes). And those of us who waited for extra tables and chairs to arrive were happy to do so; there was plenty to chat about with the local fooderati. Some were well-heeled mavens of good taste. Others were food nerds. Thanks to the Dallas convivium of Slow Food USA—a nonprofit, educational organization dedicated to “stewardship of the land and ecologically sound food production”—we’d all gathered to celebrate a historic Texas event: for the first time, regional cheese makers assembled to showcase their cheeses in one place. Veteran Mozzarella Company cheese whiz Paula Lambert, who has been separating her curds and whey in Deep Ellum for 25 years, was there. So was 18-year-old Chrissy Omo from CKC Farms in Blanco, who invested some of her college funds on 10 goats a year ago and now produces a lovely feta scented with black and red pepper, rosemary, and olive oil.

The panel of 11 cheese makers took their places. Karen Cassady, cooking school coordinator for Central Market and a member of Slow Food, gave a short speech that no one in the back of the room could hear. Then the group of about 75 attendees listened to the loosely moderated panel trade goat-raising stories, rind-washing techniques, and the finer points of “cheddaring” cheese. Some people fastidiously took notes. Others asked cheesy questions. Overall, the evening was a big love-in for regional cheese, and I had to struggle to restrain myself from rushing the dais and forming a group hug. Call it a personal epiphany. By the end of the night, I was trumpeting the group’s message: we must all take time to eat, drink, and think local.

The plight of these small-scale farmstead cheese makers struggling to get their products to your plate is a tiny piece of the international agribusiness puzzle the world is struggling to solve. The hottest topic in food today is how to reconcile our fast-food sensibilities with the trend to eat organic and the mushrooming argument for eating local. The short version of the argument goes like this: a strawberry shipped in a refrigerated plane from Guatemala not only increases fossil fuel consumption, but it also undermines our local growers, markets, and agriculture-based businesses that could have brought us a better-tasting strawberry from a field nearby.

But eating local is harder to do than you might think. Because what does it really mean to “eat local”? And how is that different from “eating organic”? And is it *really* worth the effort for you—as a consumer, a foodie, and a

concerned citizen—to seek out North Texas food?

The answer to the last question, at least, is yes. Because we live in North Texas, we’ve got Mother Nature on our side when it comes to food. We’re surrounded by ranchers producing grass-fed, hormone-free meat, poultry, and dairy products, as well as farmers growing fruits and vegetables in rich soil. Other cities aren’t quite so fortunate. But even with this advantage, it’s still increasingly difficult for local food producers to make a go of it. New technologies, dependence on pesticides and other chemicals, and governmental policies favoring maximized production have not only led to the

decline of the family farm, these changes have caused topsoil depletion, groundwater contamination, and inhumane treatment of migrant farm laborers. And the North Texas area has lost many farmers and ranchers who traded in their tractors after encountering too many obstacles that prohibited them from getting products from their farms to area markets.

Thanks to the organic movement, spearheaded on a local and national level by Whole Foods Market, many of us have become more aware of what we eat, because, let's face it, who really loves the thought of consuming pesticides?

Which brings us to the second question above: what does it mean to eat organic? And by that I mean: wasn't the organic-food movement supposed to solve these problems?

First, some background. By organic, we mean food that is cultivated without the use of chemicals of any sort, including fertilizers, insecticides, or additives. The term also conjures up the image of a back-to-the-land, small-scale family farm. This is the sort of food you seek out at Whole Foods, the world's leading purveyor of organic products, with more than 190 stores and \$5.6 billion in sales. The Whole Foods shopper is paying more for her groceries because she feels it's better for the environment. At the recently opened store at Preston Forest, not only are the shelves lined with organic produce, dairy products, and meats, the upstairs carries organic clothing, bedding, and home accents. "The cotton crop is the No. 1 user of pesticides," says Karen Lukin, Dallas media and community relations representative for Whole Foods. "When you buy sheets and pillowcases made from organic cotton, you are contributing to making this a better planet."

But now the term “organic” is under fire from purists like Michael Pollan, who in his best-selling book *Omnivore’s Dilemma* challenged “industrial organic” suppliers like Wal-Mart and Whole Foods, who buy from farms with elaborate international distribution systems that deplete energy sources and generate waste. Pollan points out that, once picked, many organic foods fall into “the same conventional supply chain as non-organic.” Which is the antithesis of the small family farm image. One of his case studies was a massive organic lettuce-packing operation in Northern California that washes and packs 2.5 million pounds of organic lettuce a week. Pollan studied the production from picking to shipping and calculated that “growing, chilling, washing, packaging, and transporting that [one] box of organic salad to a plate on the East Coast takes more than 4,600 calories of fossil fuel energy, or 57 calories of fossil fuel energy for every calorie of food.”

Enter the new buzz phrase “sustainable agriculture,” a growing movement that questions the role of the giant agricultural establishments contributing to the current social, political, and health problems. Now consumers, who are already overloaded with health concerns such as mad cow, trans fat, tainted spinach, and toxic dog food, must learn to calculate the “carbon footprint” of their food choices, organic or not. What’s so healthy about eating organic lamb from New Zealand when the transportation contributes to the dirty air that your kids breathe?

It’s such a serious point that Whole Foods co-owner and CEO John Mackey debated Pollan point by point on Whole Foods’ website.

Eventually the two met in the middle, a move that has created a change in focus for Whole Foods. Stroll down the produce section of any area store and you’ll now find signs screaming “Local” instead of just “Organic.”

Which gets us to our third question: why is local better than organic?

To answer that, let’s look at the other big grocery chain for the conscientious foodie, Central Market. CM sells a variety of organic products, including its own brand, Central Market Organics. But the Texas chain’s central focus is on delicious food, particularly local and regional items. Several times a year, individual stores invite their local farmers to participate in the arrival of their crops. It’s possible to get a slice of peach from the farmer who grew it. The procurement team scours the countryside looking for small producers. In some cases, the team buys the whole crop from a farmer and exports it to one or all of its stores. In other cases, they invest in an emerging company, like Fischer & Wieser. Once the business is up and running and the products are available to the mass market, Central Market will contract Fischer & Wieser to develop products exclusively for Central Market and, in some cases, one product for a specific Central Market location.

But to see the true greatness of local food, you can visit our local farmers markets. Most suburbs now have one, but the largest sits on 11 acres east of downtown. Here, especially on summer weekends, the stalls are alive with farmers, fresh produce, eggs, hormone-free meat and poultry, flowers, honey, and scads of other locally grown or produced edibles.

Once again, though, it’s tough for consumers to figure out which farmers market sellers are really providing “local” food. Because not all of them are farmers. If a site is marked with a “vendor” sign, it could mean the person selling has backed up a truck filled with wholesale wares that they load into cute baskets.

So what is a local-food-lovin’ foodie to do? You can start by emulating me, of course. A few days after my epiphany at the Slow Food event, I headed down to the Dallas Farmers Market. In the mid-1970s, when I was cooking at a (now-closed) restaurant, I went to the Farmers Market and picked up the day’s menu every morning. But this time I spent the morning talking to farmers, vendors, and producers.

Ron Crain, from Wagon Creek Creamery in Helena, Oklahoma, gave me a lesson on farmstead butter made from their grass-fed cows. He handed me a little spoon and I slid a pad of butter in my mouth. It exploded with rich, grassy cream.

At the International Shed I scored again at Texas Supernatural Meats, a co-op of organic farm products including grass-fed and “pastured” lamb, beef, pork, and chicken. I picked up a couple of gorgeous ribeyes (the fat veins were green from grass) and



**GOURMET GOODIES:** Central Market sells organic products as well as locally grown onions. Karen Lukin of Whole Foods. Exotic shiitake mushrooms from Whole Foods are cultivated nearby. *photography by Kevin Hunter Marple*

pork sausage, both from Rehoboth Ranch in Greenville, where, according to their website, “wooly lambs and frisky calves still skip and play in green pastures while children gather golden brown eggs and milk a cranky cow.” The eggs from the green pastures of Rehoboth tasted as idyllic as their prose read.

I shook hands with John Lucido as he packaged up a box of herbs grown on his 10-acre plot in Garland. I thanked the farmer who was too busy unloading her van to chat as I slipped her \$5 for a jar of honey from Sabine Creek Honey Farms in Josephine, just northeast of Plano. I believed I had not only succeeded in identifying many ways I could cook and eat local, but I also felt as though I was providing a road map other concerned eaters could follow. I witnessed the power of talking to farmers and listening to people talk about food in intimate, reverent terms. To these people, food is sacred. When you get to know the people supplying your food, you can stop and appreciate the nourishment their food provides the body and soul of the community.

For the next two nights I cooked local—okay, I used some *fleur de sal* from Portugal and Italian olive oil, but I think the baked free-wheeling chicken raised near Greenville balanced my fossil fuel calories. The result was a phenomenal difference in my mouth and in my heart.

But Central Market's Karen Cassady, also an active member of Les Dames d'Escoffier, AIWF, and, most important, a dear friend, burst my bubble. “You are going to drive yourself crazy,” she says of my newfound dedication. “It's pretty hard to eat all local. Because of our climate here in North Texas, we don't have access to a wide variety of produce year-round.” I guess I'll give her that. I'm not willing to die of scurvy in my quest to eat local. “Expand your concept of local to include Texas,” Cassady says, “and you'll have a much more blanced diet.”

Cassady makes a great point that leads to another dilemma. Instead of one- or two-stop shopping, eating local requires more effort and commitment. In order to keep from going insane, I would have to co-opt some core values. Sure, it was easy to avoid the big name brands that hurt the small farmers, but I'd still go to Costco for toilet paper and ketchup. I couldn't avoid a quick trip to the Albertson's on my way home for orange juice and coffee. But I decided that, as a start, I could move past the guilt and make some changes in the way I thought about buying food, and perhaps in the long run it would make a difference.

I would be mindful of what I eat. Yes, at times I might eat a lamb from New Zealand that has more frequent flyer miles than I do, but in the end the most important thing is to take care of myself. I will eat organic when it makes sense, like with thin-skinned fruits and vegetables. I will spend a little extra money on hormone-free meats and pastured poultry. I will buy local and in season every chance I get. And I will hug a farmer whenever possible.