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## Eating local means figuring out your "food miles"

By Tom Watson

Your green car may get 40 miles per gallon, but how many miles per bite was your lunch?

"Food miles" — how far food travels from the producer to your home — have become the latest preoccupation for folks concerned about their ecological footprint. Transportation of food requires copious amounts of fossil fuels and other resources that contribute to global warming and pollution, so the lower the food mileage we rack up, the better.

Eating local also supports our regional economy and promotes awareness of food and its environmental impacts. Since locally grown food may be picked within a day or so of when we eat it, it will often be fresher and more nutritious.

And when the people who produce our food are closer and more accountable, it helps protect us from contamination problems that have become commonplace in the industrialized food system.

Not all locally grown food is organic, which for some can lead to food-choice dilemmas. And even when you look primarily at food miles, it's a complex matter not easy to calculate.

This guide will help you sort out the different options and trade-offs as you try to buy food produced closer to home.

### Farmers markets

Twenty years ago, Seattle had only the Pike Place Market. Today the Puget Sound area boasts 90 neighborhood farmers markets ([www.pugetsoundfresh.org](http://www.pugetsoundfresh.org)), most open for longer seasons than in years past and several open year-round, in Ballard, the University District, West Seattle and Port Angeles.

### Pluses:

- An increasing array of choices, including vegetables, fruits, meat, fish, dairy products, breads, pasta and honey.
- High level of knowledge about products, since you buy directly from farmers or their employees.
- Prices on local organic produce may be lower than in grocery stores, while farmers keep more of the money.

### Minuses:

- Inefficiencies from a single pickup bringing a farm-load of produce for a weekly event.
- Not conveniently located for all (lower-income residents especially are underserved).

### Future outlook:

- Satellite-distribution networks for farmers markets (being considered in a startup project) could make transportation more efficient, though this might reduce customer interaction with farmers.
- High-growth potential; most neighborhoods want one.

### Community-Supported Agriculture:

With a CSA, you buy a "share" of a local farm and receive a weekly box of fresh produce during the growing season. CSAs may offer centralized pick-up locations, on-farm pick-up, delivery or a combination.

#### Pluses:

- More convenient than farmers markets for some consumers, but with products from many of the same farmers.
- Exposes customers to new food choices.
- Farmers make more than when they sell to stores.

#### Minuses:

- Some customers may have to drive a long distance for pick-up.
- May lead to waste if customers don't like or eat what's in their box.

#### Future outlook:

- Explosive growth of CSAs expected to continue (the 2009 Puget Sound Fresh directory lists 72 CSAs, compared with 34 in 2007).

### Home-delivery services

The Puget Sound Fresh CSA directory has links to eight services that carry a wide variety of organic products, in season mostly from local farms ([www.pugetsoundfresh.org](http://www.pugetsoundfresh.org)); most deliver a weekly predetermined bin but allow substitutions. You can sort for local products on full-service online grocer AmazonFresh's Web site.

#### Pluses:

- Most convenient option for many consumers.
- Customers have more control than with CSAs.

#### Minuses:

- Not as efficient when customers are spread out. (Companies say they try to minimize gas use by keeping delivery routes dense; one, spud!, says its deliveries are carbon neutral but collects a 22-cent-per-order carbon offset fee to help accomplish this).

#### Future outlook:

- Any rises in cost of gas could place pressure on prices. • Full-service grocery-delivery companies will likely expand offerings of local items.

### Natural-food Stores:

PCC Natural Markets and other local food co-ops helped pioneer locally grown foods in this area.

#### Pluses:

- Staff at co-ops often extremely knowledgeable about local foods.
- Expansion of Whole Foods and other non-co-op natural-foods stores has increased awareness of local foods.

#### Minuses:

- Most customers still can't do all shopping at natural-food stores.

#### Future outlook:

- Continued strong focus on local foods, to help set these stores apart from the crowd.

#### Full-service grocery stores:

Major chains have joined the buy-local frenzy. Wal-Mart, for example, calls itself "the nation's largest purchaser of local produce."

#### Pluses:

- Customers' own food miles are reduced by buying all food in one place.
- Large scales of major chains can make transportation efficient.

#### Minuses:

- Customers' level of trust about locally grown food not as high.
- Staff not as likely to know specifics about origins of foods.
- Stores' volume needs and distribution model make it harder to buy from wide array of local smaller farmers.

#### Future outlook

- New project, Puget Sound Food Network, aims to create an online-based, fuel-efficient system to help stores, restaurants, institutions and consumers order from local farmers.
- Chains will keep expanding local offerings if customers demand them.

Growing your own veggies: We're seeing a resurgence of this freshest, safest option.

#### Pluses

- Can reduce food miles to feet.
- No big-time commitment for small-scale vegetable growing (a few lettuce or tomato plants).
- Not necessarily cheaper.
- Large-volume home-food production impractical for many people.

#### Future outlook

- Steady increase likely as more resources and opportunities (such as community gardens) become available.

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