



Local

*By Marcia Rae
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Some words get used so much (or should I say mis-used) that they have lost their meaning, like "love," or "sustainable." We really have very little agreement about what they mean. "Local" is like that. What exactly is local? And, of course, most particular to my concern – what is local food?

I started asking this question in earnest last fall when the Calapooia Food Alliance was awarded a USDA, Farmers Market Promotion Program grant with this stated goal, "this project will increase the amount of local, sustainable food that is being produced and consumed." Well now, that's nice, but what does that mean?

Between the time of writing the grant and receiving the grant, my understanding of local food in our community increased, and changed. In comparing our farmers market to, say, Sweet Home or Lebanon, I came to understand that we have a pretty happening thing going on, yet there are good sized farms in our neighborhood who travel to Portland for a farmers market, but cannot, and will not, sell at ours because our consumer base is too small for them to make a living by selling in Brownsville. With this in mind, how could I affect the economic realities so that people produce and consume more local food?

Well part of the answer to that is in thinking more deeply about what is local. So, I googled local food definition, and come to find out, as usual I am not the first person to ask a question and be stymied. Local food seems to be a relative term rather than an absolute. For instance, if Kristi Glaser is producing local eggs and I buy them at our Farmers Market, they are more local than eggs I might buy at the co-op in Corvallis. But for people living in Eugene, Kristi's eggs are local food. Go figure.

Local can mean anything from produced in my state, or my county or a neighboring county, to the USDA's definition of 400 miles from origin to consumption. I used to think local food was food produced in our foodshed, which I loosely defined as this little Calapooia Valley I live in, but Kristi is out on 7 Mile Lane, and Kim and Steve's farm is on Fry Road. Foodshed is no more help than local food since they roughly mean the same thing. In a US News and World Report poll 85.29% of respondents define local food as food that is grown near my home on a small sustainable farm. How near is near? And why must it be a sustainable farm? In another survey, conducted by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, they found that food produced within 100 miles as the definition most widely-accepted by the general population.

Since the definition of local food seems to be relative, personal, and local, I decided to make up my own definition; food is local if it comes from anywhere in the southern Willamette Valley. This definition, which is a bit broader than "near Brownsville," means we have access to a wider variety of food that is relatively accessible. For a comprehensive list of food that is locally produced and available using this definition, visit willamettelocalfoods.com. Then come to Roots on Tuesday afternoons and pick up your local food.

Munch On This – How do you define local? How do you define local food? Do you shop local? What does that mean to you?

PS – See you at the Farmers Market this Saturday, 9 a.m. to noon, for real local local food. Music by nearly local singer and guitarist, Joe Hall.

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