

My Week of Eating Locally -- and What I Learned

by Cheryl Baehr

May 27, 2015

It is 4:15 p.m. on a Tuesday, and I'm sitting in a Starbucks' drive-through on the verge of delirium. "How did it get to this?" I berate myself as I order coffee and a chocolate croissant. "If this is what eating locally does to a person, count me out."

I am just eight hours into Day One of my "week of eating local" challenge, yet here I am in the parking lot of a multinational corporation, slurping down mass-produced Indonesian coffee and gobbling a defrosted pastry baked in San Francisco. As I suck down my caffeine fix and begin to come to, I try to figure out where I went wrong.<

My plan had been to spend May 6 through May 15 eating only foods sourced from within 150 miles of St. Louis. It was the locavore equivalent of a crash diet: no salt, no coffee, no olive oil, no Burgundy.

Admittedly, the parameters I'd chosen were somewhat arbitrary. "Think about what is important to you," I kept hearing when I asked the experts how to eat local. I never got a straight answer — because there isn't one. The group organizing St. Louis' Local Food Challenge — which kicks off for most participants on May 27 — set a 150-mile radius for its boundaries, but the rest was a bit nebulous. Did I have to stick to it every day, every meal? For how long? Are raw ingredients the most important metric, or can we include independent business such as craft breweries, which manufacture here even if they use hops from, say, Bavaria? As a prominent local chef would later tell me, "Once you start going down this path, you find yourself with questions, not answers."

So what is important to me? I realize that I want to get to the root of what it means to eat local — not just the complicated task of defining terms, but

what it really feels like, as a food lover, home cook, a busy mother and someone on a budget, to forgo food from far away.

As I quickly find out, it's not nearly as romantic as it sounds. Actually, it's pretty awful sometimes, especially if you go for strict definitions and firm rules. Those locavores gaily frolicking through fields of squash blossoms on the cover of a food magazine? Ten bucks says their smiles are as airbrushed as a Victoria's Secret swimsuit catalog.

And yet it's also not that simple. I would discover many things over the course of this one, very long week.

First, coffee is an inalienable right.

Second, you can only eat so many eggs without becoming homicidal.

Third, and most importantly, what it means to eat local is wholly undefinable. It's a matter of personal choice, it's complicated and it's something a person may come to love only after devouring a perfectly prepared Berkshire pork chop.

[Click here](#) for more gorgeous photos of locally grown food.

"Maddie would be so disappointed in me." That's one thought swirling in my head as I sit in the Starbucks parking lot.

I first learned of the St. Louis Local Food Challenge this past February from Maddie Earnest, owner of Local Harvest Grocery and Cafe. The concept was still in the early stages of development, she explained, but the idea was to come up with a way to honor the ten-year anniversary of the Tower Grove Farmers' Market.

As the plan solidified, Earnest and her business partner, Patrick Horine, came up with the idea for a 30-day local-food challenge. During the month of June, challenge participants are encouraged to eat as much local food as possible. They can take it as far as they want, Earnest notes — commit to using only local seasonal produce for three meals per week, say, or make a

complete switch to locally raised meat and dairy. The goal is less ideological purity than raising awareness of the bounty within 150 miles of St. Louis. Period.

I'm the one who decides to complicate things. A textbook overachiever with a stubborn streak, I opt to take the challenge to the most extreme level possible. For one week, I vow, I will eat only items that could be sourced from within 150 miles of St. Louis.

It doesn't start out that badly. Aside from extreme sleep deprivation coupled with the necessary caffeine detox (no one grows coffee beans in Missouri, after all), I begin the day with smug optimism. I haven't yet made it to the store for provisions but fortunately have a few local eggs on hand. "Scrambled farm-fresh eggs? This won't be hard at all," I tell myself as I crack them into a mixing bowl.

Without thinking, I reach for some cream and salt, only to stop myself. I don't have any local cream, and I cannot think of how to get local salt. Then there's the cooking-fat situation: I have no local oil in my pantry, and my butter is mass-produced (somewhere in the U.S.A., the label assures me).

"It won't be that bad," I muse, pouring the whisked eggs unadorned into a non-stick skillet.

After the second, bland bite, I open my computer and begin researching a locally sourced way to season. "If there's a Saline County in Missouri," I curse, "then there has to be a way to get salt." The cracks are already starting to form.

"I don't want to say it, but I think you were setting yourself up for failure," Brian DeSmet laughs when he hears about my locavore plan. "If you're trying to be so extreme — I mean, maybe you could get salt in southern Illinois 150 years ago, but come on. People have been trading for thousands of years."

DeSmet speaks with me from his office: the small, one-seventh-acre garden at Schlafly Bottleworks. You'd be hard-pressed to find a more enthusiastic proponent of local eating than DeSmet. As Schlafly's farmers' market and garden manager, he has made it his mission to reconnect people to the local food economy.

Yet even he thinks my extreme approach is untenable at best and pointless at worst.

"An issue you have is that 100 years ago, eating local wasn't a thing. It was just what people did," DeSmet explains. "A lot was grown and made locally — maybe even salt — but over time, it has all been consolidated into a few big corporations. The systems just aren't there."

For DeSmet, local eating is about restoring these systems and supporting the local food economy. That's what is important to him. Why, he asks, is eating locally important to me? "What purpose does it serve?"

Next: Thinking about what motivates us to eat locally.

If I'm honest, my extremism is a way to atone for some self-righteous behavior. It began with an article I posted on Facebook in January. Mother Jones had published an exposé on the horrifying conditions endured by laborers in northwestern Mexico, all in the name of unblemished fruits and vegetables for U.S. dinner tables. Horrified, I shared the story with a sanctimonious "this is why we eat local" tagline.

Feeling satisfied with having done my part, I continued to scroll through my newsfeed until I was notified of a comment. An old high school friend had read the article and, looking to me as a food expert, earnestly asked how she could begin to make the shift toward local consumption. I had no idea how to answer her.

Her question, and the resulting realization that I was quite possibly a fraud, prompted me to reach out to DeSmet and his colleague Tom Flood, Schlafly's properties and sustainability manager.

"So, how does one eat local?" I ask, notebook in hand as if prepared to jot down a few bullet points.

DeSmet and Flood smile in the way I imagine Albert Einstein might have done upon being asked, "So, tell me about this gravity thing." Their answer is probably as complicated.

"What do you mean by 'local'?" Flood asks. "Are you talking about within Missouri or 150 miles? Or 300 miles? Is organic important to you? Sustainability? Antibiotic-free and humanely raised meat? If you want local, are you OK that it's not necessarily organic?" Head spinning, I leave our lengthy conversation more muddled than when we began.

That two pillars of the St. Louis slow-food scene cannot clearly define what is meant by "local eating" should have tipped me off that I'd be in for a rough week if I stay the extreme course I've charted.

Still, I refuse to concede defeat this early. Even if it is well past lunchtime and nothing in my house adheres to my self-imposed rules, save for more eggs.

I bitterly make my daughter a grilled cheese sandwich, the scent of Irish butter and California sourdough almost too much to bear. "I'll get to Local Harvest after her nap," I assure myself and guzzle a large glass of water.

Then the caffeine headache sets in.

Anyone who has experienced withdrawal knows exactly what I mean. Irritability is Stage I, where it's the end of the world that you can't find the remote control. For me, this hits sometime around noon.

Stage II begins around 3 p.m. as a generalized fog, like someone has wrapped my head in a pillow. By the time I reach the icepick-in-eyeball headache that defines Stage III, I have two choices: coffee or medication.

"This is asinine. Why am I doing this? I'm just going to grab a cup and not tell anyone," I grumble.

I resign myself to be true to my craft until my toddler has a 90-minute nap-fighting meltdown. It's more than I can bear. Starving, fiending like a junkie and completely at my wits' end, I strap her into the car seat and drive straight to Starbucks.

Minutes later, flakes of buttery pastry still on my lips, I look at myself in the rearview mirror with intense shame. I can't bear to go into Local Harvest at this point. They'll smell the corporate coffee on me.

I have another egg for dinner.

With a belly full of — surprise — scrambled eggs, I head to Local Harvest the next morning to pick up provisions. Clearly, people who post photos on Instagram of Missouri's rainbow cornucopia of fruits and vegetables do so in August, not May. My choices are greens, greens, meat, dairy and greens. Oh, and mushrooms — basically the low-sodium Atkins diet.

"Yeah, you get into February, and it's pretty scarce," Maddie Earnest concedes. "You're just standing there depressed, looking at a bunch of old sweet potatoes and onions."

A social worker by trade, Earnest opened Local Harvest eight years ago (with partner Horine) to be St. Louis' source of local, sustainable and humanely raised produce, vegetables and staples. Quite the locavore cheerleader, Earnest walks me through the store, pointing out all of the surprising foodstuffs I can eat during my challenge.

"Look at this milk," she says, pointing out one of the store's new products: a yellow-hued jug of local, hormone and antibiotic-free raw cow's milk. "I just scoop the cream off of the top and eat it. My son wonders how anyone can eat that much cream. I can." She gives me some Missouri pecans and walks me around to the St. Charles honey and sorghum.

I ask about the fruit situation — whether anything is available, preserved or fresh — and she's realistic. "In a dream world, we would be canning and preserving in the summer so that we would have them for the late winter.

Honestly, though, in 'times of yore' people would eat really meat-heavy and rely on what was in storage. Luckily, farmers are now able to grow things in greenhouses. It's a bit of a false season, but it works, and is a way for us to have produce and farmers to have income year round."

I wonder about our romanticism of the "times of yore" Earnest speaks of, and can't help but think that a pioneer would consider winter strawberries like my 60-something maternity nurse considered epidurals: "Why on earth wouldn't you want one? I would have killed for one when I had my nine-pound baby without pain relief." I think of how difficult life on the prairie would have been, relying on stockpiles of root vegetables and dried meat for months on end. Potatoes and salt pork for days? Progress is a good thing.

But I get Earnest, DeSmet and Flood's point: For the most part, we've become completely disconnected from our food, dependent on large-scale corporate agriculture and all too willing to fill our bodies with food of questionable safety and quality. You need only consider Frontline's recent gag-inducing expose of the poultry industry to support the small-scale farmers who try to raise their animals in a more humane and sanitary way.

"For me, I can break it down to three main reasons for why it's important to eat local," Earnest says. "First, it's important to support the local and regional economy. It's a way to have a direct impact on where you live. Think about it — you can shift an economy with your dollars."

She continues, "Think about how food is grown and produced, and the environmental impact of what you choose to eat. The third reason relates to the second: Think about what you are putting into your body. It comes down to a health decision. Oh, and then there is the foodie reason: that it just tastes better."

I'm pumped from my pep talk and armed with a newfound enthusiasm for the week, even sans coffee. For lunch, I sauté some green onions, sunflower shoots and lion's mane mushrooms. Local Harvest is out of walnut oil, so I cheat and use a dash of olive oil, but still no salt. The meal is delicious and

made from two ingredients (the mushrooms and the sprouts) that I would normally pass on.

My dinner plans are more conservative — chicken and sautéed kale — but once again I hit a roadblock: The chicken fails to thaw on time and my husband isn't hungry.

I eat a vegetable omelet. At this point, I've eaten so many eggs that I'm worried I'll be found in the back yard scratching in the dirt.

I'm thrilled to have yogurt back in my life after my Local Harvest shopping excursion (and even more thrilled to have an egg-less meal), but my excitement turns to horror when I open the refrigerator.

"I think something is wrong with the fridge," my husband has been saying for days, but I paid him no attention. Now the warm air and smell of spoiling food forces me to face a terrible fact: The refrigerator is broken. "All of my food is in there," I protest.

I have no idea what to do about the challenge. My neighborhood grocery is worthless. I can't run all the way down to Local Harvest, shop, return to the house and cook. It would take at least an hour, maybe two, and by that time, I would have a full-blown toddler revolt on my hands.

The real problem, though, is that I can think of no restaurant that will satisfy the requirements of the challenge. That's the thing about dining out when trying to eat locally: It's not happening. Sure, there's Niche or the Libertine or Sidney Street Cafe or any number of higher-end places that have made an honorable commitment to offering locally sourced food. For the most part, however, a locavore ideologue looking to dine out quickly and casually is out of luck. Mom wants to try a cute little tearoom for Mother's Day? That quiche is probably made with factory eggs and wheat from unknown origins. Craving pizza? You'd better plan well in advance to make your own, dough and all, because there is no going out for a slice.

To be fair to Earnest, her intention was never to make this an endurance test. "We talked off and on about the idea of the challenge and thought, 'Surely this has been done before.' I did a little research and found out that New Orleans does something very similar, so we modeled ours off of that."

Unlike the New Orleans Eat Local Challenge, which allows participants to choose between four levels of strictness (the lowest level is just a twice-weekly dalliance), Earnest created goal sheets for St. Louis participants. "Have fun with it!" Earnest cheerfully exclaims, encouraging people to take things as far as they want without killing themselves.

I, however, am not having fun. Clearly, I'm missing the point of what this is about, even as I feel guilty contemplating a shift, as if any concessions are a way of giving up.

Something has to change, though. I call the repairman, pack up my daughter, and decide to redefine my parameters.

As I drive around in search of an acceptable breakfast spot — something in the spirit of the challenge, if not its letter — my thoughts drift toward Barbara Kingsolver and her book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. Like Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Kingsolver's book has become a sacred text of the locavore movement, detailing her year of living off the land at a family farm in rural Virginia. She doesn't hide that she moved from Tucson to make the experiment work, which suggests she realized that she couldn't sustain herself on prickly pears and roadrunners for a year.

We are much luckier than Kingsolver's Arizona brethren. Yes, pickings are slim in the off-season, but we Midwesterners have ample land for animal husbandry and a fertile soil that yields a bounty of crops. If there is any place you can still eat local in 2015, it's here.

But another resource is in play besides the food that is available to us. Perhaps more important is the economic commitment that is required to eat more local and sustainable foods.

DeSmet insists there are ways to do it on the cheap. "When you really look at it, getting produce at a farmers' market is no more expensive than going to the grocery store," he says. Growing your own food is also an economic option, one he actively encourages.

But another precious resource is required: time. Though it is certainly possible, I find it difficult to imagine a working single mother taking the time to cultivate the land when she barely has enough time to shower twice a week. Even scrambling to get across town to visit the "right" grocery store is proving a challenge for me.

My extreme challenge also exposes the complicated way that local artisans fit into a commitment to eating local. If the point is to support the local food economy, what about the independent coffee roasters using African beans, the craft breweries who import their hops, the corner bakeries using sugarcane? Surely they're part of the local food economy. Was I wrong to discount them?

As I pull into my neighborhood coffee and bakeshop, Colleen's Cookies, I think of the woman who owns it, Colleen Thompson, and how she parlayed a few hundred cookies baked for a charity event into a small, independent business. Yet in my ideological purity, I'd lumped her in with Wal-Mart. It just didn't seem right.

"I want my dollars to support re-growing the local food economy," DeSmet says. "At the farmers' market, we support local farmers, but also local businesses." He speaks of Estie Cruz-Curoe, owner of del Carmen, whose Cuban-style black beans are sold at area farmers' markets. Her raw ingredients, including the beans, are sourced throughout the United States, so technically, they're not a purely local product.

However, del Carmen has created jobs in the community as Cruz-Curoe has expanded and hired more employees. "That's what is important," DeSmet says. "When you support the local economy rather than going to a big-box store, the money stays here. Fundamentally, that's what matters."

Earnest echoes DeSmet's words when I ask her about things like coffee and salt. "Our challenge is unlike the New Orleans one in that we want to bring attention to local artisans," Earnest explains. "We're never going to have coffee and chocolate grown here. That's not the point. The point is that maybe you will think about going to a local place for those things."

I settle into my booth at Colleen's Cookies with a cup of Stringbean coffee and a handmade biscuit. Were it not for the challenge, I might have gone back to Starbucks. Earnest's plan is working after all.

By the time I talk to Nate Hereford, I've transitioned from thesis to antithesis and am making my way to synthesis. "That's the creative process," he says. "Whether it's food or music or whatever. We live in a society where we expect things to be easy, but it's not. This is challenging, but it's rewarding too."

Hereford, Yoda-like in his wisdom of local eating, has had more time to find his zen with hyper-regionalism than just about anybody in St. Louis. As chef de cuisine at Niche, he's been toying with what it means to eat local since 2009, when he and owner Gerard Craft decided to make the transition to an ultra-local menu.

"We wanted to showcase all of the awesome ingredients here in Missouri and Illinois, so we started out with sourcing things we could get within a day's drive," Hereford explains. "We just kept shrinking our zone until we got to the point where over 90 percent of what we do is from Missouri."

If my concept of eating local is extreme, Niche's borders on the absurd. Aside from a handful of pantry items like salt (they can't figure out how to source it from within Missouri either) and white vinegar, the restaurant's menu is entirely comprised of ingredients that are grown or raised within 300 miles of St. Louis. Hereford and his team make their own pungent vinegar substitute from fish guts. Tangy whey from their housemade yogurt approximates the acidity that a lemon might provide, and beets and sorghum stand in for sugar.

Hereford is sympathetic to my angst. "I'm not going to lie to you. It's hard," he acknowledges. "We asked some serious questions when we began, like: If we do this, do we lose our identities as chefs? As a restaurant? It's really hard. I remember talking to people in March and them telling me I wouldn't see [certain foods] for five or six weeks. I was like, 'Five or six weeks? I can't make it that long.' I had a panic attack."

As a culinary professional, it's Hereford's job to spend his days preparing food, playing with ingredients and wrapping his head around how to meet the constraints of such an onerous challenge. Going this far as an amateur home cook — without infinite amounts of time and money — would be impossible.

Hereford encourages me to push past my feelings of being overwhelmed with the challenge, noting that he feels the ingredient restrictions at Niche have benefited him professionally. "You learn when you back yourself into a corner," he laughs.

I was certainly backed into a corner, but I still didn't feel the creativity flowing — that is, until I made my trip to Bolyard's Meat & Provisions.

I accepted an invitation to my friends' house for dinner on the week of my experiment with the caveat that I would only be eating local foods. They were up to the challenge. They would pick up all of the accompaniments and staples if I would buy the meat.

That's when I head to Bolyard's Meat & Provisions, a local butcher shop opened in Maplewood last November by former Sidney Street Cafe chef de cuisine Chris Bolyard. It serves only humanely and sustainably raised meats from small Midwestern farms.

I have the idea of buying some Missouri-raised rib-eyes, until I encounter the benefit of chatting up the butcher rather than picking up prepackaged meat from a supermarket case. "Listen," the man behind the counter tells me. "I know you want rib-eyes — and they are great — but if you're grilling, you have to try our pork chops."

I'm not really in the mood for pork, but his enthusiasm convinces me to order a few chops. They're from the Circle B Ranch heritage breed Berkshire hogs that spend their days in Seymour, Missouri, foraging for acorns and, per Bolyard's website, getting their bellies rubbed by farm owner John Backes. (And to think I'd wanted to come back in my next life as a cat.)

When I get to my friends' house, the care shown to the pork, both in how it was raised and how it was butchered, becomes immediately apparent. We unwrap the package and gasp. There before us is the most glorious piece of pork any of us has ever seen: inch-thick and so marbled it looks like a slab of bacon fashioned into the shape of a chop. My friend has to dodge the flames from all the fat dripping off them when he lays them on the grill.

"I'm human. I go to the grocery store for meat every now and then," Hereford admits. "But I look at it — at the color — and it just doesn't seem right." Good meat may be much pricier, he notes, but when you buy the industrially processed stuff on a bed of styrofoam, "you're getting shortchanged."

To say that we perceive the value in our local pork during our dinner this night is an understatement. It is life-changing, the kind of food that makes you wake up the next morning wondering when you can have another bite.

And it isn't just the pork. My friend makes a kale-and-green-onion torte with Missouri hard-winter wheat flour and freshly churned butter (he had a churn from his daughter's school's Pioneer Week) that is as good as any side dish I could have asked for. The first-of-the-season asparagus is without the slightest hint of stringiness and, when paired with the pork, a Missouri Norton makes me rethink my disdain toward locally produced wine.

The only item we use that comes from further than 150 miles away is salt. And yet this dinner is one of the most delicious meals I have had in a very long time, challenge or no challenge.

"Think about what is important to you."

When I spoke with Earnest, DeSmet, Flood, Hereford and anyone else about local eating, the first question I posed was, "So how do you go about making the change? Where do you start?" Their answers were always the same — it's a matter of individual priorities. DeSmet worried that such a vague answer might sound like a cop-out, but a week removed from my self-imposed extreme locavore diet, I have come to appreciate why there is no clear answer.

If we think of local eating as aspirational rather than a strict set of rules, the question of individual priorities makes sense. What do I want my food system to look like?

Reflecting on the week, my utopian vision includes heritage pork, sunflower shoots and independent coffee roasters. For DeSmet, it's a place where people are competent home gardeners and cooks. For Hereford, it's an ever-expanding bounty of Missouri vegetables.

As for Earnest, she just wants people to find the joy in what they eat. When I last visit Local Harvest, she has recently received a delivery of first-of-the-season strawberries. I had previously eaten yogurt and berries nearly every day for the last ten years, only to give it up for the locavore challenge. Seeing the vibrant red beauties glistening like jewels on the produce rack felt like Christmas morning.

I had come to take my fruit for granted. Now, here I am, in awe of a simple box of produce.

That's what's important to me.

The St. Louis Local Foods Challenge kicks off this week, but it's not too late to join in the festivities. The brainchild of the Tower Grove Farmers' Market, the event asks participants to source as much food as possible throughout the 30 days of June from within 150 miles of the city. It costs

\$30 to enroll, but perks include a \$20 credit for local produce and a card good for a free meal at Chipotle. For more details, see stlfoodchallenge.org.