Title:
Local or Organic? A False Choice

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Summary:
Think about what you're buying. If you want local food, buy local. If you want organic, buy organic. The point is to make a conscious choice, because as we insert our values into the market, businesses respond and things change.

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Article Body:
A couple of years ago, I visited an organic vegetable farm in southeast Minnesota, not far from the Mississippi River. Nestled in a valley that sloped down from rolling pasture and cropland sat Featherstone Fruits and Vegetables, a 40-acre farm.

Featherstone was part of a local food web in the upper Midwest, selling at a farmers' market, through a CSA (community supported agriculture) and to co-op stores in the Twin Cities. But the partners, Jack Hedin and Rhys Williams, who began in 1995, were having a tough time economically and realized they would have to boost sales if they were to become viable. The farm earned about $22,000 a year -- split between the two partners -- so they had to take on debt to keep going; this, after a 60 to 70 hour work week.

Hedin told me he made some calls and eventually landed a deal with Whole Foods to supply the natural foods chain with organic heirloom tomatoes. When I visited, they were in year two of the contract, picking the tomatoes before their peak ripeness, then shipping them to Chicago for stores in the Midwest. The deal had become the biggest sales channel for their farm; while still "local," they were not as local as when they sold in their backyard.

There was a lesson here, one that often gets lost in the debate about which is better, local or organic? Too often this is understood as a zero sum game -- that the money you spend on organic food at the supermarket will mean less for local farmers. After all, the food you buy is being shipped from who knows where and then often ends up in a processed food product. I've heard the argument that if all the money spent on organic food (around $14 billion) were actually

channeled to local food, then a lot more small farms would survive and local food networks could expand. Well, Featherstone was doing precisely the opposite: it had entered the organic wholesale marketplace and then sent its tomatoes hundreds of miles away to survive as a small and, yes, local farm.

As consumers, it's hard to understand these realities since we're so divorced from the way food is produced. Even for conscious consumers who think about values other than convenience and price -- avoiding pesticides, the survival of small farms, artisan food, and, of course, the most basic values, freshness and taste -- choices must be made. Should we avoid pesticides at all costs or help small local farmers who may use them? Should we reduce food shipment miles, or buy food produced in an ecologically sound manner regardless of where it's grown? These questions arise because we want to do what's right.

The problem, though, is that these questions set up false choices. What Hedin and others showed me was that when it comes to doing the right thing, what really mattered was thinking about the choice -- to be aware, to stay informed, and to be conscious of our role as consumers. But what you actually chose -- local or organic -- didn't really matter.

Hedin, for example, was competing against farmers he actually knew on the West Coast, who also supplied organic produce to Whole Foods. I met one, Tim Mueller of River Dog Farm, in the one-bar town of Guinda, California. His farm sold produce at the Berkeley Farmers Market about 90 minutes away, but he was also tied to wholesale markets. (I saw River Dog's heirloom tomatoes in western Massachusetts.) For these organic farmers, selling wholesale was a foundation for economic sustainability.

Moreover, by expanding the organic market, we may be actually helping local farmers. The USDA surveyed farmers' markets and found that about a third of farmers selling direct were organic -- local and organic, that is. In comparison, just one percent of all American farms practice organic agriculture. So for smaller-scale farmers selling direct, organic food has become a key component of their identity. By bringing more people into the organic fold, through whatever gateway they happened to choose, the pool of consumers considering local food would likely increase too.

That's at least what Jim Crawford, a farmer from south central Pennsylvania believed. His 25-acre operation, New Morning Farm, works two farmers’ markets in Washington, D.C., and Jim played a key role in the growth of local foods in the region, having started out as an organic farmer in the 1970s. He told me he worried when Whole Foods opened a supermarket near his farmers' market location in Washington because he thought he would lose customers. But over time, he

noticed, sales kept rising. He thought the supermarket, which stocked a lot of organic produce from California, was actually converting customers to organic food and they in turn were finding their way to his market.

But what about companies that have pursued the organic marketplace without any concern for local food? What about, say, Earthbound Farm, which has grown into the third largest organic brand and the largest organic produce company in the nation, with its bagged salad mixes in three-quarters of all supermarkets? The company fiercely competed with other organic growers who later went out of business; its salad was grown organically but with industrial-scale agriculture; and the trucks that shipped the salad around the country burned through a lot of fossil fuel.

But Earthbound was competing with the likes of Dole, Fresh Express and ReadyPac in the mainstream market to offer consumers an organic choice. It did little for local food (a saving grace, since it left the market to smaller players). But Earthbound farmed on 26,000 acres of certified organic land, which meant that 267,000 pounds of pesticides and 8.4 million pounds of chemical fertilizers were being removed from use annually, the company estimated. And as studies repeatedly show, organic farming also saves energy (since the production of fertilizer and pesticides consumes one-third of the energy used in farming overall). Earthbound's accomplishments should not be ignored -- even if they are anything but local.

Which brings me to a final point: How we shop. Venues like Whole Foods are not fully organic because people are often unwilling to spend more than a small portion of their grocery budget on organic foods. It's too expensive. This is one reason why organic food accounts for just two percent of food sales -- one percent if you include eating out. Similarly, local foods, though important, total 1-2 percent. So arguing over local or organic is a bit like two people in a room of 100 fighting over who has the more righteous alternative to what the other 98 people are doing. It doesn't really matter, because the bigger issue is swaying the majority.

When I shop, visiting the Dupont Circle farmers market in Washington, D.C., on Sunday morning and then going to the supermarket, I make choices. I buy local, organic, and conventional foods too, because each meets a need. Is the local product "better" than the organic one? No. Both are good choices because they move the food market in a small way. In choosing them, I can insert my values into an equation that for too long has been determined only by volume, convenience and price. While I have nothing against low prices and convenient shopping, the blind pursuit of these two values can wreak a lot of damage -- damage that we ultimately pay for in water pollution, toxic pesticide exposure,

livestock health, the quality of food and the loss of small farms. The total bill may not show up at the cash register but it's one we pay nonetheless.

So what's my advice? Think about what you're buying. If you want local food, buy local. If you want organic, buy organic. The point is to make a conscious choice, because as we insert our values into the market, businesses respond and things change. There's power in what we do collectively, so is there any reason to limit it unnecessarily?

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