

Eat Local Week

I'll Have the All Local, Please

Max Morange, *Sustainable Connections*

On Friday night, September 2, 2005, I thought about breakfast—not just any breakfast, however, but the all-local breakfast I would eat the next morning before setting up my booth at the Bellingham Farmers Market. I had been planning the logistics of Sustainable Connections' Eat Local Week since early August, talking to chefs and farmers, researching recipes, and thinking about the gastronomic bounty that the Northwest has to offer at this harvest time of year. Along with 41 other local food advocates, I had pledged to eat entirely within Whatcom, Skagit, and Island Counties for the week leading up to the annual Slow Food & Farm Friends Harvest Dinner. The idea was to celebrate our local food shed and raise awareness about the vast array of food available right in our own backyard, but I realized at 8 pm on that Friday night that I had forgotten to go grocery shopping. There wasn't much in my house that I could eat come Saturday morning.

While planning the week, I had thought a lot about where I might go to get locally grown, caught, or raised grocery items, had even researched where I could find the specialties like cheese and nuts that make eating a joy for me, but hadn't actually gone to get any of it. So, I soon returned to my kitchen with ten pounds of russet, Yukon, and fingerling potatoes, seven large sweet onions, a bag of brilliant orange carrots, a weighty green bell pepper, and a flat of thirty beautiful brown free-range organic eggs. As I stocked my cupboard with these goods, I pondered the bags of rice and pasta, the cornmeal and beans that I pushed aside and which usually give structure to my meals. "How much do I really get from my local farmers after all?" I thought to myself. Apparently not as much as I believed.

As the week progressed, I found my repertoire expanding and my

attitude shifting for the positive and more adventurous. What had at first seemed a scant selection of items from which to choose became by the end of the week an invitation to explore the deep and delicious field of locally produced food. I tried more unusual vegetables and foods that I had never before noticed in my local grocery market or on the farms near my house. The pedigree of tubers, edible greens, and berries that found their way into my kitchen became successively more complex and consequently much richer. To my delight, I found that buffalo and grass-fed beef made wonderful additions to recipes calling for pork or tofu. I could make my own butter with the cream from raw milk. I have never had such vibrant and delicious salads. Hazelnut tea stood in marvelously for my morning cocoa. Long after Eat Local Week, I have incorporated into my cooking the flavor discoveries from that culinary journey.

My experience working with the chefs of the restaurants that participated in celebrating our local food shed gave me an even more profound respect for them and the wonderful things they could make with all local ingredients. Not satisfied to simply combine the local items already used in their regular menu, each chef created a menu item truly inspired by the spirit of the week. Even after hearing several testimonials, I was still impressed to learn of the trials and tribulations that accompanied such endeavors as drying salt or smoking salmon at 2 am for the following evening's special. The chefs suggested ways to expand the event in the coming years as well.

David and Judith Laws were two of many pleased diners and Eat Local devotees. They decided to spend their summer vacation money to eat out at each participating restaurant and wrote to tell me of their experience one day, saying, "We ordered the Eat



Local menu item at Mannino's Italian Restaurant, and after our first taste we said, 'This tastes like real food, just picked out of the garden.' What a surprise to have Chef Sam Crannell come out and tell us that indeed, he had gone out early that morning and gathered the food we were eating from farms in Whatcom County." When I called to congratulate Sam, he told me how pleased he'd been to be a part of the program. "Cooking and eating local is the way to go—you can count me in next year."

While I cannot say that during Eat Local Week I forgot entirely about those favorites that originate far from my home, I did experience a changed appreciation for them after the week had passed. Chocolate, for instance, or a banana on breakfast cereal, were things that I was very pleased to re-admit to my diet. However, I have been more conscious of their foreignness to the culinary landscape of my home. The point of the week was not to limit the range of our diets or to test self-control but, having eaten all local and expanded our knowledge about and taste for the wonderful array of delicious food grown practically on our doorsteps, my hope is that we will continue to seek out and celebrate those local specialties and farm fresh staples that make this place agriculturally and culinarily distinct.

For more information, contact Sustainable Connections at 360-647-7093 or see their website at www.sconnect.org.