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She's on the local diet

May 8, 2008

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By Wynne Everett, Staff writer

I love mangoes.

Sweet, juicy, perfectly ripe, slightly pine-smelling orange mangoes weren't anything I ate as a kid. I never even knew they existed - my family refers to green bell peppers as mangoes - until I was in my 20s. They were hard to find in the grocery store 10 years ago and they were pricey. Now you can have them year-round, usually for about a buck a piece, and generally from Peru.

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The only problem is, Peru is about 3,800 miles from Chicago.

Donna Vickroy



Wynne Everett, a SouthtownStar city editor, is going to only eat food this summer that comes from within 100 miles of Tinley Park.

(Art Vassy/SouthtownStar)

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Wynne's rules, er... make that guidelines

The Goal: For as much of my diet as possible to be produced within 100 miles of Tinley Park

Exemptions: Sugar, olive oil, salt and pepper, tea, the occasional pop, vodka, tequila

Challenge: Eating locally will require a great deal of planning. Like most of us, I am accustomed to being able to grab any number of ready-to-eat processed consumer food products without so much as considering where they come from. I'm going to need to get good at planning, shopping and stocking up.

Web sites about eating locally
www.sustainabletable.org

www.locavores.com

100milediet.org

www.animalvegetablemiracle.com

www.eatlocalchallenge.com

I've been reading in recent months about a campaign to improve the environment, local economies and food quality. It goes by many names. Founders of a group in San Francisco call themselves locavores. Some folks in western Canada created what they call the "100-mile diet." Author Barbara Kingsolver and her family spent a year eating almost exclusively what they could grow or make for themselves on a Virginia farm, resulting in a book called "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle."

In every case, proponents argue that if I chose some local strawberries or apples over that Peruvian mango, I'd be a healthier, happier and a more environmentally friendly food consumer.

OK, it isn't entirely that simple. Mangoes aren't solely to blame for a recession, global warming or bad nutrition.

But the idea intrigued me and local-eating proponents sold me on the basic notion that if you can choose local food over stuff that has to be trucked to you over hundreds or thousands of miles, you're making a good choice.

- Local produce is fresher, and fresher food tastes better.
- It takes less fuel to get local food to my plate, thereby helping the environment.
- Buying locally produced food helps our local economy.

"It's really good for your local community," said Diane Hatz, founder and director of the New York-based group Sustainable Table. "When you buy food from local farmers that farmer takes that money and goes to the local diner or the local store. That money stays in your community."

And hey, I live in the Midwest. This is where the food comes from. I mean, how hard can this be?

Hatz tried eating local and was similarly enthusiastic when she started.

"I lasted all of 20 seconds, which is when I realized my tea came from the bark of some tree in South

Africa," she said.

Now, to some local-eating proponents this wouldn't even be cheating. While some follow strict diets and only eat food with all-local ingredients, others make lists of exceptions - typically spices, olive oil and coffee or tea. Still others are quite flexible and encourage consumers to choose local food when it's an option.

The local food movement is gaining popularity. In 2007 the word "locavore" was the Oxford University Press' word of the year.

"It's the big buzzword," Hatz said. "The community of people involved in this are very supportive and it's a totally doable thing. I tell people that the challenge with eating locally is actually sitting down and planning. All the food you need is available. You just have to spend some time on the weekends planning your menus and your shopping."

I think I will end up eating healthier. Eating local food is likely to mean gathering local ingredients and preparing my own food, I suspect. This should mean fewer preservatives and other chemicals that come with processed food.

I also think I will get some nice bonding experiences with my mother and grandmothers, all of whom I remember helping can tomatoes and freeze beans and make jam when I was a little girl. I want to preserve fresh produce when it's plentiful and try to extend my local-food project into the fall and winter.

I am a little concerned that I'll crave mangoes, but Hatz was encouraging.

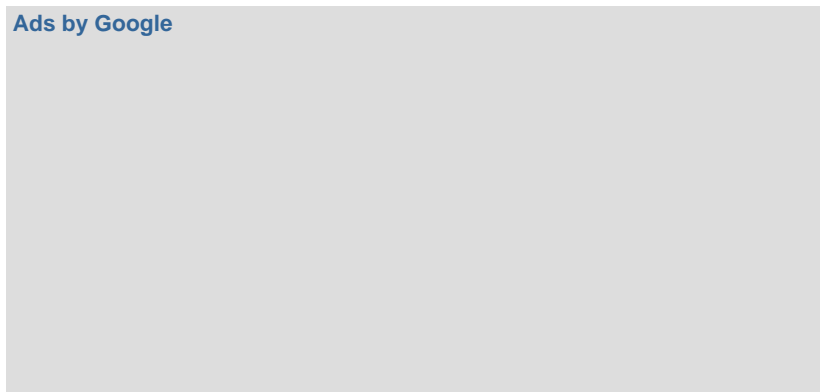
"Maybe you'll discover new stuff," she said. "You'll find foods you never knew about before."

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