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Grow Local, Buy Local Part 1.

By the time everyone in the US reaches adulthood, chances are, they know how to purchase and operate a car. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the production of one's own food. Years ago, common knowledge typically included an understanding of food production. Vegetables, herbs, fruits and grains were routinely produced, processed and stored in households. Alas, "the good life" has reached most of us now, and the knowledge, experience, and I argue, the freedom associated with self-provision is not part of it. In this series of columns we will begin looking at our food system and the role of producers and consumers.

For most of us today, our food comes to us from the farmer through an ever-growing complex of handlers, processors, transporters, distributors, wholesalers, and retailers. The result, often touted by food industry proponents is the cheapest and safest food supply in the world. Is it really so? Let's take a look.

Cheap food, really!

Without question, the average US consumer spends relatively little on food. Including the 2 meals most of us eat outside of our homes daily, about 10-12% of income is spent on food purchases. No other country can come close. Our on-farm production technology using chemical pesticides, bioengineered seeds, and huge, economies-of-scale-meeting equipment has driven the raw cost of production down to an amazing level. Keep in mind, however, that as consumers pay less for food, farmers, whose prices are set at the market, are taking in less for their products. Those "savings" we all enjoy relative to the rest of the world come at a price to farmers in the form of lower commodity prices. As the profit margin available to farmers thins, the food production industry consolidates. Hence, we have huge conglomerates responsible for significant aspects of our food system. More on that later.

Safe?

Who do you trust? Remember the recent recall of 24.7 million pounds of poultry, the largest recall in history? According to the Food Safety Inspection Service, voluntary recalls of meat products in 2002 are more than 4 times the number reported in 1996 (http://www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/recalls/rec_intr.htm). A widely used commercial pesticide, chlorpyrifos, is being removed from the household pest market due to its effect on children, but it is still widely used in food production. Mancozeb is a fungicide labeled for use on nearly every vegetable and grain crop grown in the US. The use of mancozeb and other fungicides to protect crops from disease is one of the reasons our food is so "cheap." Take a look at the protective equipment required for the application of this product to *the food we eat daily*: Self contained breathing apparatus, chemical splash goggles, chemical resistant gloves and chemical resistant apron. Does this really seem OK?

A food system like ours requires consumers to put a lot of trust in "the system" to deliver products clean and free of contamination. You don't have to go far to find growing occurrence of problems related to pesticide exposure (<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/living/DailyNews/dursban000621.html>). The long-term affects of these products are not required to be known prior to registration by EPA. But we are starting to see the results of long-term exposure now after 50 years of usage in US food production. If everything is just fine with our current food production system, why are organic foods the fastest growing segment in the grocery industry?

I hope I've piqued your interest in this topic. The goal here is to encourage readers of this column to look critically at our current food system, and to consider becoming *producers* of food rather than simply consumers. Stay tuned!