



Buying Directly From a Farmer

Consumers can bypass the corporate food bottleneck

We live in an age when farmers don't know where their food is going, and consumers don't know where it's coming from. This has created an unsustainable food system that serves to reward an inefficient industrialized system of production, processing, packaging and transportation. But more consumers are seeking out farmers on their own and buying food from them directly. This type of food shopping provides the kind of one-on-one, trusting relationship with farmers that no amount of labeling or marketing can provide, plus it sustains the values of eaters and farmers alike.



How do you find a farmer?

◆ **Farmers' markets.** These events often take place once a week during the growing season. They mostly consist of produce farmers, but meat, eggs, dairy products, honey and other items are also often available. These markets offer a great way to meet a farmer and build up a relationship over time. However, don't assume that just because a farmer has a table set up at a farmers' market means he or she is producing food in a manner that fits your needs and desires. Some careful, respectful questioning can help you determine which farmers you would like to build long-term relationships with (see "Questions to ask" section).

◆ **Field days.** Organizations like the Land Stewardship Project and the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota often hold field days on farms. These events are designed to showcase innovative production methods and the strong correlation between good food and a healthy environment. Such events are usually targeted at other farmers, but they can also be a great way for non-farmers to see sustainable agriculture in action and to meet farmers who might be direct-marketing food.

◆ **Meat lockers, garden stores, elevators and other businesses** that service the farm community are good sources of information.

◆ **Farmer lists.** Various nonprofit organizations and government agencies provide listings of farmers who direct market food (see "Resources" section on the reverse page).

◆ **Store labels.** Browse your local grocery store/co-op for the growing array of labeled items produced by farmers from the region.

Questions to ask

When contacting the farmers, consider asking these questions when trying to determine if their production methods fit your priorities and values:

◆ Are the animals raised on well-managed pastures or deep-bedded straw (hogs) at least part of the time?

◆ How are antibiotics and hormones used in animal production? Why are they used? Are they used only to treat illness, or are they used regularly on a sub-therapeutic level to boost production?

◆ Are vegetables, fruits and grains produced using chemicals? If so, are integrated pest management techniques used to reduce reliance on chemicals as much as possible?

◆ Are conservation tillage techniques such as minimum till, no till and ridge till used?

◆ Are diverse rotations that involve small grains, forages and perennial grasses used?

A few handy definitions

◆ **Community Supported Agriculture (CSA):** This is a system where consumers buy a "share" in a farm before the growing season begins. In return, they receive a weekly delivery of fresh produce throughout the season. This arrangement allows eaters to share in the rewards, as well as the risks, of farming.

◆ **Integrated pest management (IPM):** An approach to managing pests that combines biological, cultural, physical and chemical means to reduce environmental risks.

◆ **Conservation tillage:** When preparing a field or garden for planting, care is taken to disturb the soil as little as possible and to leave dead plant material from the previous crop as a protective cover.

◆ **Grass-based livestock production:** A large part of an animal's nutritional needs are met through grass, in particular via managed rotational grazing systems that rotate livestock through numerous paddocks, spreading manure in a biologically sound manner. This method also provides healthy feed for ruminant animals.

◆ **Certified organic:** A third-party certifying agency has documented that the food has been produced without such inputs as insecticides, herbicides, petroleum-based fer-

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tilizers, genetically-modified organisms, hormones or growth-promoting antibiotics. In addition, certified organic farms must utilize management systems that protect water, soil and wildlife.

◆ **Natural:** According to the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, "natural" can be used on a label as long as a product does not "contain any artificial flavor or flavoring, coloring ingredient, chemical preservative or any other artificial or synthetic ingredient; and the products and its ingredients are not more than minimally processed (ground, for example)." In other words, "natural" does not officially tell a consumer anything about how that food was raised.

Before you leave home

Traveling to a farm to buy food is not like stopping at the local convenience store for bread and milk. Farmers are extremely busy, particularly in the spring and fall, and are usually not set up to do retail selling in the conventional sense. Consumers should also respect the fact that a farmer's place of work is also a home. However, with some planning, making a buying trip to the farm can be a rewarding experience for the whole family:

- ◆ Call to find out when the farm welcomes customers/visitors.
- ◆ Ask whether the product you are seeking is available. Many items are available only on a seasonal basis.
- ◆ Keep in mind that pets are often not welcome on farms.
- ◆ Assume it is your responsibility to bring a box, bag or cooler to transport the food after purchase. Bringing small change or bills is helpful too.

LSP resources

The Land Stewardship Project has developed several initiatives for bringing farmers and consumer together:

◆ **Stewardship Farm Directory.** The 2009-2010 edition of the Land Stewardship Project's *Stewardship Farm Directory* lists over 160 LSP member-farms in the Upper Midwest that are direct-marketing their products straight to consumers. Also listed are LSP member-restaurants, co-ops and other businesses that are playing key roles in advancing a community based food system. A pdf version of the directory can be downloaded from LSP's website at www.landstewardshipproject.org/foodfarm-main.html#sfd. You can get a paper version from one of our offices (visit www.landstewardshipproject.org/index-contactus.html to get contact information for LSP's various offices), or by contacting LSP's Abigail Liesch at 612-722-6377; aliesch@landstewardshipproject.org.

◆ **LSP's Twin Cities Region Community Supported Agriculture Farms Directory.** This directory, which is updated annually by LSP, lists CSA operations that are serving the Twin Cities region. It can be found at www.landstewardshipproject.org/csa.html or you can call LSP's Twin Cities office at 612-722-6377 for a free copy.

◆ **The Upper Minnesota River Valley chapter of Buy Fresh Buy Local** has published a guide to the farms, farmers' markets, retailers and restaurants that sell and grow local foods in the western Minnesota region. The latest edition of the *Local Foods Guide of the Upper Minnesota River Valley*

features over 77 farms in the region that are sustainably producing vegetables, fruits, grains, herbs, meats, eggs, dairy products and wool for direct sale to consumers, as well as restaurants and retailers that feature local foods.

A pdf version can be downloaded from www.prideoftheprairie.org. Paper copies are available by contacting Tom Taylor in LSP's prairie region office in Montevideo, Minn., at 320-269-2105 or ttaylor@landstewardshipproject.org.

◆ **The St. Croix River Valley Buy Fresh Buy Local** chapter web page features numerous resources for people interested in buying food direct from farmers on the Wisconsin and Minnesota sides of the St. Croix River. Visit www.landstewardshipproject.org/bfbl or call Dana Jackson in LSP's Twin Cities office at 612-722-6377 for more information.

Other resources

◆ **A nationwide listing of CSA farms** has been compiled by the USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program. Go to www.sare.org/csa/index.htm to access the list. You can search for farms by state. You can also receive the free listing by writing to: CSA/CSREES, 1400 Independence Ave., SW, Stop 2207, Washington, DC 20250-2207 (when writing, please specify whether you want the entire directory or just a list for your state).

◆ **Local Harvest** has developed a national listing of direct-marketing farms that is searchable by zip code and by city. It can be found at www.localharvest.org.

◆ **Consumer Reports** provides expert evaluation of the sustainability claims made on food labels. You can search by product, category or certifier, and easily compare labels using the website's report cards. For more information, see www.greenerchoices.org/eco-labels/eco-home.cfm.

You've bought food from a farm...now what?

◆ When buying meat direct from a farmer, ask for guidance on how to handle various cuts. Local meat lockers and butchers are also good sources of information. The website www.eatwild.com has information on obtaining cookbooks that focus on preparation of grass-fed meats.

This fact sheet is brought to you by the members and staff of the Land Stewardship Project, a private, nonprofit organization devoted to fostering an ethic of stewardship for farmland and to seeing more successful farmers on the land raising crops and livestock.

For more information, call 612-722-6377 or visit www.landstewardshipproject.org.