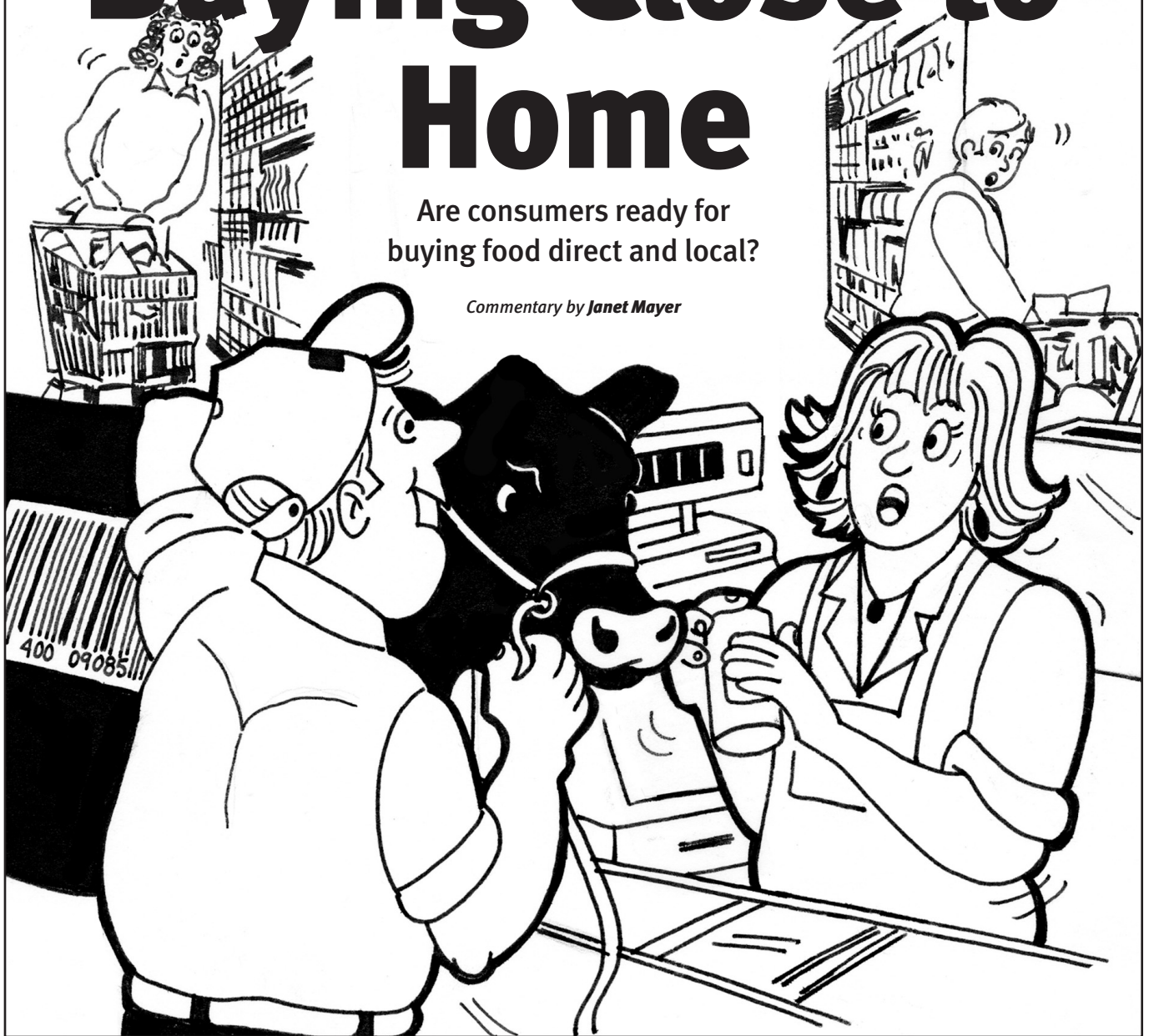


# Buying Close to Home

Are consumers ready for buying food direct and local?

Commentary by Janet Mayer



**W**hen people see our Angus cattle grazing in the fields or talk to some of our freezer-beef customers, they will often call or stop by our farm to ask if we can sell them beef or put them on a waiting list for a half or a quarter. Aside from the obvious fact they want Angus quality, we have found the common dominator among these potential customers seems to be their desire to know where their food comes from, how it is produced and how it is processed. This seems to be especially true since the recent episodes of *E. coli*-contaminated foods, salmonella poisoning and tainted pet foods.

Nutritionists say an increased interest in buying direct and local can be attributed to

consumers largely being in the dark about how their food is being processed and handled en route to the supermarket. This was made abundantly clear to a great number of consumers last fall when the *E. coli* outbreak revealed many of us do not know the origins of most of our food, which can have disastrous effects.

It is alarming that often little to none of the foods available in a conventional supermarket are being grown or processed locally. A stroll through a grocery store will reveal labels on produce and other food products showing a great number of out-of-country origins. Information from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

indicates about 40% of our fruit is produced overseas; 9% of red meat comes from foreign countries, including locations as far away as Australia and New Zealand.

Joan Gussow, author, nutritionist and Columbia University professor, says she is stunned to look at all the food in supermarkets and marvels at consumers who are eating these mysterious things that are grown such a long distance away.

In her book titled *This Organic Life*, she says the consumer's ignorance about food sources does more than allow the occasional public health disaster, it also distances them from a connection to the things they eat.

"In a typical supermarket, tomatoes,

blueberries and eggplants are always in season,” she says. “Because of this, consumers not only lose touch with the natural world these plants came from, they forget that certain plants and flowers ripen in specific months and that certain vegetables and fruits proliferate in the places where they live, and ultimately they forget what fresh-picked produce tastes like.”

Gussow and her husband live along the Hudson River in New York. In keeping with the idea of buying direct and local, they grow as much of their food as possible. They keep garden records of when crops come in and when they are finished to determine what they can eat during every season. What they do not grow, including grain and meats, they buy locally.

“The important issue of our times is learning how to grow food for everyone in a way that’s sustainable, and we are not doing that,” she concludes. “What we are doing is increasing food production globally while destroying the environment and destroying our capacity for future food production.”

### Relationship marketing

According to the National Sustainable Agricultural Information Service (ATTRA), these concerns and also the shortcomings of the conventional marketing system have perhaps made the time ripe to consider marketing beef and other foods directly from ranches and farms to the consumer. As an alternative to commodity marketing, direct marketing could be justly referred to as relationship marketing, since it achieves both strength and advantage by bringing the producer and the consumer together in a way that the mass market cannot accomplish.

If the growing number of farmer’s markets and farm enterprises are any indication that buying direct and local is the wave of the future, statistics from the National Farmer’s Market Directory provide supporting evidence with listings of 4,385 markets in 2006. This is an 18% increase compared to 3,706 in 2004 and decidedly up from the 2,410 listed a decade ago in 1996.

Surprising information distributed by the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) and other organizations shows there is a good chance that food brought into an average U.S. grocery store has traveled 1,500-2,500 miles, or about 27 times further than food brought from a local source. This is attributed to industrialization, with much of our food being grown and processed in fewer locations, making shipping a necessity. Although the larger methods of production are considered efficient and economically profitable, they can be harmful to the

environment, consumers and rural communities.

As the only statewide, member-based, sustainable farming organization in Pennsylvania and the northeast, and one of the largest in the nation, PASA is a nonprofit organization aimed at working with the farmers who grow the food, the consumers who eat the food and those concerned with the ecological well-being of the environment and natural resources. In an effort to address the sustainability of the entire food and agriculture industry, the association creates networks and markets to strengthen the ties between concerned consumers and family farmers.

Advice to consumers on buying food comes from other sources, like the North Carolina Cooperative Extensive Service, which cautions consumers to remember the Latin phrase, *caveat emptor*, meaning let the buyer beware. This is to remind them that they share responsibility for protecting themselves in the marketplace of today, where the quality of many products is difficult to determine before purchase and especially confusing when it is produced many miles away from where it is sold.

The great variety of products sold both baffles and frustrates many consumers trying to decide what to buy and how to get the most for their money. A second Latin phrase emphasizes to consumers that they do have a weapon at their disposal — *scientia potestas est*, or knowledge is power.

### Consumer programs

University of Illinois Extension is likewise working toward increasing the consumer’s awareness of the benefits of buying local food and increasing consumption of fresh products. The Adams/Brown Unit and the Western Illinois Sustainable Ag Society are working together in a comprehensive

program known as Locally Grown. The program provides an approach to target all levels of the local food system network by creating learning opportunities and increasing availability of locally grown products for consumers. The project creates awareness and understanding between farmers by supporting farmer’s markets, a locally grown dinner, a community garden, a locally grown foodfest, newsletters, a web site and more.

In Pennsylvania, a similar promotion by the PASA called the Buy Fresh, Buy Local (BFBL) campaign is part of an even larger nationwide BFBL initiative organized by FoodRoutes Network. One of the goals behind the campaign is to create a brand label for consumers to look for when shopping and to increase consumer awareness of farmer’s markets, orchards and restaurants. Especially designed with direct-marketing farmers in mind, it also provides technical support to community-based groups working to strengthen regional markets for local food and beverages.

Other organizations, like the newly formed Lebanon Valley Food and Farming Association (LVFFA) at Palmyra, Pa., are focusing on educating people about making better food choices while choosing foods that will generate income for local farmers. At a recent meeting of the association, tips were given by a member on how people can become better consumers through education. The consensus was that most consumers are confused by food presented in a store as “fresh,” “home-grown” or “natural,” and that they should take the time to find out what labels actually mean and realize there are more choices in other places. Preserving choices comes down to three principles: buying fresh, buying locally and staying informed.



### Reasons for encouraging consumers to buy local, direct

**Buying local food strengthens a regional economy.** Purchasing food that was grown and harvested locally keeps money circulating within a community. It also gives consumers the opportunity to know the farmers who produce their food, often resulting in building relationships based on understanding and trust.

**Buying local food supports the family farmer in a community.** This helps create jobs, insulating the region against recessions, and with each local food purchase, consumers ensure that more of the money spent on food goes to help family farms financially.

**Buying local food will help protect the environment.** Local food doesn’t have to travel far, reducing carbon dioxide emissions and packing materials. Buying local food also helps to make farming more profitable and selling farmland for development less attractive.

**Buying local food gives exceptional taste and freshness and will safeguard a family’s health.** Knowing where your food comes from and how it is grown or raised enables consumers to choose safe food from farmers who avoid or reduce their use of chemicals, pesticides, hormones, antibiotics or genetically modified seed in their operations.

— Janet Mayer