10 tips for eating locally and cutting the energy used to produce your food

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Abstract
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Farmers markets are one way to find local produce. Farmers market image from www.shutterstock.com

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Disclosure statement

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Partners
Being a “locavore” means choosing food that is grown locally, and is one way that you can help ensure there is more food to go around.

To feed the predicted nine billion people in the world in 2050, the world will need to produce 70-100% more food. This unprecedented increase in food production will require substantial changes in soil management, land cultivation, and crop production.

This cannot be achieved without technological advances that increase crop yield and reduce the need to use nitrogen-based fertilisers. The question is how this can be achieved sustainably, while also tackling climate change.

This is where “eating local” comes in.

**What is eating local?**

The primary reason why eating local is good for the planet is the reduction in energy resources required for transport and storage. Generally, the further a food has travelled from “paddock to plate”, the greater its impact on the environment. This is because of fuel used in transport and increased greenhouse gas emissions used for refrigerated storage.

The mode of transport matters too. Transporting food by air generates 177 times more greenhouse gases than shipping it.

The global food system lets us eat food from all over the world, all year round. But food miles impact adversely on the nutritional quality of fresh foods, and on the environment.

Yet while eating foods grown close to where we live makes planetary sense, farmers markets and foods grown more sustainably (organically) often carry a price premium, and seem to be targeted to a trendy and wealthy demographic.

The lack of a definition of “eating locally” also raises questions of how to incorporate organic and fair trade produce within the larger sustainability movement, and how to support developing nations.

Global supply chains place great demands on ecosystems and natural resources, and large distances between where food is produced and consumed is often seen as evidence of an unsustainable food system. However, this is not always as straightforward as it appears.

Take the case of seafood. Australia is in the enviable position of having been ranked in the top five countries for fisheries management and the majority of commercial fish stocks in Australia are assessed as sustainable.

However, 72% of seafood consumed in Australia is imported. Surprisingly, there is little difference between the carbon footprint of meals made using imported seafood compared with those of three domestic wild-caught fish.

**10 tips for eating local**

So given that eating local can be tricky, here are 10 tips:
1: Become familiar with foods that are grown or produced locally and what time of the year they are available. Seasonal food guides are available from some fruit markets and online such as one developed for south-east Queensland.

2: Look for local farmers markets, community gardens, food co-operatives and community supported agriculture schemes. Green Connect is one example of a community-supported agriculture scheme operating in the Illawarra region of New South Wales. In some states such as Tasmania, a thriving food tourism culture may encourage consumers to eat locally but this concept has not been replicated in other parts of the country.

3: Grow your own fruit and vegetables and keep chickens in your own backyard, or get involved in your local community garden, and trade produce with neighbours.

4: Read the labels of packaged foods. The new “Made in Australia” labelling on foods makes it easier to determine where the food (and its individual components) has been grown, processed and packaged.

5: Choose less processed foods. Generally, the more processed a food is, the more energy and water it requires in the production process. Replace junk food with fresh fruit, nuts and vegetables.

6: Take the Eco Friendly Food Challenge and get some friends to join you.

7: Cook meals using fresh ingredients rather than purchasing ready-made meals.

8: Ask your food retailers and manufacturers about the origin of the food you are buying. Locate fruit and vegetable retailers, butchers, delicatessens and fishmongers who sell food produced locally.

9: Limit your intake of alcohol and purchase locally-grown alcohol with the lowest food miles possible. If you enjoy a particular beer or wine, contact the manufacturer to learn about
their environmental policies and to advocate for more environmentally friendly production methods.

10: The Fair Food Forager app allows you to search for food outlets that adhere to fair and sustainable practices.

Creating consumer demand for more locally and sustainably produced food is being led not only by food champion Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution, but also by our very own Australian Youth Food Movement, whose organisers are passionate about improving the food supply for future generations.