Trade is the answer to Centre party's dilemma

ÖstgötaCorrespondenten. Published in print 2013-07-20.
Maria Björk Hummelgren. Page: 2.

Of all things, the inconsiderate meddling in the trade of foodstuffs is the most dangerous [...]. There is no other matter where human emotions are so volatile and judgment so fallible, and about which there are so many unfounded general assumptions.


Ledare

Handel är svaret på C-dilemma

The quote above is taken from the book The Locavore's Dilemma - in praise of the 10, 000 mile diet, recently published by Timbro. But the words come from the philosopher Edmund Burke, and were uttered as early as 1795, yet they describe well our current view of food. Through the food we grow, buy, cook and eat we express our life philosophy, knowledge conscience and time constraints. Food has always been necessary for survival, but never before so hotly debated. That gives the subject political impact. The latest addition to the food debate comes from the highest public office in the area; Minister for Rural Affairs EskilErlandsson (Centre Party). The Centre party now considers itself a liberal green party, with a positive view of free trade and the market economy. At the same time, the party traces its roots to a place where decentralization and a flourishing rural economy are important political goals. After taking some unsuccessful side tracks which contributed to the party's drop in public polls (3.2 per cent according to the last polls from Demoskop/Expressen) and accusations of neoliberalism past the point of recognition against leader Annie Lööf, the Centre Party appears to be trying to find its way back to a more grounded ideology by making more room for old core issues like rural areas and the environment. This is the background from which Erlandsson presents his four point program in DN Debatt (17 july). The first point is a reform of the purchasing procurement law. Erlandsson is right to shine a spotlight on the paradox of, on one hand, Sweden's high standards for environmental sustainability and animal protection, and on the other hand a public sector that makes procurements without taking note of these standards. The result is sometimes that schools, hospitals and homes for the elderly buy cheaper food from abroad while the Swedish farmers have difficulty selling their foodstuffs, which are more expensive as a result of demanding legislation. Because the cause of this situation is often a lack of knowledge of how to write procurement documents, reevaluating the law could be a good idea. The goal, according to Erlandsson, is to make it easier to place demands on animal protection and environmental care. But it must be done without coming in conflict with EU competition laws, which for example preclude demanding goods and services to be produced in Sweden. That is good. No product is good simply because it is Swedish, but concerns like environmental standards and animal protection can make a Swedish pork chop preferable to, for example, a Danish one. Erlandsson's further demand for clearer source information on meat and other animal products follows logically from this. Additionally, the recent horse meat scandal showed the need for such reform. Next however, Erlandsson crosses the line into protectionism. It begins with a historical description of how Sweden has gone from producing most of what is consumed within our borders to an increasing import - while at the same time spending a smaller share of our disposable income on food. This, however, is not a negative development. Quite the opposite. At the dawn of man and for a long time after, human societies existed as isolated islands. One tribe, one village and later on, one community - had to be self sustaining in order to survive. A roof overhead, clothes and food had to be produced from what the earth, the animals and the people in the immediate area could offer. Some had the luck of being born in an area where the soil and the forest gave a rich yield, while

others were less fortunate, and forced to try to survive on poor soil and undernourished animals. Many failed, and died of starvation. Trade changed that worldview. People began to specialize. Everyone was no longer required to be able to produce everything, separately, but instead could buy or trade goods with each other. Technical developments and improvements in infrastructure have facilitated longer and longer transports, people no longer need to live where the food is produced. Those who live by the coast have an easier time fishing, while those who live near the forest have timber on hand. Those who live on rich soil are better off growing crops than those who live in a dry climate. Trade is and has always been a precondition for urbanization and development. Modern scientists more or less agree that trade plays a key role in the continued fight against the shrinking problem of starvation worldwide. Friends of free trade can also feel good about the fact that trade is also an important part of the solution to the world's environmental problems. In the book mentioned above, The Locavore's Dilemma, authors Pierre Desrochers and Hiroko Shimizu punch holes in several myths about how environmentally friendly locally produced food is. Apart from a return to a time where everyone was more or less self sufficient, with the consequences of widespread starvation and poverty, they present evidence that distantly produced food can be more climate-friendly than locally produced goods. Part because small scale production is often less energy efficient than large scale production, and because transports only represent a fraction of the carbon dioxide emissions caused by our food production. So when the Minister for Rural Affairs worries that we are spending a smaller share of our money on food, and that we really should pay more for Swedish food, he's worrying about the wrong things. We are spending a smaller share on food part because we have more money, but also because the food, thanks to global trade, has become cheaper. And that is a basically good thing for consumers across the globe. The last two points in Erlandsson's program are unfortunately not spent on what's become a Swedish tradition; criticizing the EU's oversized agricultural budget and support policies. Instead, the Minister for Rural Affairs wants to work toward a larger share of it reaching Swedish milk- and meat farmers in the form of a "cow support". Additionally, Erlandsson wants to increase the financial support side of the Swedish state budget so that "more companies can grow in rural areas and the competitive strength of the farmers increases". Here, the Centre Party's interest in the countryside is on a collision course with the market economy. The crash is avoidable, however. More specialization in production and more trade on equal market conditions would be a more sustainable help for Swedish farmers than bureaucratic support systems and costly trade barriers that the consumers pay for both on their tax returns and in the grocery store. Remember Edmund Burke. There is no best-before date on words of wisdom. "Of all things the inconsiderate meddling in the trade of foodstuffs is the most dangerous." – Edmund Burke (1729-1797), Irish-British philosopher.

© Östgöta Correspondenten

Good food and a clean conscience

Guest column

Kristianstadsbladet. Published in print 2013-06-28.
Karin Rebas. Section: Editorials.
Page: 2.
Part: 1.

What can you eat in good conscience? A scene from the comedy show Portlandia illustrates the difficulties of being an environmentally conscious, ethical consumer with precision. A couple sits down at a table in a restaurant in Portland. Soon, their server is beset with questions.

Was the chicken raised locally? What about the hazel nuts in the chicken's diet? How much space did the chicken have to move?

When the server can no longer produce answers, she fetches a folder, complete with pictures. The chicken you're about to eat was named Colin, she says. But the couple is not satisfied with the assurance that Colin seemed to be a happy chicken. Did he have friends? Are you sure the farm is locally owned and not by some hotshot on a yacht in Miami?

Finally, they interrupt their meal to go investigate the veracity of all the server's statements, by bike. The scene is funny, but the fact is a lot of modern consumers behave similarly.

In the debate, a number of arguments are brought up in favor of locally produced food. It is claimed to produce not only lower emissions and a better environment, but also to be fresher and healthier, a source of local work opportunities and a facilitator of dialogue with producers. It is easy to fall for the romantic image of locally produced food. Going to a farmers' market and buying vegetables straight from the farmer - or drinking freshly pressed must at Österlen - is pure joy, something entirely different from buying macaroni and fish sticks of unknown origin at a regular supermarket.

But does that mean that locally produced food is also better for the environment and your health?

The answer is no - at least according to the book "The Locavore's Dilemma - In Praise of the 10,000-mile Diet", which was recently released in Swedish by the think tank Timbro. According to the authors Pierre Desrochers and Hiroko Shimizu, a push for local production on the global scale would not improve the world, but instead lead to increased poverty, weaker food safety control, and more environmental damage than our current advanced system of producing and transporting food.

At times, the arguments brought forth by Desrochers and Shimizu are sweeping - for example they do not care much about oil dependence. But the book is certainly interesting, not least as a reminder that today's food system is the product of hundreds of years of advancements in plant breeding, harvesting, storage and transports.

For example, growing tomatoes in warm countries and transporting them to colder climates is not only relatively cheap, but also intelligent from a climate standpoint. Modern methods are not always perfect, but they have led to humans now being able to produce more, fresher and better food for a bigger population than ever before.

Today's consumers seldom know exactly where the food has been grown or raised, but unlike earlier generations we can trust that the grocery store shelves will be full, all year round.
It might be difficult to see the system of large scale food production in a romantic glow - but it is undeniably something to be grateful for.

© Kristianstadsbladet

Arguments from far away against locally produced

Oskarshamns-Tidningen. Published in print 2013-06-27.
DANIEL BRAW. - daniel.braw@barometern.se. Section: General.
Page: 22.
Part: 1.


LEDARE

Dålig variant av administration

Skilj på korruption och korruption

Långväga argument mot närproducerat

MATUPPROR

"For 470 years we have been laying low, but now we are raising our pitchforks, sickles and fists again. Because despite the fact that top quality food is produced in our vicinity, many choose imported food that came through an unknown amount of middle men. Why?"

The text above comes from the annuncement of a recent "food rebellion" in Kalmar, the goal of which was to make consumers think about their choices and remind them of all the good and genuine food available. Both the county council and the regional confederacy are partners in cooperation.

According to the Canadian-Japanese author couple Pierre Desrochers and Hiroko Shimizu, initiatives like these are pure madness, however. In the newly released book "A Hipster's Dilemma - In Praise of the 10,000-mile Diet" (Timbro) they march together against the idea of locally produced food as "a basically vain and counterproductive movement, which has failed repeatedly".

The somewhat cryptic title refers to something currently topical. A hipster, by the definition of Nationalencyklopedin [Swedish encyclopedia with strong credibility, translator's note], is a person who belongs to a life style oriented movement, involving mainly younger, trend-conscious urban middle class people. In these circles, there has been a growing interest in the source of food, under the assumption that locally produced is better.

It is not only trendy city folk who think this way, however, but also less hip politicians. Among the priorities for most counties for next year, for example, are procurements of locally produced food.

This though, according to Desrochers and Shimizu, is based on romantic ideas about nature, food, life in the countryside and self-sustainability. "That worry has since been combined with a skepticism against the anonymity that comes with long distance trade and the profit motive that comes with large corporations."

And there is a measure of truth to that: as the distance to food production has increased, the understanding for its conditions has decreased.

But at the same time, the problem of borrowing arguments from North America and Japan is visible. The past spring's horse meat scandal in the EU has hardly been a glowing marketing campaign for the anonymous, long distance trade or the responsibility of large food producers; DNA tests have since rather confirmed the picture of lacking control, frequent cheating and criminal back-door dealings. Desrochers and Shimizu's claim that the idea of local food production creates "unnecessary worries for consumers" sounds rather doubtful in this context.

If any worries are unfounded, it is rather those of the authors about a growing trend of local production leading to major environmental damage, reduced economic growth and considerably less certainty of supply; yes, even shorter life spans.

A trend with that kind of impact ought to be very difficult to confirm. Instead, as the local food uprising points out, the value of Swedish food imports have increased: meat and meat products from 7 631 MSEK in 2006 to 10 801 MSEK in 2011, and dairy products from 4 470 to 7 288 MSEK in the same period. If locally produced food is a "dangerous" trend, as the book's foreword claims, the authors can at least find comfort in the fact that there is still a great distance between ideals and actions.

© Oskarshamns-Tidningen

Easier to shop locally

Opinion

Norran. Published in print 2013-06-26.
Column LARS KRISS. Section: Opinion
Page: 19.
Part: 2.

In anticipation of April's wage payout weekend, the Federation of Swedish Farmers, LRF, launched a smartphone application. The app contains 10 000 products and is aimed at making us buy more locally produced foods. The consumer can use the phone's camera to scan the barcode of grocery store products.

DEBATT

DAGENS CITAT

Skolan ska ge alla en bra start

Enklare handla lokalt

Dags att sluta drömma nu

If the butter contains Swedish raw materials, the result is a green thumbs-up.

For consumers, the application is a useful tool. The fact that LRF wants to market Swedish products is no stranger than the fact that Swedish Enterprise wants to reduce the wage taxes for the supermarket's owner, or the fact that The Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO, wants to raise the cashier's pay.

Swedish agriculture is under pressure from production costs and price competition. In my birth year of 1979, more than 30 per cent of the price of the food went to the farmer, today that share is barely 15 per cent. Since my father's birth year of 1950, eight of ten Swedish farms have disappeared.

At the same time, the global demand for foodstuffs is increasing. Price competition faces the single farmer with two alternatives: expand - or shut down. It is in light of this market situation that the moral and environmental sales arguments for locally produced food can be examined.

In the book "The Locavore's Dilemma - In Praise of the 10,000-mile Diet" (Timbro), by the geographer Pierre Desrochers and the economist Hiroko Shimizu, the authors say a too-tight focus on local production is harmful.

The authors support geographic specialization. Out of the total emissions from the food sector, production represents 83 per cent, transport represents four. Consequently, it is more climate-friendly to produce the right goods in the right regions, than to be regionally self-sufficient.

When I started first grade in 1986, imported foods represented a fourth of Swedish consumption. Last year, that number was almost 50 per cent. The development is not uncontroversial - probably because food and drink is taken up into our bodies.

People want knowledge about the food they consume, while few have the energy to find out how the global chain of food production is linked together. The gnawing consciences of consumers makes the very name of the farm an easy sales trick - even when the locally produced falukorv [Popular sausage type, transl. note] needs only to contain 45 per cent meat to be sold under that name.

© Norran

The dilemma of midsummer food

Blekinge Läns Tidning. Published in print 2013-06-21.
Erik Hultgren. Section: Editorials
Page: 50.
Part: 1.

Food and good company. Most of our Swedish celebrations are no more complicated than that. For midsummer, the potatoes, herring and strawberries come out. For many, toasting around the midsummer table is a holier tradition than dancing around the pole.


50 LEDARE

Nära till gatstenen

Midsommarmatens dilemma

Det är inte lätt att välja rätt

Jorden har blivit utmärkad och utsugen av gångna seklers allt för rådiga skördar och kan inte erbjuda människorna livsmedel lika välvilligt som tidigare.

The fact that food is an emotionally charged subject has been clear in the last year. Horse meat scandals and salmon scandals. The cheating enrages. As more people move into cities, agriculture has become more distant, and more food is sold as semi-finished or prefabricated products. It has become more difficult to control on your own that the products are genuine.

As a consequence, more people are looking for alternatives, in locally produced and ecological options. The latest trend is for food to be grown locally and in an ecological manner.

In a recently translated book, The Locavore's Dilemma - In Praise of the 10,000-mile Diet, by Pierre Desrochers and Hiroko Shimizu, these ideas are ruthlessly attacked. The trend for locally produced food is described as well-intended snobbery, which at worst could lead to more people ending up without food.

The longing for a close and natural agriculture appears to be a wish that has haunted humanity ever since we started building cities. As early as year 65, the Roman Lucius Columella wrote about how new methods of farming were depleting soils and would eventually ruin food availability. In the 18th and 19th centuries, conservative thinkers warned of the dangers of foreign food.

Today's eco-labels and obsession with locally grown products have always been present in different forms. But of course there are reasons that long distance food trade, pesticides, fertilizers and other modern agricultural methods have had such a large impact. Today, fewer people are suffering from malnourishment than fifty years ago, despite the fact there are three billion more of us.

Mechanized and industrial farming is the main explanation. One of the main characters behind modern agriculture, Norman Borlaug, received the Nobel Peace Prize for his research. Returning to ecological farming would mean that larger areas would have to be used, in order to grow a smaller amount of food.

The same is true if locally produced were to become the norm.

Growing food is a complicated process. Climate, weather and soil type are important factors. Small changes create big differences in which crops thrive.

Tomatoes are a crop that likes heat. For that reason, it is a very poor fit for Swedish conditions, and profitable only during a short time in the summer. The rest of the year, heated greenhouses are required. Better, then, to grow other crops, while the tomatoes are grown in Spain, Italy and other countries where the sunlight does the job.

By specializing in the crops that fit best, we can grow more food at a lower cost and on a smaller area. That makes it natural for most things to be imported. It helps both in terms of the climate and in terms of food availability. Swedish, locally produced food should only be eaten when it is in season.

Unfortunately, almost half of Sweden's population believes that transports represent most of the emissions caused by agriculture. In reality, it represents a meager four per cent. Production is everything.

At the same time, the book is written for an American audience. In Sweden, with its strong animal protection, well controlled labels and low use of antibiotics on animals, there are other reasons to choose locally produced. Additionally, there are naturally those who want to keep the countryside alive for purely esthetic reasons.

Choosing the right food does not appear to be easy. Concerns about climate, landscape and animal protection etcetera are difficult to weigh against each other. Choosing Swedish products simply by default is not always a good choice.

Our Swedish celebrations are one of the few times when the choices are easy. It is no coincidence that Swedish fresh potatoes and strawberries are eaten in copious amounts in the middle of June. Simply by following old traditions, the food will be both Swedish and in season. That way it can be enjoyed as intended.

Without worries and with good friends at the table.

© Blekinge Läns Tidning

Is locally produced a fraud?

» BLOGG

SIRI STEIJER

13 june 2013 kl 12:12 | Permanent link


SvD

LEDARE

BLOGG

Är närodlat en bluff?

UTBLICK

Din segerbiks inledningen till en höst som övergick i en kall vinter.

Att leta fräknar i Teheran

Även "reformisterna" är en del av systemet.

Göteborgsandan inte så god som en annan

"The magic of the locally produced movement is that it has managed to combine a sense of snobbery with popularity". The quote is from the food journalist Dave Lowry, cited in "A Hipster's Dilemma, in Defence of Distant Food". In the book, which was released in a Swedish translation by the think tank Timbro last week, the authors Pierre Desrochers and Hiroko Shimizu argue in favor of a globalized agricultural industry.

To me, hipsters are youth who beg their parents for money to buy clothes at Urban Outfitters and American Apparel, and then sit down in the local park with Pringles chips and cheap beers. A relatively apolitical lifestyle, which mostly revolves around manifesting your soul through consumption and the "right" style. The original title "The Locavore's Dilemma: in Praise of the 10 000 Mile Diet" is clearer.

A locavore is a person who participates in a now-global movement which is obsessed with locally grown food, preferably in a radius of a few miles from their home. No such explicit movement exists in Sweden, which may explain the hipster title. There is a Swedish target group for the book's message, but it is not coherent. It includes everything from Green Party voting upper middle class people in central Stockholm to more conservatively minded people who want to guard the networks of the smaller world, mainly the Swedish agriculture.

Throughout five chapters, the authors dismiss the same amount of what they say are myths about locally produced goods. On many points it is difficult to come up with an answer. It seems obvious that an efficient agricultural industry can produce more food to more people. A return to a system of small scale local farming would in all likelihood bring about a rise in poverty and starvation globally. In addition to the amounts produced by industrial farming, the price is also lower, which lets people have more food for their money. The global market also brings a diversification of the risk, a poor harvest in your own country is no longer disastrous. Further, the trade of foodstuffs itself is gainful to the development of poor countries.

For the environment as well, the modern agricultural industry appears to be advantageous. The option of buying seasonal goods from areas where they currently grow naturally is good, as things like greenhouses in cold places are far more environmentally damaging than most international food transports. The authors also point out that the idea of local farming is anti-urban as it demands small habitations spread out across the countryside. They make a good point that cities have the potential to reduce human impact on nature because they gather more people in smaller areas.

They rest heavily upon the argument that today's globalized, industrialized agriculture gains legitimacy by the evolutionary process that has produced it. A weak argument, as the factuality of this state of affairs is no guarantee that it is preferable. And the premises of what was once correct are also subject to change.

For that reason, it is important to have the discussion. And there are reasons to investigate the modern agriculture. For example, the importance of well crafted regulatory systems is not to be dismissed, as they protect both animals and people in the chain of production. The further from consumers, the more difficult for them to find out irregularities. If you choose to buy Swedish meat because you feel safer that the animals have been treated well, thanks to our tough animal protection laws, that can hardly be called protectionism.

Everything should not be sacrificed in favor of lower prices. For example, reducing demands on Swedish farmers' animal treatment in order to increase their international competitiveness would be the wrong path to go down. Instead, it would be better if animal protection is improved in other parts of the world as more and more are able to pay for it.
It is also worth noting that farmers safeguard a variety of animal and plant species in the Swedish countryside, which would disappear if local agriculture was to be shut down.
It is obvious that the question about locally produced foods involves difficult decisions and values that must be compared to each other. Poor people's profit from global trading must be weighed against the cost of having good animal care and growing crops without poisonous substances. The expansion of crop area that comes with having many small farms must be weighed against the will to guard an untouched natural world. The benefits of large scale food production must be weighed against the benefits of having local farmers.
It is important to know why you are buying locally produced goods, and what you are choosing not to support when you do so. Otherwise, the risk is large that you will go to the farmers' market on false premises - or merely because it is a lifestyle.

Global dilemmas

Katrineholms-Kuriren. Published in print 2013-06-10.
Linus Källander guest columnist. Section: General.
Page: 2.

I was handed a book the other day. The book is published by the economically liberal think tank Timbro, and has the subtitle "In defense of distant food".


LEDARE

Politiken behöver hjälpa Riksbanken ur dilemmat

DEBATT

Kyrkan bör dra åt vänster

Globala dilemman

Linus Källander

Katrineholms Kuriren

The authors' ambition is to kill what they call myths about locally produced food in a little over two hundred pages. The title of the book - A Hipster's Dilemma - points out one of our time's biggest challenges: globalization.

As a politically active youth in Katrineholm [small city in rural area - transl. note], globalization issues were what originally made me lift my eyes and look beyond the city's limits, and produced the insight that my personal drive is shared by people all over4 the world who are fighting for a more humane and ecologically sustainable development in their local communities. There was no talk about dilemmas, then. What existed were the good guys and the evil people. Those who built and those who tore down the society I wanted to see.

Today, it is more difficult for me to reply. As a normal citizen, my life is full of global dilemmas. The tearing forces are still there, but the genuine will to create a positive development is there as well, even at the meeting tables of corporate management groups.

Take H&M as an example. For me, the company has been the symbol of our sick clothing consumption. But a friend who recently started working at their sustainability department tells of the hundreds of employees who work daily to improve the working conditions in their factories. As one of the largest clothing chains in the world, H&M really has the opportunity to make a difference. But do they take the responsibility they should? And would it be better to pick H&M than the niche eco-brands I usually choose?

Today, specialized analysts are trained to predict the effects of globalization in various sectors. But usually, strong economic forces in the background stand to gain from any given outcome. The problem is that research only answers the question we are asking. And the problem is often the same as the premise in Timbro's homage to market liberalism: our ecological and social systems are too complex, contradictory and unexplored to be summarized in a simple, rational economic theory.

So how should I, as a single consumer, handle these global dilemmas? I wish I had a good answer to that question, but all I end up with is a gut feeling. A gut feeling that says that those who best can explain why their specific products or services best contribute to the developments I want to see will get my vote as a consumer. And the development I want to see is not based on the outdated theories of market liberalism.

© Katrineholms-Kuriren

About food and people

Book reviews

Neo. Published in print 2013-03-26.
Patrik Strömer, Book editor Neo. Section: Reviews
Page: 75,76,77.

Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades. Nor does close count for much in terms of what's environmentally friendly when it comes to food. The morals of eating must be backed by more solid facts and less by some catchy slogan from a state-run campaign.


RECENSIONER: Läst, sett och hört

OM MAT OCH MÄNNISKOR

Nära ekjuter ingen hare. Nära näring gör heller ingen till miljövän. Ätandets moral behöver vila mer på stadiga fakta och mindre på någon lättsmält slogan från statliga kampanjer.

Energiåtgången per äpple fraktat från Nya Zeeland är så liten i jämförelse med energiåtgången för att få hem äpplet från affären.

NEO

"Sweden, the food country" is a big mess of wastefulness and lunacy. And yet, Minister for Rural Affairs Eskil Erlandsson is popular, and appears honest and likeable. The slightly more than 1 billion SEK that has been spent on Erlandsson's drive to promote Sweden as a culinary destination is gone, but the memory of the good food remains. The old fashioned, honest food, where you knew what you were eating and where the distance from soil to soup was so short that not a single frozen horse could sneak into the menu.

There are two obvious problems with this picture. The first is that what Swedish farmers and Swedish food culture need is a general easing of the burdens placed upon them by politicians. The second problem is that the picture is false and misses several important aspects.

Let us forget about the tax money and concentrate on the plate. In The Locavore's Dilemma (Public Affairs), written by Pierre Desrochers and Hiroko Shimizu, there is an educational breakdown of the arguments that are usually brought up in favor of locally produced food. As quickly and elegantly as a sashimi chef slices up a tuna, these arguments are cut to pieces. The book will be published by Timbro this spring under the title "A Hipster's Dilemma". Because it is the hipster culture's self-romanticizing high morals that turn out to be unsustainable.

Visiting the farmers' market is a statement. Both that you are interested in food, and that you can afford to spend your money on sauna-smoked bacon, newly harvested brand name potatoes, or an old fashioned jam pot. I am not criticizing anyone for seeking gastronomic experiences, but choosing locally produced food makes no one a moral person.

As long as there are people who believe that locally grown foods give more social capital, heal the wounds of the earth, improve food safety and contain more nourishment, there will be people who need to read this book.

To lend the arguments additional weight, the reader is also treated to a historical review. It gives an undeniable sense of perspective on life, even if the happy inner city hipster who thinks his daily column writing is as difficult as a railway worker's is likely to dismiss such annoying facts. Because the history of human food consumption is made up of strain, effort and starvation. More or less up until the industrial revolution.

So in what way is locally produced food good? Yes, there is actually one case, and that is when the season is right. Fresh prime fruits and vegetables, newly caught fish, mushrooms from the forest or fruits and berries. The problem is that the season is only a small part of the year. At least locally. So how can we eat a varied and nourishing diet if we're relegated to what's locally available?

There is a reason that the food we eat is produced the way it is. Historically, it has proven effective. Specialization in several areas has made each link in the chain stronger, more reliable. And with the advent of transport, vulnerability has been reduced. If the Irish potato crops fail, the Irish import potatoes today. In the 19th century, it was disastrous.

The authors rest easy in the certainty that prices on a market mirror fairly well the efficiency of resource use. So when the hipster claims that locally produced is better because the local farmer is then well paid and the money will then stay in the area, it is merely a misconception of the type that the French economist Frederic Bastiat described in the 1800s. Expensive food leads to other people ending up with less money in their wallets, and that means they cannot push demand for other local services as much. There will be less for the carpenter and the hair dresser. And that is before we show how trade works on the global scale. That it is better for us to export trucks to China and import toys, than for us to be self sufficient across the board.

The claim that locally produced is better for the climate is false as well. Transports in the production chain play a small part in terms of total emissions, it is the transports of households that are more impactful. The energy expenditure per apple sent from New Zealand is so small compared to the energy expenditure of bringing it home from the store.

These are well known facts, but still there is protectionism and would-be concern in the debate. But it is meaningless to focus singularly on transports. It is neither free nor effortless to move food from one place on earth to another, so for it to pay off, the production itself needs to be efficient. And if the Brazilian steak costs 249 SEK per kilo and the Swedish 449 per kilo, then the first saves more resources. As the authors point out: To choose the locally produced is a buying decision, not a moral decision. But not even that is completely true, because a few rows later, we read: "Getting the most out of your hard-earned money is not merely enlightened self-interest, it is also the best way of creating a better world".

But what about nourishment? It can't be reasonable to consume all the junk food, processed goods and additives that we are flooded with today, can it? Well, too much of anything will hurt you. It is the dose that makes the poison, as the physician Paracelsus stated in the 1500s. But the fact is that such goods as are considered healthy, like fruits and vegetables, have become cheaper and more readily available. Their duration has improved with working cooling chains, radiated spices and better logistics. The food wastage is worst in the third world, where fresh goods are rapidly destroyed. And the malnourishment diseases that used to strike such large parts of the population are very rare today, apart from areas where a general malnourishment is at hand. We have iodone-enriched salt, flour and milk with vitamins, which has led to improved health.

But locally produced tastes better, right?

Again, it is not the place that makes the difference, but the season. A Swedish summer offers prime Swedish strawberries, but why should we be satisfied with jam in winter and not be able to eat Belgian strawberries? The market comes up with new solutions, the locally produced has its eternal limitations.

The question of growing without pesticides finds no great sympathy with Desrochers and Shimizu. Nor does the claim that monocultural mass farming should be bad. Instead, it is thanks to the fact that agriculture has become an industrialized process that we can now produce more food, more varied food, fresher food and more nourishing food than ever. The future is not to be found in a pastoral utopia, where we like hobbits spend our time tilling the earth in small scale farms and turning our backs on the rest of the world. The sooner we realize this, and the sooner hipsters cease their vain and economically unsound food habits, the better.

Food is an area that from the very start is closely tied to other feelings: the secure meals of childhood, the menu at your first date with your beloved. For that reason, we are so vulnerable to influence and manipulation. We want to not just eat good, but also do good. But he who claims higher morals based on local production is simply wrong.

Another matter entirely is the fact that your own food as a certain value in a modern society, even if it's only a single branch of thyme on your window sill. There is a story about the economists Röpke and Mises, who were watching people poke around in their little garden allotments. Mises exlcaimed:

"What an ineffective way to produce carrots!", to which Röpke replied "But what an efficient way of producing human happiness!".

© Neo