



Debating the Local Food Movement

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Pierre Desrochers gleefully introduces himself as the *bête noir* of Canadian local-food activists. An economic geographer at the University of Toronto Mississauga, he has written a book (co-authored with his wife, Hiroko Shimizu), that attempts to eviscerate the movement's main arguments, from its economic rationale to its environmental one. Even the book's title is an upper cut aimed at local food's leading "agri-intellectual," the prolific [Michael Pollan](#). *The Locavore's Dilemma*, Desrochers has styled his counterargument, with this baiting subtitle: *In Praise of the 10,000-mile diet*.

A libertarian-leaning academic with a thick French-Canadian accent, Desrochers was in Washington, D.C., last week to present the book to what has undoubtedly been one of his friendlier audiences thus far, at the libertarian Cato Institute. He is particularly bemused by the notion that anyone would try to produce local food "when it makes no economic sense," when we have developed over the course of centuries an international and increasingly efficient system for feeding the world affordable bananas and blueberries and lamb year-round. Locavores – and

their kind have popped up throughout history – have traditionally championed local food, he says, for no reason other than that it's *local*.

"Over the last few years, the local food movement has become something more," he then warns the Cato crowd. "In a way it's also a rebellion against globalization, against big agri-business, against the way food is produced."

Several dozen heads nod in assent. To this crowd, locavores aren't mere silly liberals. They're a menace. In fact, the people in this room, led by Desrochers, view locavores with about the same conspiratorial alarm with which some food activists view Monsanto.

Desrochers' argument begins with this question: If things were so great when food was produced locally, why did people bother developing a globalized food chain in the first place? And why haven't history's many local food movements ("urban potato patches," "liberty gardens," "relief gardens," "victory gardens!") ever lasted? As late as the 1880s, one-sixth of Paris was still devoted to food production. But even that foodie capital has long since given up on the practice (one contributor: the advent of the automobile meant no one got around on horses anymore, which meant there was no longer enough horse manure around to fertilize urban farms).

"You cannot have economic growth without urbanization. And you cannot have urbanization without long-distance trade," Desrochers tells us. We also cannot, he says, increase food production and urban density at the same time. "You cannot square a circle."

He is essentially arguing that local food is fundamentally incompatible with urbanism. Urbanization isn't possible without imported food. And urbanization is what makes it possible to raise standards of living everywhere. Historically, we have pushed the production of food out of cities as subsistence farmers have moved in. Now, instead of each tending our own plot of rural land for a living, cities have enabled us to specialize as lawyers and bakers and engineers, while we've turned farming itself into a specialty.

In the process, Desrochers points out, we've learned to produce more food on less land, the price of it has fallen, the range of it available at your local store has increased, and the malnourished percentage of the world population has declined. The problem with locavores, as he sees it, is that they want to undo all of this progress, with terrible consequences.

The most environmentally friendly food policy, Desrochers argues, is the one where agriculture consumes the least amount of land globally, and only agri-business can deliver this efficiency. Producing food also requires more energy than transporting it, he adds. He dismisses the concept of "food miles," which he says fails to take into account the mode of transit on which our bananas travel. The 2,000 miles your produce travels from Latin America to Los Angeles by freight, he suggests, may be associated (per banana) with fewer carbon dioxide emissions than the 10 miles it travels home in your car from the supermarket.

He also argues that it's less energy-intensive to produce food where regions best specialize in it, than it is to try to coax those

same products out of ill-suited soil elsewhere, even if that means shipping apples from New Zealand to the U.K.

Desrochers' environmental arguments are the most interesting. But he has equal faith that these same economies of scale deliver us safer food, food that's engineered to be more nutritious, and a more secure global supply of it – all benefits that locavores threaten. He sums all of this up with a dramatic slide warning that locavorism will lead inevitably to higher costs and greater poverty, no environmental and social benefits, less food security and nutrition, and significant penalties for developing economies.

In the audience afterward, one man raises his hand and wants to know what concerned citizens can possibly do about all these urban chickens reintroducing disease into the city.

"In the end, I throw up my hands in despair," Desrochers says. "In the end, someone will have to die."



Desrochers' book takes aim at locavorism in all its forms: the "100-mile diet," the Community Supported Agriculture share, the neighborhood farmer's market (chief among his indictments: they never have enough parking!). But is this really what most locavores think they're doing: feeding the world, taking down agribusiness, farming at such a scale that it would be fundamentally at odds with urbanization?

Sarah Rich's new book, simply titled *Urban Farms*, offers an interesting reading companion to Desrochers'. While he broadly paints the motives of locavores, Rich actually visits them,

alongside photographer Matthew Benson. Politics are all but absent from Rich's interviews. She visits one urban farmer in Detroit who comes the closest to voicing revolutionary motives. He is concerned about a trash incinerator in his neighborhood, and he views his backyard farm partly as a defiant form of environmental remediation.

"That's what he's thinking about, his local garbage system and how messed up it is," Rich says. "He wasn't talking to me about Monsanto, or industrial agriculture."

Throughout her 16 urban farm profiles, Rich found what she describes as very local initiatives, where agriculture just happened to be the medium for doing something positive in the city.

"There is an underlying question from a lot of people: Well, can urban farming really feed a city, or do cities have to be self-sufficient in the future? Is urban farming really the solution to that?" she says. Rich doesn't set out to address these questions, and she isn't particularly convinced herself of the answers. "But that being said, there are many, many great reasons for there to be agriculture in cities now. And feeding the city of the future is really only just one reason we might pursue this."

Her book is about all of these other reasons. Urban farms can serve as a social anchor for communities. They can beautify blighted neighborhoods. They can create jobs for the unemployed and safe spaces for children. They provide outdoor classrooms for students to learn about where food comes from, but also how producing it is related to geography, math and science. Urban farms yield fresh produce to communities with

scant access to it. Three of the farms Rich and Benson visit are in Detroit, a city without a single major supermarket chain.

Rich suspects that what she's seen is no fleeting trend, as Desrochers describes past locavore movements. And urban farms don't have to be incompatible with density, she argues. Thinking of this, she recounts a recent flight into the Los Angeles airport.

"The way we're flying in, I was coming over this area where I was looking at just ungodly acres of flat rooftops that are just sitting there in L.A.," she says. "The sun is shining. I see that, and I do have the thought that man, we could really be using that space for something."



In the language of economics, one way to look at locavorism is that it tries to address the market failures of the food system Desrochers celebrates. Even for all of its benefits, industrial agriculture isn't a perfect market (particularly with the distortion of government subsidies that funnel more money into corn byproducts than the "[Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food](#)" USDA program Desrochers warns us about). Progress and innovation have made the food industry more productive and efficient, but so too have its unintended consequences grown over time.

Desrochers derides locavorism as a philosophy that "simply amounts to saying backward is the new forward." Food economist Gary Blumenthal, who also spoke at Cato, goes even further: "I equate it to fundamental Islam – this rejection of modernity." But instead of asking, "why have locavore

movements always disappeared?" it may also be worth pondering the inverse: Why do they keep cropping up?

In her introduction, Rich mentions one obvious market failure of the industrial food system, although she doesn't frame it in such terms. In "food deserts," she writes, it's often easier to plant vegetables than it is to get corner stores to start carrying them, or to convince full-service supermarkets to move in. If our industrial food system does such a good job of feeding ever more of the world's population at ever-lower prices, with a growing mastery over seasonality, why is it so hard to find a tomato in July in Detroit? Why is it easier for a shopper on food stamps to purchase 1,000 calories in candy bars than 1,000 calories in canned soup? These are the unanticipated consequences of our food system that some locavores think they can address.

Desrochers only allows for the coexistence of locavores and agribusiness, of urban farmers and urbanization, in one place: the production of niche products for rich folks. He leaves no room for many of the benefits that Rich documents are already taking place, and he sidesteps some of the biggest problems these urban farmers think need addressing.

Flip to the back of Desrochers' book, and the topic of obesity gets this meager entry: "145, 146, 166" (Michael Pollan, on the other hand, gets 16 pages). Surely locavores have their extremists, just as any other movement does. But if Michael Pollan himself has never advocated a full-scale return to pre-industrial agrarianism, is there really such a menace?