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TRANSCRIPT

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Debate

Local Foods Have Impact Beyond Kitchen Table

Amid increased promotion of organic foods and pushes to support local growers, an agricultural analyst and a New York City chef discuss the broader economic impact of buying local, in-season foods.



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TOM BEARDEN, NewsHour Correspondent: At the Mount Vernon farmers market in Alexandria, Virginia, earlier this week, shoppers were busy stocking up for the holiday.

FARMERS MARKET SELLER: I would go with a few Empire and then anything down beyond, the real tart ones.

TOM BEARDEN: This market has been in operation for more than two decades. Others like it have been sprouting up at a rapid rate nationwide. In the most recent count from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, there are nearly 4,400 farmers markets in operation, more than double the number in 1994.

FARMERS MARKET SELLER: It's got a little spice in it.

TOM BEARDEN: It's an idea that renowned chef Alice Waters has been advocating since 1971 at her restaurant, Chez Panisse.

ALICE WATERS, Owner, Chez Panisse: It's a way people have been eating since the beginning of time. I mean, just eating what is locally available, sharing it with their families, cooking it simply, eating in season.

TOM BEARDEN: As the movement to eat local and sustainable food grows, so does the list of books prodding consumers to be aware of what it takes to get their food to the table. Aubrey King is the co-owner of Twin Springs Fruit Farm in Orrtanna, Pennsylvania, and a vendor at the Mount Vernon market.

AUBREY KING, Owner, Springs Fruit Farm: Our business has gone up dramatically this year, I think because the press is really playing up local -- the "buy local," "buy fresh local," the low carbon footprint that buying local creates. Your stuff isn't shipped from New Zealand or the West Coast.

TOM BEARDEN: But for a national grocery chain like Whole Foods, providing more locally grown foods is a delicate issue. Even though the natural foods giant has expanded the amount of local produce it carries, Whole Foods relies on shipments from larger farms all over the U.S. and abroad, especially for its federally certified organic produce.

By contrast, all the products for sale at the Mount Vernon farmers market are grown and produced within a 125-mile radius.

JOAN SHANNON, Shopper: I like to support the local farmers. I grew up in Kansas, so I'm all for the farmer.

TOM BEARDEN: But for many shoppers, buying locally means fresher, tastier food.

BONNIE DAVEY, Shopper: It's better to come closer to the source of the food, so you have fewer middlemen and fewer people getting their hands on the food and doing things to it. And so it's just fresher and better.

TOM BEARDEN: But the agribusiness industry and trade experts say buying locally raises other concerns. Produce and meats are sometimes more expensive at farmers markets than at the local supermarket, raising questions about affordability. And some are concerned that if the "buy local" movement expands even further, it might threaten the livelihood of poor farmers in other countries that depend on exports to the U.S. market.

Two views on local foods

RAY SUAREZ: Gwen Ifill picks up the story from there.

GWEN IFILL: So how does the food you put on your Thanksgiving Day table affect the environment, the economy and the lives of the farmers and corporations who grow and raise it?

For that, we're joined by Dan Barber, a chef and owner of the Blue Hill Restaurant in New York City, which serves food grown in a small farm in Westchester County.

And Dennis Avery, a former agricultural analyst for the State Department, he now studies international food and farming developments for the Hudson Institute, a policy research center based in Washington.

Welcome to you both.

DENNIS AVERY, Hudson Institute: Thank you.

DAN BARBER, Chef, Blue Hill Restaurant: Thank you.

GWEN IFILL: Mr. Barber, explain to us, why does it matter where the food on our tables comes from?

DAN BARBER: It matters, I think, because we're hardwired for it. Food generally tastes better when we know where it's coming from and how it's grown, and even better when we know the people who are growing it. That might be a little idealistic, but certainly in the last 30 years, it's hard to argue that profound changes have occurred on our agricultural landscape and the kind of stuff that I am, in some cases, forced to buy and use in my restaurant. And those are changes that have not been benign.

They've affected our health, our environment, our communities, and those are things that, it seems to me, people are becoming more and more aware of. So I think they're asking, in general, "We don't want that kind of food anymore. We want to know more about where our food is coming from, because it's better for us, it's better for our environment, and generally it tastes better."

Food sources for city dwellers

GWEN IFILL: So in a perfect world, Dan Barber, we would all shop at farmers markets?

DAN BARBER: In a perfect world, we would know more about where our food is coming from. We would have a better transparency about it. You know, for some of us in the city, I would say, yes, a perfect world is a farmers market, because it attaches you to an agricultural landscape that's just outside the city. And it's a perfect way to enjoy food and enjoy the benefits that good food provides.

So for those of us in the city, that's as close as we're going to get, and that's why I'm there three times a week.

GWEN IFILL: Dennis Avery, I know that through your work with the Hudson Institute you work with a lot of agribusiness interests. Why, in your opinion, would what Mr. Barber suggests not be practical?

DENNIS AVERY: Well, I like farmers markets, too, and I shopped in the farmers market here in Stanton, but we buy specialties: cinnamon rolls, local sausage, peaches in season.

But this country needs hundreds of millions of tons of food every day, and New York draws food from all over the country. If New York tried to supply itself from farmers' pickup trucks, the traffic jam to end all traffic jams would lock up the city.

And we've got to realize that, if we're going to live in cities, then we're going to need a major supply chain. And I would say to Chef Barber that the food we're getting today is the safest it's ever been. It's as fresh as it can be, if we're going to live in cities. And the nutrition is as good as it's ever been.

GWEN IFILL: And so there's a connection -- to the question I asked Dan Barber -- is there a connection between where the food is grown and where it comes from and what ends up on the table?

DENNIS AVERY: Well, let's remember that there are regional specialties like Idaho potatoes as good as there are in the world, New York apples as good as there are and I've got a particular season of the summer when I get some peaches from Pennsylvania, and I won't even say where, because I don't want everybody else buying them.

And our farmers market in Stanton pulls food from South Carolina, Florida, extending the season, trying to make their market more useful, and it all takes fuel. And if the fuel is used in constructive ways, if the trucks are well loaded, if the rail car takes a little bit of fuel to come a long way, that's not a bad investment.

Affordability and taste

GWEN IFILL: Dan Barber, Dennis Avery says not only is the food every bit as tasty and nutritious from larger suppliers as it is from specialty -- as he puts it, farmers -- markets but that this is as good a way to get the economies of scale and make it more affordable. Why not?

DAN BARBER: Well, affordable in one sense, sure. I mean, you know, the checkout aisle, I'm not exactly sure that the price of the food is reflecting the real cost of growing the food.

So to the extent that our food is cheaper because of the kind of farming practices that Mr. Avery both represents and promotes, I would agree that there's a "cost reduction," in quotes, for that. But we're going to pay for it on the other end, and we're just seeing that in how we are dealing with some of the environmental effects of our food policy, of big agriculture, just the kind of things Mr. Avery is talking about.

We're seeing the effects on the health of this country; obesity and diabetes to be two of the hotter subjects. So all of a sudden food and how we grow food becomes more than just fuel. It becomes about ecology; it becomes about health; it becomes about community. And those are the things that we've lost over the last, I'd say, 30 years.

And more has changed in agriculture in the last 30 years than the last 30,000. And that's not hyperbolic. That's a reality that we're beginning to understand more and more of. And I think people, my diners, and my role as a chef, I think, is to produce good-tasting food.

And part of producing good-tasting food is making sure that the food that I'm putting into my oven and onto my saute pan is grown in the right way. And grown in the right way means that it has good ecology behind it, and it means that it's loaded with a nutrient density to produce that flavor. It just so happens that great flavor -- luckily for me, luckily for me -- great flavor also has behind it great ecology and great nutrient density, great health.

Modern farming and energy needs

GWEN IFILL: Let me ask Dennis Avery about that. Dan Barber says that the food that he puts from being grown locally, from having good ecology, and that it kind of reverses what he sees negative direction that our food sourcing has gone through in the last 30 years. What do you

DENNIS AVERY: Well, Chef Barber's shortening the food chain. He's shortening the supply chain, good, and I applaud him for doing it. It does cost more.

But I would say that the community where he's serving that food has changed even more in the last 30 years than the farms have. And we have to recognize that the environmental benefits of modern farming are being realized.

When we triple the yield per acre, we reduce the amount of land that we have to take away from other uses. And with modern farming -- particularly I'm thinking here of no-till farming -- the farmers do it with less negative impact on the environment than any farmers ever have.

That's not widely recognized, and I know a lot of people protest that, but it's the basic truth.

GWEN IFILL: Dan Barber, go ahead. You want to respond?

DAN BARBER: Well, yes, just nipping at this. It's one paradigm to look at is, you know, ecor that to feed the world, the ever-growing world, we need ever and ever larger farms and monoculture food.

But the truth is we produce way too much food right now. And for the future, what we need is not so reliant on cheap energy, because we're seeing the effects of what happens when our fossil fuels compete in the last couple of years, anyway, with ethanol, but increasingly with peak oil.

And what's going to happen in the next 50 years when our agricultural food system, from seed to processing center to distributor to marketplace, all of it is based on cheap energy. And that's not what Mr. Avery can respond positively to for the future.

GWEN IFILL: Mr. Avery, you get the final word.

DENNIS AVERY: Well, I agree with Chef Barber that ethanol is one of our really bad ideas. It takes 50 gallons worth of gasoline per acre per year against a demand of 134 billion gallons a year

make a significant dent. I would end the ethanol program immediately and give Chef Barber back the farmland.

GWEN IFILL: But, to his larger point, beyond ethanol?

DENNIS AVERY: Well, the whole of society is going to have to retarget its energy system. I'd personally go nuclear; he may not agree with that. But we have to have some sort of energy or society disappears. And I strongly suspect society is going to persist.

GWEN IFILL: Dennis Avery and Dan Barber, thank you both very much.

DAN BARBER: Thank you.

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