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Eat local? Not here

10:44 PM, Jan 30, 2011 | by Philip Brasher | 1 Comments

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Philip Brasher



Philip Brasher covers agriculture, energy and climate issues for the Des Moines Register. He is based in Washington, D.C.

The local food

movement has a long way to go, and no where is that apparently more true than in Santa Barbara County, where food writers spent the weekend learning how broaden the appeal of locally produced foods.

The county ranks 24th nationally in the value of its agricultural production – \$951 million in the [2007 ag census](#). The county, which has 11 farmers markets, ranks No. 2 in broccoli and cauliflower, 6th for lettuce and 24th overall in the category of vegetables, melons, potatoes and sweet potatoes. If local veggies aren't enough for you, try the pistachios, grown in the Sierra Madre Range that rises above the Pacific. Lemons, oranges and grapefruit grow in the heart of city of Santa Barbara, including on the grounds of the city's famed 18th century mission that overlooks the ocean. Restaurants offer local swordfish.

But more than 95 percent of the fruits and vegetables consumed in the county are brought in from elsewhere, said David Cleveland, a professor of environmental studies at the University of California-Santa Barbara. Meanwhile, 99 percent of what the county does produce goes elsewhere, according to his [research](#).

And oh yes, here in this land of plenty of fruits and vegetables, four in 10 adults are households classified as food insecure. More than half of adults are [overweight or obese](#).



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But eating local won't necessarily fix the obesity problem, said Cleveland. "Simply making local what we already eat isn't the problem. The problem is getting local food to the people who need it, and Santa Barbara County is typically of California and typically of the U.S. is dominated by non-nutritious food outlets," he said.

Cleveland wouldn't get much argument with that observation from conventional, large-scale farmers. But there the agreement would end. What Cleveland is really after is a broader definition of what's local food, too. Much of what is being sold as local is offered in chain stores where the produce managers don't know where it comes from, and the food is picked by labor brought up from Mexico.

"We have to take the definition of local into our own hands. We have to make sure we're defining it in terms of the real goals we want for our food system," he said.

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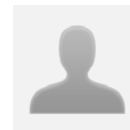
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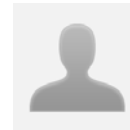
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