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# The Santa Barbara Syndrome: Evidence of a Broken Food System

By Barry Estabrook



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Should you ever want to see firsthand how completely dysfunctional our modern food system is, I urge you to hop a flight to Santa Barbara, California.

That's just what I did late last month to attend the annual Edible Institute, a conference organized by Edible Communities, a network of several dozen magazines that celebrate local food.

In this land of plenty, overflowing with all manner of great local food, fully 95 percent of the fruits and vegetables consumed in the county are shipped in from elsewhere.

If ever there was a group of Americans that should be able to eat locally with neither effort nor sacrifice, it's the 425,000 residents of Santa Barbara County, about 90 miles north of Los Angeles. Santa Barbara County grows commercial quantities of more than 50 vegetables, everything from

artichokes to zucchini. Apples, peaches, oranges, lemons, and melons are among the more than 25 varieties of fruits raised there. There's beef, pork, and chicken. All of which can be washed down with a [terrific bottle of local Pinot or Chardonnay](#).

Given this abundance and a year-round mild climate, it didn't surprise me to learn from David Cleveland, a professor at the University of California Santa Barbara who gave a presentation at the institute ([PDF](#)), that Santa Barbara ranks among the top 1 percent of American counties for agricultural production, with annual sales of \$1.2 billion. Nor did it surprise me that 99 percent of what is grown in Santa Barbara is exported: a box of Santa Barbara mandarins currently sits on the counter of my Vermont kitchen.

But then Cleveland dropped a statistical bombshell: In this land of plenty, overflowing with all manner of great local food, fully 95 percent of the fruits and vegetables consumed in the county are shipped in from elsewhere. "Picture two produce-laden tractor-trailers passing on the highway," he said. "One bringing food into the county; the other hauling it out."

This illogical and wasteful system is in part responsible for a couple of other counter-intuitive statistics that Cleveland presented. Nearly 40 percent of households in the county are "food insecure," meaning that people have trouble affording food. Even with all those healthful fresh fruits and vegetables growing beside its roads, Santa Barbara's obesity rate is in the top 20 percent of California counties. About 8 percent of children there are overweight, and 53 percent of adults.

I in no way mean to cast aspersions on Santa Barbara County. My hunch is that its consumption of local foods is no better or worse than most counties in the United States. (Interestingly, climate-challenged Vermonters buy about the same amount of their food from local sources as do residents of Santa Barbara County.) The take-home message is that our food system is broken. We should all be taking steps to fix it.

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