

Why Buy Local in Amish Country?

(Adapted, with general permission, from “Growing For Market” (2001) and expanded by Robyn Morris for our local Amish and Farm market.)

Here’s a list of a **dozen reasons**:

1. Locally grown food tastes better. Food grown in our own community was probably picked within the last day or two, and is crisp, sweet, and flavorful. Produce flown in or trucked in from California or South America is a bit older, and may have traveled 1,500 miles or more to reach your plate. In this travel time, some flavor is lost as plant sugars begin to turn into starches and plant cells lose vitality. With age, there may also be some loss of nutrients.

2. Buying local is more environmentally sound. The amount of gasoline and other resources used, pollution caused, etc. to bring foodstuff across the country can be minimized by purchasing as much as possible locally. Obviously, bananas and pineapple will need to be shipped in. But given a choice, choose to buy Ohio products such as local produce, wine, maple syrup, and locally repackaged bulk foods.

3. Buying locally spurs economic growth. If you and your neighbors spend money at locally owned merchants and farms, that money circulates locally, positively impacting typically three to seven other local businesses before it leaves the area. Those same

dollars spent at a national or multi-national chain have less opportunity to impact the local economy. If we can purchase in greater quantities from our smaller merchants, they will be able to keep prices competitive with greater sales volume. If we snub our local merchants, they will eventually go out of business, leaving us with very few options.

4. Locally grown food preserves genetic diversity. Large mega-farm growers choose to grow a limited number of varieties that will have a long shelf life in a store. Also important to large growers and distributors is growing those hybrids that ripen on certain simultaneous time frames, and fruits and vegetables with tough skins that can pack and ship easily. Local farms, on the other hand, who are selling directly to you, tend to grow and raise many more varieties of vegetables, fruits, and animals - with the result that they are able to extend the growing season, satisfy many different customers, and bring back flavors and a family farming heritage threatened with being lost forever. A more diversified farm is a healthier environment for all.

5. You can talk to the farmer or local merchant and ask questions. You can find out about their farming practices if, for example, you are looking for natural/organic growing methods or humane treatment of animals. You can ask the Maple Syrup producer why he chose plastic or metal containers, and what this year's syrup is like. You can ask the Amish Gift Shop owner for the name of the person who quilted the placemats you are about to purchase. (It's probably a friend or relative!) You can ask the local butcher about the cut of meat you're about to purchase. He probably aged it, and cut and

packaged it in his own store.

6. Buying locally supports local families. When local farmers sell directly to consumers from the farm or at farm markets, they can get full retail price for their food - which means farm families can afford to stay on the farm, producing food for our future. When you buy food from the small Amish grocery or bulk food store, you are helping that store to continue to be available to all who depend on it. When you buy a rug from an Amish Gift Shop, you help to sustain an independent home-based business. Don't buy a rug for your back door that was made overseas! Buy an Amish-made rug that is locally woven, using fabric from worn out blue jeans and outgrown Amish dresses and shirts.

7. Buying locally builds community. Buying directly from local farms might make you think about the other connections between the consumer and the farmer, such as the impact of weather on the farmer, what's "in-season" and "out-of-season", and the overall process of raising food. You may even get to know your local farmers and build relationships based on trust and common goals. Becoming a "regular" in the Amish bulk food store or even the locally owned coffee shop or restaurant helps to build a sense of connectedness and belonging, not only for you, but also for the person selling to you.

8. Local food preserves open space. If farmers see a value in selling locally to consumers, they will continue to hold onto their land to provide a living for themselves while providing a valuable service to consumers. The many benefits of open space provided by

farms will last for as long as farmers can afford to farm on the land. *When you buy local food, you are doing something **proactive** to preserve the agricultural landscape.* If farming is continually not viable (because we consumers choose to purchase low-cost, lower nutrition, mass farmed foods from across the country), more families will either sell their farmland, or just give up on farming and work in manufacturing or service sectors. As farmland disappears under new housing and industrial parks, this cycle will result in fewer opportunities for buying locally.

9. Local food keeps your taxes in check. Farms contribute more in taxes than they require in services, whereas suburban development costs more than it generates in taxes, according to several studies. Think about it. Developed land requires police and fire services. Roads. Sewer and water. More people create more traffic. A need for larger schools. Traffic lights. Don't be fooled by the argument that greater tax revenue can be generated by a dense population. The cost of services for a dense population is great.

10. Local farmers may choose against genetically engineered seed, and certain pest-control methods, especially when they know that their customers prefer non-engineered, less chemically treated produce. Surveys show time and time again that many American consumers do not trust genetically modified foods. If we can support local family farmers, they will have an incentive to avoid genetically modified seed and harmful pesticides. A smaller farm that grows a variety of foods, and also houses livestock or fowl, and practices good farming methods may have less need for pesticides and

antibiotic control. A diversified farm is a microcosm of a healthy state of being, in which the need for chemical intervention is minimized.

11. Buying local farm products and other locally produced or repackaged products will help support our immediate local economy. Buying locally today is our best predictor that access to local farm fresh produce will be available in the future. And supporting our local merchants will help ensure that we will have local choices in the future, for everything from bakery items to handmade gifts to repackaged tea and baking supplies to locally owned restaurants. If we don't sustain our local farmers and merchants, we will be reduced to shopping at a small handful of giant corporate stores.

12. Interacting directly with Amish farmers and merchants may help to dispel the idea that the Amish are a "tourist attraction", and increase the perception that, while culturally different, the Amish offer valuable merchant and farm services worthy of preservation and support. At the same time, integrating Amish farmers and merchants into a "Buy Local" approach may cause the Amish to feel less like "spectacles" to be viewed from a distance, and more like community partners - joining in a common goal of local economic viability.