

## 8 local simple fresh

---

### Introduction

---

**E**at local. Keep bees. Boycott feedlot livestock. Grow vegetables and sell them at public markets. Support your neighbors by buying their produce. Contain suburban housing by preserving green acres for farms.

Seeds of the “locavore” moment take root in a valley that once led the nation in irrigated agriculture. *Locavores*—like the *carnivore* natives who hunted big game during Boise’s Ice Age, like the *omnivore* Shoshone who once roamed southwestern Idaho, spearing salmon and digging roots—follow the seasons and forage within 100 miles of home. Coined by a chef in San Francisco, locavore was the *New Oxford American Dictionary’s* “word of the year” for 2007. In Boise it has come to describe a way of life. Local food tastes better, its proponents argue. It preserves biodiversity. Supports regen-

erative agriculture. Cuts greenhouse emissions from fossil fuels. "Food miles" has become the Idaho locavore's measure of globalization's impact. In Boise, locavores say, the average distance from farm to table is 1,500 miles.

At once nostalgia and economics, and strong enough to override suburban land-use zoning codes, the locavore movement pines for the barns



Benefits of buying local include fresher food, open-space preservation and support for the regional economy.

---

## 10 local simple fresh



Treasure Valley Food Coalition

The Treasure Valley Food Coalition proclaimed 2011 "The Year of Idaho Food." The coalition hopes that 20 percent of the food consumed in the valley will be valley grown by 2020.

and rail fences lost to suburbia's blight. "Agriculture is our heritage," said the Urban Land Institute in its 2012 "Sustainable Farming" report on the Treasure Valley. Yet agrarianism retreats before the advance of asphalt rooftops. USDA census figures show a 14 percent loss of farmland in Ada County, 2002 to 2007. Canyon County lost 4 percent. Population, mean-

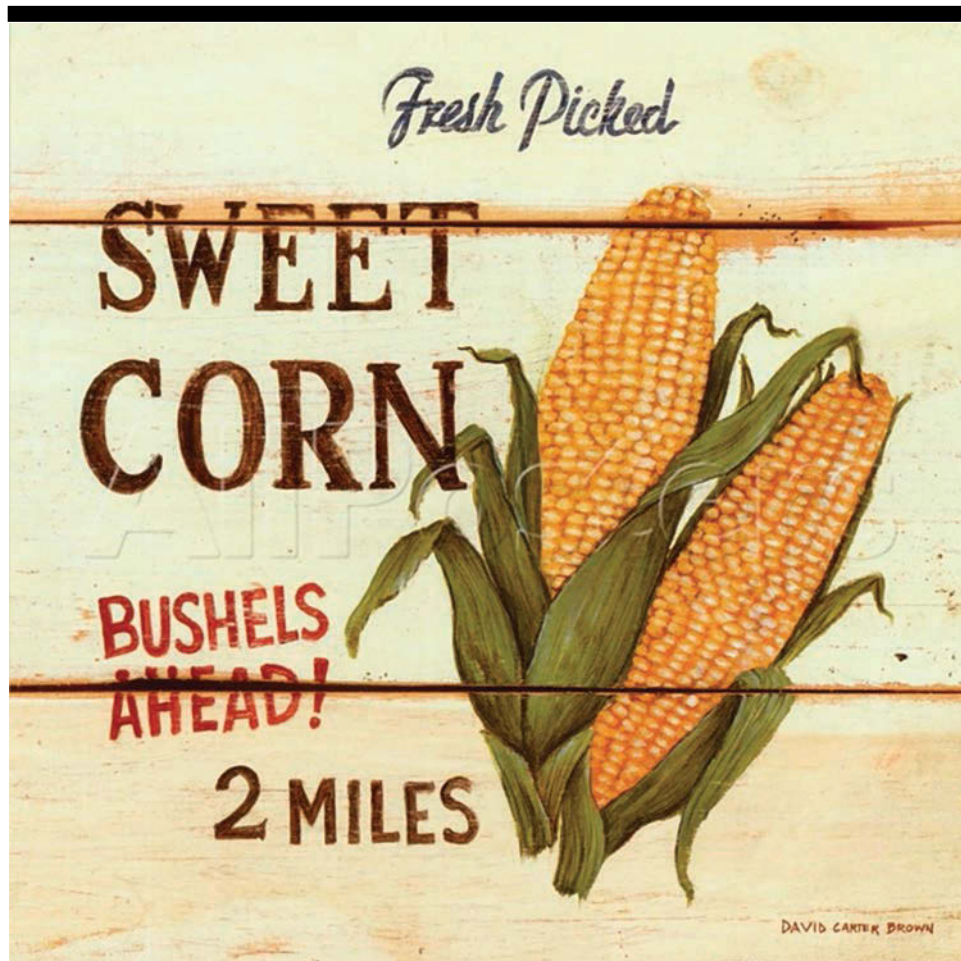
while, boomed. "If we have no land for agriculture," the land institute continued, "we have no food. If we have no food, we have no long-term sustainability. For flat and irrigated land, agriculture may well be the highest and best use."

In Boise the movement proscribes a transformative diet of communitarian values. A school for Boise Urban Gardens offers a seven-week summer program on food "literacy" and "a deeper understanding of nature." An organic farm called Peaceful Belly credits "community" for its commercial success. The Treasure Valley Food Coalition, meanwhile, campaigns to end the tyranny of tasteless tomatoes. Stressing food security through food independence, the coalition promotes its "modest" ambition to double farming acreage. Its goal is to increase the valley's consumption of local food from 2 percent to 20 by the end of the decade. Posters advertise a 12-part local meal of food in healthy abundance, of milk, wheat flour, beef, dry beans, carrots, peppers, tomatoes, potatoes, leafy greens, apples, strawberries and grapes. Twenty percent local consumption would add, says the coalition, 8,800 local jobs.

Not everyone accepts those numbers. Economist Steve Sexton of UC, Berkeley has argued that local food, being seasonal and small-scale, is inherently inefficient. Nationwide, says Sexton, if America's top 40 crops were consumed within 100 miles, farmers would need to plow 60 million more acres of cropland. It would require 2.7 million tons more fertilizer and 50 million more pounds of chemicals. Nutrient-rich produce would be more expensive. "Large operations are more efficient," writes Sexton in the book *Freakonomics*. "Implicit in the argument that local farming is better is an assumption that a 'relocalized' food system can be just as efficient as today's modern farming. That assumption is simply wrong."

The Idaho Potato Commission points out that some soils are better than others. Alabama, for example, yields 170 hundredweight of potatoes per acre. An acre in Idaho yields more than twice as much. To forsake that comparative advantage would be to destroy more habitats, use more chemicals and pollute more water and air. Economists wince at the locavore claim that food mileage is an obvious way to measure environmental impact. Trucking lettuce from California may require less fuel than heating an Ohio

## 12 local simple fresh



David Carter Brown vintageprints.com

Locavores focus on farm-to-fork “food miles.” Critics emphasize the comparative advantage of food imports from distant places with optimal climates and soils.

greenhouse. Potatoes travel by rail and sea in fuel-efficient containers. Small-scale farming relies more heavily on gas-burning vans and trucks.

Locavores brush back those free-market claims with the arguments that local food, being fresher, provides more nutrition; that free-range valley farm-

ers treat their animals better; that growth hormones and preservatives poison the food chain; that organic farming cultivates tastes for unique products; and that conscientious consumption promotes citizenship. Evaluating those claims and assessing those expectations are the research questions that guide this collection of essays. Published by the College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs at Boise State University, the report emerged from a town-gown field school on the dynamics of municipal growth. Annually the program draws about 50 college students from six social science majors. Each class takes on a research query. Top students continue in fall, revising papers for publication. *Local, Simple, Fresh* collects the best of last year's research.

Food seems a logical sequel to our three previous investigations. *Making Livable Places*, published in 2010, presented case studies of land-use conflicts. *Growing Closer* (2011) showed how those conflicts played out in low-density housing sprawl. The rippled effects of unsustainable housing guided student research on the Great Recession called *Down and Out in Ada County* (2012). That dire story sent us looking for a future beyond, searching for Boise's next big thing. Food piqued our interest because it connected history to economics, politics to settlement patterns. Topics in the volume include farm subsidies, farm ethics, breweries, vineyards, public markets, refugee gardens, potato promotions, land-use patterns and locavore entrepreneurs.

**Todd Shallat** directs the Center for Idaho History and Politics at Boise State University. A Ph.D. from Carnegie Mellon University, he specializes in the history of science, technology and the environment.