

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
George P. Nassos

Don't be Confused by "Locavores" or Organic Food

With the growing interest in the environment and energy efficiency, there have been many articles written about what food items we should be eating. These articles may focus on the food content, the farming methods, the transportation or all of the above. While it is very confusing, perhaps I can clarify this matter – or confuse you more.

Most food labels show a calorie value per gram, per ounce or per serving of the food item. This refers to the energy released during the respiration process. There is also a definition for calorie defined as the amount of energy needed to raise one gram of water one degree Centigrade. The food calorie is usually written as Calorie and it is equal to 1,000 calories. So a food Calorie is not the same as a fuel calorie.

The word "organic" does not have a strict definition and as a result it is used very loosely. Some products are called organic just because they are grown and sold locally. That does not make them organic. The USDA Organic certification covers all aspects of food production, processing, delivery and retail sale. It is very specific in prohibiting toxic and synthetic pesticide, herbicides and fungicides; cannot be irradiated; and cannot use treated sewage sludge for fertilizer. The land used for the crop cannot have been treated with chemical applications for three years or more. Organic livestock are not treated with antibiotics and growth hormones, are given certified organic feed, and have access to the outdoors.

There is also a certification that is more stringent than USDA Organic. It is called Demeter Biodynamic. What distinguishes a Demeter certified Biodynamic farm from a certified organic farm is that, in its entirety, a Demeter Biodynamic farm is managed as a living organism. As such, particular emphasis is placed on sustainability, use of all on-farm inputs and care of the place of production.

I have seen various calculations that claim that the average distance traveled by food products from where it is grown to your table is 1500-2000 miles. Therefore, some environmentalists are placing much emphasis on purchasing locally produced food, and have defined these people as "locavores". They have even defined locally produced food as anything not shipped more than 500 miles from its origin to the table. Their argument is that considerable energy is consumed to ship the food 1500 miles, and there is a corresponding emission of carbon. This is true, but it may represent a small portion of the energy consumed during the food's lifecycle.

You are better off eating truly organic food shipped 1500 miles than a locally produced food that may not be organic. The largest part of the energy needed to bring the food to your table is you, the consumer, not the truck transportation. You consume much more energy in driving your car to the grocery store, operating your refrigerator, cooking the food, and running the dishwasher. So don't worry about eating food in Illinois that is grown in California.

If you are not really sure what to eat, you can't go wrong by using "yiayia's" (grandmother's) recipes from Greece. The American Heart Association conducted a study by placing 500 people with a high risk of heart disease on a special diet prescribed by the AHA. They took another 500 people with similar risk and placed them on a typical Greek (actually Cretan) diet. After five years, the group on the Greek diet showed considerably less heart disease than the other group. Another study was just completed at Tel Aviv University's School of Health Professions to determine the best way to protect your skin, particularly in sunny climates. While one recommendation is to use certain suntan lotions, the best prescription is to "go Greek". This means eating foods common in a Mediterranean diet such as olive oil, fish, yogurt, and colorful (anti-oxidant containing) fruits and vegetables.

So be careful with organic food and "eat Greek".