

## Food for Thought

You are what you eat!

What does it mean to eat healthy? Last year, it was cutting out saturated fat. The year before, it meant avoiding carbohydrates in favor of vegetables and meat. With so many trend diets contradicting each other, it can be difficult to find the truth amid the media blitz. Despite the many permutations of trend diets, the punch line is always the same: being conscious about your food choices is important. You can make a social impact with the food you eat daily.

Today there is a movement towards local, organic and non-processed food. Local food is produced close to where you live, typically within 250 miles. Organic food is produced in a way that conserves biodiversity, without additives. Non-processed simply means food that is as close as possible to its natural form.

So why do enthusiasts of the local, organic, non-processed food movement like this type of eating? In part, because it is sustainable. Food grown locally does not have to travel long distances or be frozen and preserved; as a result, it expends less fossil fuel. Additionally, instead of overworking the land like commercial farming practices often do, the agricultural processes used to grow organic food reuse waste from farming for useful purposes such as fertilizing land. Organic farming often treats workers and animals better too. Eating locally also helps to support the local economy because profit is reinvested in the region.

Practical reasons aside, advocates argue that eating locally and organically just tastes better. This food is fresh and more likely to retain the vitamins and minerals that keep you healthy. Eating organically avoids the antibiotics, preservatives and hormones added to much commercially-produced food. Though these characteristics may not apply to all local, organic, non-processed food, they generally hold true.

**“Practical reasons aside...eating locally and organically just tastes better.”**



So how can you start to eat organically and locally? The first step is to do your research. Find out where your food is from and how it was produced. When you are at a restaurant, grocery store or your school's cafeteria, do not be afraid to ask the clerk or server about the ingredients or sourcing. For some of the most important questions to ask, check out [www.sustainabletable.org/shop/questions/](http://www.sustainabletable.org/shop/questions/)

Then start using your buying power. Whole Foods is a familiar option that is available in many neighborhoods year round. If you're feeling adventurous, give it a go at your local Farmers' Market, which usually runs in the spring, summer and fall. Read up on your local farmers' market's offerings at [www.localharvest.com](http://www.localharvest.com)

Of course, the local, organic, non-processed food movement is not without controversy. Critics argue that local, organic eating does not have as many positive attributes as its proponents claim. Some argue that commercial farms are much more efficient than small farms. Additionally, since not everybody can grow food locally, we should take advantage of the efficiency of growing it somewhere warm instead of wasting energy on somewhere it does not make sense. Finally, there is controversy surrounding how organic food is produced – it can be just as industrialized and non-sustainable as commercial farming practices. In this issue, we plan to equip you with enough information to decide how to eat for yourself!

Sources: [www.medindia.net/news/Locavore-Movement-Challenged-73634-1.htm](http://www.medindia.net/news/Locavore-Movement-Challenged-73634-1.htm)

**Summer in the City:** With green thumbs handy, and the Chicago skyline as her backdrop, a Civic Leadership Institute Chicago participant gardens away.

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# IS LOCAL, ORGANIC FOOD ELITIST?

Who has access to local, organic foods? This is an important question that highlights distributional inequalities in the American food system, as certain populations face bigger barriers than others to eating in this way. In fact, local, organic eating has been dubbed elitist for its lack of affordability and availability in many neighborhoods.

Think about the price difference between buying an entree at a fast food restaurant and buying an apple. The two options cost about the same. However, the fast food option, though low in vitamins and minerals, is inexpensive and full of calories that fill you up – so you get more “bang” for your buck. In comparison, fruits and vegetables, while more nutritious, are more expensive per serving. For this reason, affordability is often cited as the biggest barrier to local, organic eating.

As you might expect, lower income individuals tend to eat more processed foods and fewer fruits and vegetables. The federal food stamp program, known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), is one national initiative in place to help combat the issue of unequal access to food. Individuals qualify based on income level and receive aid at the beginning of each month, though it can be difficult to make those resources last the entire month.

There are also other outlets for people of limited financial means to access high quality food, but many people do not know about them. For example, there are over 6,000 Farmers’ Markets across the country that accept food stamps, but they are rarely utilized (U.S. Department of Agriculture). However, not all Farmers’ Markets have the technology to accommodate food stamps. Moreover, food stamp users may not have transportation to get to markets or still may be unable to afford Farmers’ Market prices on limited benefits.

Food deserts are neighborhoods where healthy and affordable food is inaccessible. In these areas, even if community members want to eat locally and organically, they cannot because healthy food sources are too sporadic. Supermarkets are more likely to have healthy food at low prices, but large supermarkets are rarely found in low-income neighborhoods. Convenience stores are much more common in many neighborhoods, but when convenience stores offer healthy options, they tend to be less fresh and more expensive. As a result, lower income individuals tend to spend more on food purchases because they face higher prices at their local grocery stores, and because their limited food budgets prevent them from buying in bulk (Center for the Advancement of Health).

The existence of food deserts has important policy and business implications because studies show that proximity to healthy food sources matters: fruit and vegetable consumption increases by almost 1/3 when consumers live close to healthy food sources. The problem is exacerbated in rural neighborhoods, where healthy food is not only far away, but there are often not ways for residents to get to it. This is because car ownership rates are low and public transportation is usually not available.

Even if you live in a neighborhood with few of these options, you can still take steps to incorporate local, organic food into your own life. Start with a few foods – like apples, carrots or dairy – that you buy locally. If you can’t eat locally grown, you can eat locally produced foods. Visit your local Farmers’ Market if you have one, and support initiatives to bring gardens, grocery stores and small farms to food deserts in urban and rural areas. Be more conscious of your food purchases – it may turn out that there are inexpensive, healthy alternatives to all the foods you currently buy.

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# Urban Farming

Urban farms are beginning to crop up in major cities across the United States. You might have seen one of these curiosities nestled cozily between tall apartment buildings or between businesses on a city block. Urban farms have two central aims – to increase the availability and the quality of food in urban areas, where it has typically been inaccessible. These farms usually employ sustainable practices and introduce green space into areas that need it.

Earthworks Urban Farm is a program of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen in Detroit, MI. Started in 1997 by Brother Rick Samyn, Earthworks is a 1.5 acre certified organic farm that aims to restore a connection between “neighbor and nature.” Earthworks’ primary goal is to work towards food justice, providing healthy access to food for all and eliminating food deserts. Earthworks holds regular volunteer hours and hosts youth programs, community forums on food justice, and classes. The farm grows every common vegetable found in Michigan and lots of other crops like small fruits, herbs and flowers, too. They strive for a year round harvest and even have beehives and produce their own honey! Most of the crops go directly into the food at the soup kitchen but some are sold through the Grown in Detroit co-op and through farmers’ markets. Earthworks is an excellent example of how urban farming can have a positive, holistic impact on the community, from providing community education to healthy food to programs for youth.

Urban farms like Earthworks decrease food miles, the number of miles that food travels “from field to plate.” Commercially grown food travels an average of 1,300-2,000 miles from farm to consumer; locally grown food reduces this average. According to the Council on the Environment of New York City, “transporting food long distances uses tremendous energy: it takes 435 fossil-fuel calories to fly a 5 calorie strawberry from California to New York.” In fact, most of the energy used by the United States food system goes toward processing, storing and transporting food – not producing it. By reducing the miles food travels, we can not only significantly reduce our carbon footprint but also eat local, nutritious food that directly benefits the community.

Sources:

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Let's find the  
**FOOD**

Here's an easy way to map the accessibility of fresh, healthy food in your area. Walk around and count the food providers: How many fast food places, convenience stores, restaurants, supermarkets and cafés are there? Are there more McDonald's than grocery stores? Is there a Starbucks on every corner?

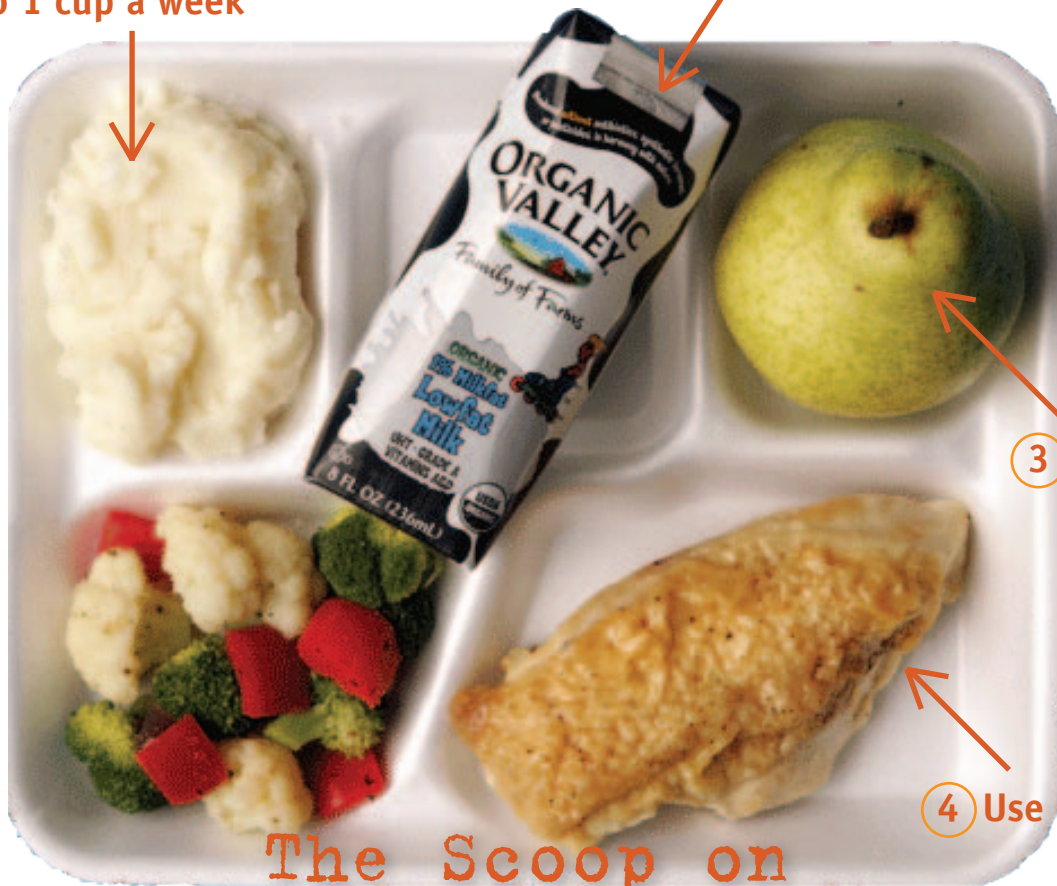
Once you've got your data, think about what that might mean for the nutrition and overall health of your neighborhood. Ask yourself questions like:

- > What are the price differences of purchasing food in these different venues?
- > How convenient is one place over another?
- > How easy is it to find fresh food?
- > Are whole fruits and vegetables easily available?

Then work with local organizations to advocate for what your neighborhood needs to promote healthy eating and living. If you want to get a broader picture, check out the Food Environment Atlas provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture at [www.ers.usda.gov/FoodAtlas](http://www.ers.usda.gov/FoodAtlas)

① Limit starchy vegetables to 1 cup a week

② Serve low fat milk



③ Serve more fruits and veggies

④ Use more whole grains

## The Scoop on School Lunches

### More New Guidelines

⑤ Cut sodium gradually over 10 years and eventually by more than half

⑥ Establish the first calorie limits for school meals

⑦ Ban trans fats

According to Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, every day over 32 million children eat lunch in public and private schools across the country. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) under the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) gives federal subsidies to schools to provide free or reduced cost lunches to low-income students. Schools participating in the NSLP must adhere to the USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans, from which the USDA designed the food pyramid. The guidelines were developed to help Americans eat healthier. Unfortunately, the USDA reports that a third of children aged 6 to 19 are overweight or obese today, and that since 1980 the number of obese children has tripled. Clearly, the guidelines alone have not been successful.

Part of the problem might be that, despite advances in how scientists understand how food affects our health, the guidelines for the NSLP have not changed significantly in 15 years. Vilsack argues that with children consuming up to half of their daily caloric intake in schools, healthier school lunches would make a big difference. Recently, the government has taken steps to improve school lunches. President Obama signed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act in December 2010 and pledged "to [give] our kids the healthy futures they deserve." The act will give \$4.5 billion to schools to help subsidize healthier meals and free or reduced cost lunches in schools. Additionally, in January 2011, the USDA announced new guidelines for school lunches, as outlined above.

Childhood nutrition is a top priority for First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move!" Campaign. Since coming to the White House, the First Lady has made it her goal to "eliminate childhood obesity within a generation." Let's Move! is how she plans to achieve that goal. Let's Move! has four pillars – empowering parents and caregivers, providing healthy foods, improving access to healthy, affordable foods, and increasing physical activity – and aims to effect every area that contributes to a child's weight.

The fact is that much of school age children's food choices are shaped by greater forces than themselves – whether parents, schools, or the USDA – but we can all still make the choice to eat healthier by grabbing an apple instead of that bag of chips.

#### Sources:

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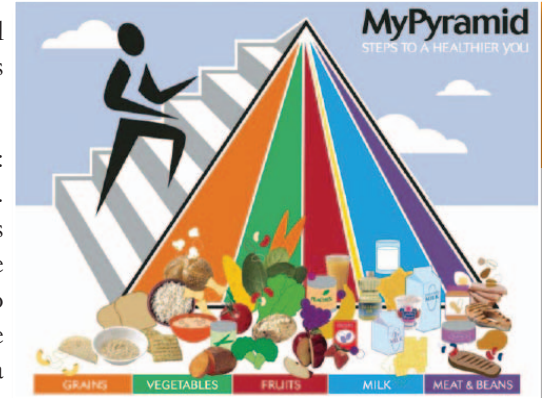
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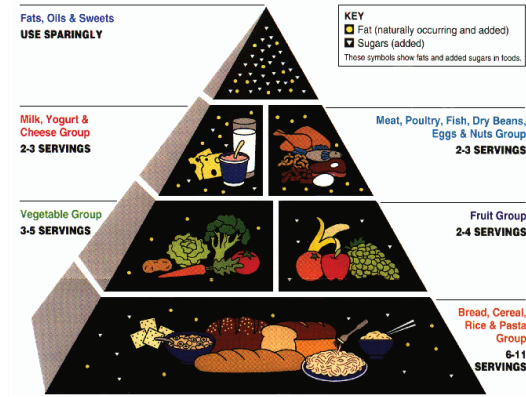
# MyPyramid: A Recipe for Success?

In 2005, the USDA introduced a new version of the Food Pyramid. Now called “MyPyramid,” it is designed to be more user-friendly and customizable than the old version. Check out *MyPyramid.gov*, where you can enter your sex, age, activity level, and other key information for a pyramid tailored to you. How is it different from the food pyramid of our elementary school days? The new pyramid replaces the old horizontal categorical boxes with vertical swathes of color representing different food groups. It also changes the units of food consumption by abandoning “servings” for “cups.”

MyPyramid is not without its critics. The old pyramid was relatively easy to understand: the foods that formed the base should be eaten more often than the foods at the top. Proportional food consumption in MyPyramid is more ambiguous – it is less obvious what and how much we



MyPyramid



Traditional Pyramid

should eat daily. MyPyramid tries to convey that all foods are acceptable in small quantities (indicated by a position at the top of the pyramid) but as you consume more (moving down the pyramid towards the base) you should eat some foods like grains and vegetables more than others like meat and beans.

Still, some scientists argue that the food industry had too much influence in the development of this new pyramid. For instance, the categories of grains, vegetables and milk are all the same size, indicating that all of these foods should be consumed in equal quantities, but scientific studies do not support consuming that much milk.

To address the pitfalls of the USDA pyramid, the Harvard School of Public Health created the Healthy Eating Pyramid, “a food pyramid that’s actually based on the latest and best science.” It is a more comprehensive pyramid that encompasses all aspects of a healthy lifestyle. The base of the Healthy Eating Pyramid is formed by exercise and instead of clumping all protein into “meats and beans,” as the USDA pyramid does, it differentiates steak from fish and tofu, suggesting that proteins like tofu, nuts, fish and eggs should be eaten much more often than red meats. It even includes taking daily vitamins. The Healthy Eating Pyramid is much easier to read than MyPyramid and can be found at [www.thenutritionsource.org](http://www.thenutritionsource.org)

Whichever pyramid you choose, as long as you are conscientious about eating healthier, that’s a step in the right direction.

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## Food Vocabulary

- *Vegetarian (lacto-ovo)* - Consumes products containing milk and eggs but no fish or any other meat
- *Pescetarian* - Eats fish but no red or white meat
- *Vegan* - Does not eat animal products
- *Raw vegan* - Eats only raw plant foods
- *Locavore* - Eats food grown locally
- *USDA Organic* - Meets USDA guidelines that promote biodiversity, do not use pesticides or other chemicals, and enhance ecological harmony
- *Genetically Modified Foods* - Foods that have foreign genes added to their genetic makeup
- *Whole foods* - Not to be confused with Whole Foods Market. Foods that are unprocessed and unrefined, and typically do not contain added ingredients like sugar or salt.

# Spotlight on Service

Slow Food International is a global grassroots organization operating in over 150 countries. It was begun in 1989 to combat the burgeoning fast food industry and to rekindle interest in local food traditions, where food comes from and how our food choices affect the world. It has over 100,000 members organized into local chapters called “convivia” that are, as Slow Food proudly states, “working autonomously to defend their culinary culture and to support a more sustainable food future.” Slow Food International has launched several campaigns including Slow Fish, Terra Madre Day and Ark of Taste. Slow Fish promotes small scale and artisanal fishing as well as the fishing of neglected species. It includes a tool called ‘Which Fish?’ that details the types of fish should you eat and which ones you should you stay away from to prevent the

eradication of the world’s most popular fish. Terra Madre Day is December 10th. Similar to Earth Day, it is a day to celebrate eating locally and to promote the biodiversity of our food. The challenge of maintaining biodiversity has been a top priority for Slow Food USA. Slow Food USA reports that since 1990, 93% of food diversity in the United States has been lost. The Ark of Taste campaign is a catalog of foods in the U.S. that are threatened by large-scale distribution and environmental damage. Slow Food USA believes that the only way to preserve these endangered foods is to cultivate consumer demand. The Ark of Taste currently encompasses over 200 rare, regional foods, tips and tools to use these foods in your diet and most importantly, where to buy them. Check it out at [www.slowfoodinternational.com](http://www.slowfoodinternational.com)



## Slow Food®

**Founded:** 1989

**Vision:** A world in which all people can access and enjoy food that is good for them, good for those who grow it and good for the planet.

**Members:** 100,000

**Countries Represented:** 150

**Convivium:** A local Slow Food chapter

**Convivia Worldwide:** 1,300

## Alumni Q&A *with*



**Danika  
(Kopanke)  
Amusin**

*shown here with garlic scapes at  
Chicago's Green City Market*

**Q:** How did you get involved with food justice?

**A:** My husband, Savva Amusin, and I are both CEP alums, and this past year we have made some changes in our lives! It started with us both reading *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer and *The Omnivore's Dilemma* by Michael Pollan. Now I'm moving toward a greater appreciation of food. Food is one of the greatest pleasures in life, and it is so much more than sustenance; it evokes and creates memories, forms the basis of and deepens relationships with people, and forces a frequent communion with messy reality when I too often live in a digital world.

**Q:** How did you change your food consumption?

**A:** Not being quite brave enough to go vegetarian, we decided that we couldn't keep eating factory-farmed meat. So, no more Five Guys burgers...oh, how we miss them! We still go out to eat, but choose vegetarian dishes

when the restaurant doesn't use humanely raised/humanely killed meat, and we've begun supporting restaurants that do use meat we feel good about. We go to Farmer's Markets more often now in the summer, which is really quite fun.

**Q:** What advice do you have for *Catalyst* readers who want to become more conscious eaters?

**A:** It can be so helpful to have a friend who has already made some of the changes that you want to make; they can be your guide. If you don't have someone like this, you'll have to do it on your own, but be ready to help guide your friends as these things have a way of growing! Very pragmatically, plan out your meals for the week and do your grocery shopping; it can be so easy to just run out for some bad fast food if you don't have the ingredients on hand and recipes at the ready. And make cooking meals into something to do with friends; it really is a blast to be creating something together.

**How we know her** Social Theory and Community Problem Solving: Perception of AIDS, Boston 1999

CivicWeek: Rural Poverty and Hunger/Homelessness, Morehead 2000

CivicWeek: Youth Violence and Conflict Resolution, Detroit 2000

CivicWeek for College-Age Alumni: Race and Social Justice, Cincinnati 2002