

Health

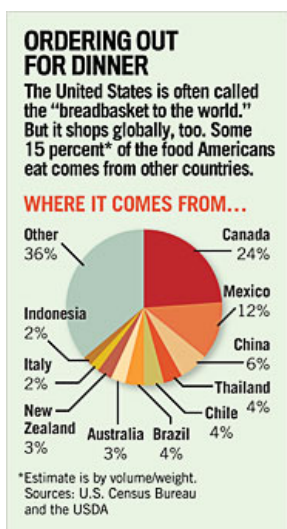
Better Safe Than Sorry

By being a smart shopper and taking some precautions in the kitchen, you can lower your family's risk of getting sick

By Nancy Shute

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Andrew Stout's farm in Carnation, Wash., is one of the most successful small organic farms in the country. Each week, Full Circle Farm delivers fresh lettuce, green peas, spring garlic, and spinach to 17 farmers' markets in the Seattle area, as well as to dozens of restaurants and retailers, including Whole Foods Market. Some 2,400 boxes of produce a week go out to families who have bought a share in the farm's riches. His customers are counting on getting freshness and taste—and also on Stout's care when it comes to hygiene. "Bacteria exists everywhere," he says. So he keeps the manure pile away from the packing shed, tests the water used to irrigate and wash vegetables, and keeps an eye on his workers to be sure they wash their hands. "I'm a food provider," he says. "You want to do the absolute best that you can."



The rapidly growing passion for locally grown produce from farmers like Stout and his wife, Wendy Munroe, is one sign of just how nervous Americans have become about the state of food on their plate. Little wonder, given recent headlines: melamine dumped in pet food and fed to millions of chickens and pigs; E. coli bacteria killing people who eat spinach; salmonella in peanut butter from Georgia; and just last week, E. coli-contaminated beef in 15 states. Each year, 76 million Americans get sick from food; more than 300,000 end up in the hospital, and 5,000 die, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Confidence in the safety of supermarket food has reached an 18-year low, according to the Food Marketing Institute.

Lately, the melamine scandal has left shoppers wondering whether imported foods can be trusted—a legitimate concern, given that many countries have less-than-sterling safety records, and an increasing percentage of what Americans eat comes from overseas. Clearly, the oversight system has big gaps. The Food and Drug Administration is responsible for monitoring 80 percent of the food supply (everything but meat, which the U.S. Department of Agriculture oversees), but the food inspection program has been underfunded for years, and the agency has little enforcement capability beyond asking companies for voluntary recalls. It is able to inspect less than 1 percent of the \$60 billion of food imported each year.

Broken. Keeping homegrown food safe, too, requires diligence, from the field through the processing shed and factory, all the way to the supermarket. Farmers are legally bound to produce food that doesn't pose a health risk; so are manufacturers and retailers. Costco, for example, uses its own labs to test food samples for microbes and hires third-party auditors to inspect suppliers' farms and factories. Whole Foods, which increasingly looks abroad for its organic products, requires growers to shun pesticides allowed in their countries but not here. But with little oversight, human error or expediency can cause disease and death. "Our food-safety system is broken," former FDA Commissioner David Kessler told a congressional hearing this month. Last week, the USDA declared that 56,000 pigs fed melamine-tainted feed are safe for human consumption.

So what's a hungry consumer to do? "If you want 100 percent safety, you have to stop eating. You really do," says Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition at New York University and author of *What to Eat*. "Unless you're growing your own food and you know the quality of your soil, and you know what the animals are eating, you can't be 100 percent safe." Nestle and other food-safety experts would advocate giving the FDA the authority to require food recalls and enough funding to do more inspections. Last month, David Acheson, a longtime food-safety official at the FDA, was named the agency's new "food czar," charged with overhauling the food-safety system. "We're constantly in a situation where, gee, we've got people sick, and we've got to get this food off the market," Acheson says. "What we've got to do as an agency is push that back into prevention." That, clearly, is a long-term project. In the meantime, consumers can make choices that reduce their family's risk.

SELF-DEFENSE IN THE KITCHEN

The best defense against food-borne illness, experts say, is mounted at the end of the food chain: the kitchen counter. "The biggest proactive thing you can do, whether you buy organic or conventional food, is wash it and wash your hands," says Stout.

The FDA recommends that all produce—organic or not, homegrown or imported—be washed under running water just before it's eaten. Even fruit that will be peeled should be washed, since bacteria from the skin can contaminate the inside during cutting. Firm produce, like melons and cucumbers, should be scrubbed with a clean brush. Drying produce with a clean towel or paper towel may also help remove lingering contamination.

Food should be refrigerated at 40 degrees Fahrenheit to keep nasty bugs from proliferating—a refrigerator thermometer is an essential tool. Produce should be kept separate from uncooked meat, poultry, fish, and eggs; almost all domestic chickens, for example, are contaminated with *campylobacter* bacteria, which causes diarrhea. Cutting boards and other food-prep tools need to be washed with hot soapy water or a diluted bleach solution, especially after they've been used to prepare raw meat.

Salad lovers may lament, but you can't beat cooking food as a way to kill nasty bacteria. That's why milk is pasteurized; it's also why the Department of Agriculture recommends that hamburgers be cooked to 160 degrees, well past pink. Frozen foods are usually cooked in the processing, which makes frozen spinach, raspberries, and strawberries—all nearly impossible to wash thoroughly—a safer bet than fresh.

THE BENEFIT OF BUYING ORGANIC

In search of safety, many people turn to organic fruits and vegetables, presuming that they are less apt to carry pathogens like *E. coli* than nonorganic produce. That belief has fueled a boom in organic foods at stores as diverse as Whole Foods and Wal-Mart, as well as at regular supermarkets, which now offer organic house brands. Sales of organic food have been growing by 15 percent a year for the past decade, spiking upward after each publicized food contamination incident.

The good news: Organic produce does carry less pesticide and herbicide residue than conventionally grown crops. And under federal law, organic milk, meat, and produce can't contain added growth hormones, antibiotics, or genetically modified organisms. But organic produce and meat can just as easily be contaminated with bacteria, heavy metals, or other pathogens that pose significant health risks. A recent study found that organic chickens were just as likely as their regular brethren to be contaminated with *campylobacter*; some organic birds had more bacteria. And the California spinach contaminated by *E. coli* last year had been grown using organic methods.

IS LOCAL BETTER?

The new push to buy locally grown food is spurred partly by an interest in supporting environmentally friendly practices that would reduce global warming; food is shipped 1,500 miles on average in the United States, burning fossil fuels and adding shipping costs along the way. But a bigger, if less often expressed, motivation is the belief that domestically grown food is inherently safer than stuff from foreign lands. In a 2002 study, researchers at Colorado State University found that consumers were willing to pay a 19 percent premium for steak labeled: "Guaranteed USA: Born and Raised in the U.S."

Anyone who has traveled in developing countries knows that sanitation standards for food and water are often much less reliable than in this country; people here rarely have to boil water to safely drink it. The same holds true for agriculture: In many countries, human waste is often the only fertilizer available, and pesticides that have been banned in the United States for decades are still used. The melamine-contamination incident, in which Chinese manufacturers adulterated wheat flour with a cheap substance that masquerades as protein, showed only too well how weak links in a global food chain can be exploited by careless or unscrupulous vendors. Given all that, buying from local sources has grown ever more attractive. Proponents count on the people close to home to hold to standards like Stout's.

"Mainly for me, it's knowing the grower, and knowing how they grow the food I'm buying," says Gail Feemstra, a food systems analyst with the University of California-Davis. After the spinach scare, she says, "I went right to the farmers' market and said, 'Give me a big bag of spinach.'" She knew that the spinach she was buying was grown far from the Central California fields implicated in the *E. coli* outbreak.

Beyond the likelihood of getting some quality control, people buying local food may avoid some risks of microbial contamination because the food isn't processed in large facilities that mix products from many farms. But there's still no guarantee; *E. coli* could easily contaminate a spinach patch down the street. Still, farmers' markets have thrived in recent years, supported by rising

consumer demand and by state and federal programs designed to help small farmers get their products to market. There are now 4,000 farmers' markets in the United States. Some supermarkets offer a limited selection of locally grown foods in season. And community-supported agriculture programs, in which farmers like Andrew Stout sell shares in their yearly output, provide a two-sided guarantee. Farmers have a guaranteed market, and consumers know that each week they'll get a box of fresh veggies, fruit, or eggs, often delivered right to their doorstep. (CSAs in your area can be found at www.localharvest.org/csa.)

One of Stout's members, Sage Van Wing, 29, created a website when she lived in the San Francisco area, challenging others to eat food grown within 100 miles of home for a month. In the first month, 800 people signed on to the locavores.com challenge. The list has now grown to 2,000 from around the world. Being a locavore wasn't as easy as Van Wing expected; she couldn't find local sources for salt, spices, or bread. Avocados were hard to come by, too. (Exceptions, she decided, are just fine.)

Not labeled. Eating local, or even domestic, is complicated by the fact that most supermarket foods aren't labeled by source. For years, consumer groups and domestic producers have battled for federal legislation to make country-of-origin labeling required for all imported foods. But those requirements have been applied only for seafood. Even if there were universal labeling, most consumers don't have time to bone up on the differences in agricultural practices from country to country so as to make labels of much use.

The bottom line: Consumers can take steps to protect themselves, but they can't do it all on their own. "Everybody ought to be screaming bloody murder on the lack of oversight of the food supply and talk to their government representatives," says Nestle. Acheson agrees. "I'd like company X and Y to say, all of this food is safe because we do X and Y," he says. Consumers are now pushing for more information about the safety of the food they eat. "And that's a good thing."

Meanwhile, Stout's reach continues to grow. Demand for the CSA's products is now at the point where it's economically feasible to fly his veggies to 2,000 produce-hungry customers in Alaska, offering practically same-day service. "We are kind of local for southeast Alaska, where there are no farms whatsoever," Stout says. "This is as close as it gets."

With Sarah Baldauf and Adam Voiland

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