In new book, Texas State educator challenges locavore ethics

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AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF
Wednesday, August 26, 2009

Eating local has become the trend du jour for foodies, restaurants and farmers, but is it really the solution to the world's agricultural, health and environmental problems?

Texas State University associate history professor James E. McWilliams was a typical "locavore," shopping at farmers' markets and eating as much food as possible from within a 100-mile radius until he couldn't ignore a nagging thought: Is eating this way really going to help us sustainably feed nearly 10 billion people by 2050?

In a 2007 New York Times article, he challenged the idea that reducing food miles — how far food has to travel from the field to the plate — cuts fossil fuel consumption, a notion that he says hit a deep nerve in the food and agriculture communities. He started looking further into the assumptions about organic versus conventional farming, genetically modified foods and use of chemicals to grow food.

The result is "Just Food: Where Locavores Get It Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly" (Little, Brown and Company, $25.99), a book that encourages eaters to rethink the ethics of eating local.

"(The locavore philosophy) is flawed by its own simplicity," he told the American-Statesman last week. Not only is it next to impossible to eat entirely local year-round, he says, the environmental impact of doing so isn't as great as we might think. It's easy to persuade people to buy locally grown heirloom tomatoes, but it's not as sexy to educate them on the pitfalls of taxpayer-funded corn subsidies.

The book comes at a time when public awareness about the food industry is at an all-time high. Books and films such as "The Omnivore's Dilemma" and "Fast Food Nation" have shown millions of people the downside of the industrial agriculture system: confined animal feeding operations, excessive pesticide and fertilizer use, genetically modified crops. National corporations and restaurants are jumping on the "eat local" bandwagon by advertising where their products are made and where the ingredients come from.

But McWilliams says the proposed solution — eating organic food grown from local farmers — is "not only pragmatically unachievable but simplistically smug." He does credit the locavore movement for getting Americans to pay attention to where their food comes from and what goes into producing it, but he says it's time to be realistic about its limits.
It sounds like a good idea to eat only food that is grown nearby, but you can't sustain an entire nation, much less the world's growing population, on this philosophy, he says. He's found only a few places in the country, including southern Virginia and some parts of the Pacific Northwest, where it would be possible to eat only food that comes from nearby.

While we carefully count food miles, we miss the big picture, he says. Consider economies of scale: Transporting 50 tomatoes 50 miles requires the same energy as transporting 2,000 tomatoes 2,000 miles, he says. And if it's winter and your local tomatoes are grown in a hothouse or if a local farmer is growing them in a dry region with poor soil, each tomato requires substantially more energy to grow than those grown farther away in a more suitable climate.

In fact, McWilliams writes, studies have found that transportation makes up only 11 percent of the total energy cost of food. Preparing food at home, he points out, takes up 25 percent. ("'Cook efficiently' just doesn't have the same rousing ring as 'eat local,'" he writes.)

The "eat local" ethic occupies much of our attention as socially concerned citizens, he says, which means we don't have the energy to consider less glamorous actions we could take, like encouraging lawmakers to shift subsidies away from corn growers or learning about the differences between potentially safe synthetic chemicals, which have to be applied only in small amounts, and potentially harmful natural chemicals that require multiple applications.

"As responsible consumers, we have a duty to be aware of all the options that are out there," he says. "Buy local when it's available, but buying local doesn't have the wide-ranging impact that people think it does."

McWilliams is more concerned with what we buy than where it comes from. Fruits, vegetables, legumes and nuts, for example, require far less water, land and fossil fuel to grow than processed foods and meat.

"If you really want to make radical change in sustainable agriculture, stop — or drastically reduce — the amount of meat you eat," he says. A study recently found that if you cut red meat out of your diet just once a week, you'd have the same impact as if you bought all your food from local sources.

Research shows that livestock produce more greenhouse gases than all the cars, trucks and other forms of transportation in the world combined and require hundreds of times more water than grains, fruits and vegetables. Grass-fed red meat is better than conventional, grain-fed beef in terms of sustainability, but it's just the lesser of two evils, McWilliams says. In one year, ranchers can produce 75 pounds of grass-fed beef an acre versus 35,000 pounds of fish. (Fish are more efficient are turning food into protein because they float.)

As a historian, McWilliams says the myth of "agrarian innocence" is hurting progress toward real sustainability. "Farming is ... the art of strategizing against the natural world." Romanticizing food production means we often reject scientific research, for example, of how genetically modifying seeds could help farmers in Indonesia deal with a longer flood season.
"The way we are using genetic modification seeds now is ludicrous," he says, but to ignore them completely is equally as damaging. In coming decades, we are going to have to grow more food on less land using less chemicals, he says, and it would be a huge mistake to ignore the possible solutions genetic modification offers for controlling pests and increasing yields. For instance, one kind of genetically modified cotton in India has allowed farmers to reduce the use of harmful pesticides by 80 percent, McWilliams writes.

"Genetically modifying (seeds) allows you to pinpoint exactly what you want to do," he says. Farmers have been cross-breeding crops for thousands of years, but now scientists can do it more efficiently in a lab.

Don't mistake McWilliams' opinions on genetically modified crops as support for industrial agriculture. He says that like many locavores, he's disgusted by the "coldly profit-driven" techniques of companies such as Monsanto. "Their tactics as corporations have turned the consumer away from even talking about genetically modified crops," he says.

So how do you persuade the biggest agribusinesses to change their ways? If corporations such as Wal-Mart are responding to the growing number of sustainable agriculture advocates, it's possible that biotechnology companies would respond to enough public pressure and increased government regulation, he says.

Any one of these solutions alone won't solve the world's food problems, McWilliams says. He isn't telling everyone to stop eating meat (although he stopped two years ago while researching this book), and he isn't saying that genetically modified seeds will eliminate world hunger, but "consumers are ready to take on more complexity" when it comes to what goes into a food supply, he says.

"We should get away from the easy and go to the gray," he says. "There's a lot of potential in that gray area."

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