

THE 100-MILE DIET

By Sue Jackson

First published in Spring 07 in *YL magazine*

I'm a big 'No Diet' fan, so writing about dieting is usually a no-no for me. But *The 100-mile diet* is a diet with a difference. For a start, it has nothing to do with weight loss. Yet people as far apart as the USA and Sweden, Scotland and Mexico swear by it.

What is it?

The 100-mile diet (160 kilometres to us) is the brainchild of Canadians Alisa Smith and James MacKinnon, who were shocked to learn that the ingredients in a typical North American meal travel on average at least 1,500 miles from spade to plate. With its enormous cost, waste of energy, excessive emissions and other environmental damage, they dubbed this profligacy around food miles 'the SUV diet'.

In 2005 the couple decided to experiment with a planet-friendly alternative, where for a year all their food and drink would originate within a 100-mile radius of their Vancouver apartment. They recorded their progress on their blog (thetyee.ca). The response was so overwhelming that they went on to write the best-seller – *The 100-Mile Diet: A year of Local Eating*.

How it works

One of the couples' first discoveries was that sourcing sufficient and varied local produce took time, particularly until they located the revolutionary farmers, modern-day hunter gatherers and other mavericks who eventually constituted

their 'food shed'. Initially they ate lots of potatoes, and because they couldn't find local flour, they pined for pies and pancakes.

Smith and Mackinnon are emphatic that they are not promoting a 'foodie cult' - 'Do we think the world would be a better place if more people ate local food more often? Yes. Do we want to pick fights or lose friends about it? No.' They even recommend bending the rules if it proves unbearable to forgo favourites like coffee or chocolate. 'Just wave your magic wand and dub them local' is their advice.

Not everyone agrees with the Canadians' insistence that the diet is possible wherever you live. On their blog, someone calling themselves *Doubts in Alaska* points out - 'We only have three months of growing time. If it doesn't grow in that time you have no chance till the next summer.' But Smith and Mackinnon are so sure of their ground that they have even extended a dietary challenge to scientists in Antarctica and astronauts on the International Space Station. I suspect this is stretching things, but stretching things is exactly what many local-eating enthusiasts would have us do - particularly with regard to our views about what is edible.

I have no problem with the Canadians' enthusiasm for gooseberry wine, or at a pinch, even turnip sandwiches. But I learned exactly where to draw the line when I chanced on a book called *The Invasive Species Cookbook*, subtitled *Conservation through Gastronomy*. Its author, J.M. Frankle, suggests an obvious but overlooked local food source is invasive species. As he puts it - 'If you can't beat 'em, eat 'em.' No matter how well it's promoted, somehow I don't think I will be alone in passing on cane toad stew.

What about Australia?

Increasing numbers of Australians are responding to the *thinking globally, eating locally* message. At the central Victorian town of Castlemaine's arts festival in March special breakfasts and lunches showcased foods grown within a 100 kilometres of town. My local Farmers' Market at Ceres Community Environment Park has price tags displaying mileage information. Discerning buyers can select golden delicious apples 'travelled 20 kms from Eltham', silverbeet 'from Colac (157 kms)' or Swiss brown mushrooms 'the most local food you are going to get - raised on site'.

Some people, like the Melbourne-based food writer and television producer, Richard Cornish, have taken the plunge and tried the diet. To get started, he took out his old RACV map, and drew a 160 kilometre boundary around his home. Then he simply bought from producers at farmers' markets whose farms fell within the circle. Like Smith and Mackinnon before him, Cornish met some fascinating people while on the diet. The Beasley family of Port Melbourne still go out every morning at 3 am to fish in Port Phillip Bay, providing flathead, whiting and butter fish to those who prefer to buy direct from the fishermen – and who are prepared to do the gutting and filleting themselves.

Cornish made a diet cake, which turned into a geography and history lesson. He combined spelt flour from near Daylesford and apples from the Mornington Peninsula with a neighbour's eggs. Honey from a small grower in Deans Marsh provided a good substitute for sugar. And since butter was outside his circle, goat curd produced in Sutton Grange did the trick. Cornish's verdict on

the cake? ‘Think pre-industrial, medieval - moist and dense and texturally hard-going. But the flavour was amazing.’

To diet or not to diet?

The wine writer, Max Allen, raises an interesting question: ‘Why do we drink wine in the first place?’ He suggests that if you answer, as he does, that drinking wine from a particular beloved region can ‘transport’ you there, a local equivalent may never suit you, whatever its environmental credentials. The same could apply to foods. Would life be worth living down south without pineapples, bananas or mangoes?

But like many other Australians, environmental issues are increasingly on my mind. I was relieved therefore to find that my sister’s farm – a source of wonderful organic eggs and indigenous greens - falls just within my limit. Even closer to home, I’ve taken to growing an abundance of herbs, vegetables and fruit in my own small inner-city garden. You could call this ‘digging for victory’, this time around for victory against global warming.

I was particularly heartened by the Canadians’ suggestion that with the 100-mile diet we needn’t bite off more than we can chew. We can start with a single meal, a 100-mile day, a one week commitment. I’m convinced it’s one diet worth sticking to.

MORE

www.100milediet.org outlines the origins of the movement, tips on getting started and more.

Record your own message on James’ and Alisa’s blog - theyee.ca

Check out biodynamic wines in Australia on Max Allen's website –
redwhiteandgreen.com.au

Read 'Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: Our Year of Seasonal Eating" (USA
Harper Collins, 2007) by the wonderful Barbara Kingsolver