

Eat Food from [Here]: The Talismanic Semiotics of Local Food

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Abstract: One especially illuminating aspect of a sign, according to contemporary linguistic anthropologists, is its indexical nature: signs gain meaning through logical or proximate association. And indexicality itself is multiple. In any given instance the potential associations are infinite but the actual associations are limited by a variety of perhaps contingent factors, discoverable not in advance but only through investigation. In demonstrating the multiple aspects (orders [Silverstein 2003], types [Ochs 1992], levels [Hanks 1992]) of indexicality of local food, I show that it indexes all at once location, contact, proximity, and multiple qualities (Chumley and Harkness 2013). As advertisers and others know (Luntz 2007, Puntoni, Schroeder, and Ritson 2010), the more positive associations that can be bundled into a single term, the more effective it can be. While only some advocates of local food would regard themselves as advertisers, virtually all see their task as promotion or education or advocacy, sometimes veering into marketing. Using my experience with a local food co-op, this analysis examines how local food is being employed as a multivariant indexical sign.

Keywords: semiotics, indexicality, qualia, local food



Qualities must be embodied in something in particular. But as soon as they do, they are actually, and often contingently (rather than by logical necessity), bound up with other qualities—redness in an apple comes along with spherical shape, light weight, sweet flavor, a tendency to rot, and so forth. In practice, there is no way entirely to eliminate that factor of copresence, or what we might call *bundling*.

– Webb Keane (2006: 188)

The concept-metaphor of the local is under-examined in terms of its pre-theoretical commitments.

– Henrietta Moore (2004: 75)

Situating [My] [Place]

I have been deeply involved in the “food movement” in some sense for decades but my participation intensified in 2009 when I joined a fledgling buying club, the Purple Porch Co-op, created to connect local farmers and consumers in the revitalizing small rust-belt city of South Bend, Indiana (population 101,000). Begun as a way to improve the food system, to make transparent the sources and inputs of food, and to provide more just

compensation to the producers, our co-op engaged in a long process of promoting comprehension of the food system, needed despite the fact that ours is an agriculturally rich location. Conceived in 2009 by five friends (not me, alas) sitting on a purple porch, our tag line, our brand, has been “Grow Here.” The co-op initially had several dozen consumers and perhaps a half-dozen producers; by the time we opened our full-time physical store and café in downtown South Bend in 2014, we had about three hundred “member-owners” and fifteen to twenty full- and part-time employees, and a dozen or so direct producers at our Wednesday evening market. (By mid-2016 the number of member-owners had more than doubled.) The first wave of our members and consumers was committed, on its own, to questioning the existing industrial food system. Most were white and educated, and largely middle-aged, though there was a substantial cohort of people in their twenties and thirties as well. We have aimed to expand beyond that easy target.

We faced the challenge of telling our story to enough customers to sustain a genuine business, no matter how idealistic the foundation and no matter how alternative the cooperative ownership structure. As I write we have been engaged in persuading enough people of the meaning and importance of various virtues connected with *local* and *sustainable* and *fair* and *transparent* and *community-focused*. Items in the coop are labeled and promoted as *local*; we report to members in newsletters the percentage of local and Midwest goods purchased. We highlight certain local products. Still, some customers appear not to be aware of this dimension. Many customers appear to prefer “certified organic”—affirmed by an outside authority that products were produced following certain strict guidelines (USDA n.d.). Occasionally we will offer the same product—say, garlic—in local and certified organic versions. Depending on the price, one or the other may sell out first.¹ Local eggs and milk always outsell anything that appears commercial or from “outside,” no matter what the price, according to Local Products Buyer Myles Robertson. But in discussions of our focus on *local*, it became obvious that people hold disparate views of its meanings and benefits.

Local food is not necessarily organic. Some of the biggest tensions within the co-op came from disagreement between those who focused on “organic” and those focused on “local.” “Organic” food may have been shipped from across the country or across the world. Bananas were a big topic at first; they will never grow in Indiana. Should we feature them at all? We did a survey; most members felt we should sell them, but only with clear identification as imported (and only organic and fair trade). A few opposed our carrying them at all. (We do sell them.) Coffee, too, does not grow in the Midwest but it counts as “local” if it is roasted locally—as long as it possesses “value-added” local dimensions, even if the raw ingredients aren’t produced locally. Like muffins containing coconut oil, we count such coffee as local.

Suspicion over how some products labeled “organic” were grown has given rise to discussions of “transparency,” which in our hierarchy of values trumps organic certification. If we couldn’t look the producer in the eye and ask how the product was made, it was not as good. Hence, *local* implied the greater possibility of transparency. We have thus accepted some local producers of fruit who do spray their orchards because they can explain to us exactly what chemicals they use. Labeling every ingredient and its source is a hallmark of our café and was a point of pride when we held regular potlucks. If we could name the producer of the eggs, sausage, or greens, it was superior to anything anonymous. Thus *local* implies “completely knowable” — i.e. transparent.

The *local* aspect of *local food* must also be defined; what, after all, is the limit of *here* and when does it become *there*? Our food co-op has defined local as within a 60-mile radius, or the distance a farmer is likely to be willing to drive for a market. Sometimes *local* refers to food within a state; we also have a “Midwest” classification (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Local and Midwest at Purple Porch Co-op. Painting by Jessica Clarke; Used by permission of Purple Porch Co-op. Photo by Susan D. Blum.

Sometimes a “driving distance” (250 miles or so) is specified, as by the Green Markets system in New York City. The United States Department of Agriculture, with its inaugural *Local Food Promotion Program* grants, defines *local* as within 400 miles or so. Sometimes the definition depends on “direct-to-consumer-marketing,” which means there must be contiguity (Martinez et al. 2015 [2010]) and contact between producers and consumers—indexicality through contiguity.

Even my co-op’s board was not initially united in its emphasis on “local” food. I was surprised by our difficulty in convincing people of the importance of local food. It seemed to me advantageous that many positive qualities were indexed by *local* and that everyone should applaud it. Only after reflecting on this problem for this article did I grasp that we needed to sort out the implied commitments, the contingent associations, and the semiotic (symbolic and material) aspects of local food, if we were to be persuasive. It became clear that our promotion of *local*—multivalent, bundled—was being used as a talisman, to convey protection from ills. Sometimes *local food* is a kind of code word, a symbol, a condensed version of something that smuggles in a host of unstated assumptions—for those who are in the know. (This is like “witness” for Christians (Harding 2000) or “modest” for Orthodox Jews (Fader 2009); “market” for economists, “out” for sexuality activists and “articulate” for racists (Alim and Smitherman 2012).) So *local food*, with its simple unthreatening short phrase, appears ready-made, pre-branded, to counteract the impersonal and absent beneficiaries of commerce. It is not explicitly, on its surface, political.

The polysemousness of the concept of *local food* has been both advantageous (it’s good in, oh, twenty-five ways) and problematic as its “brand” is unfocused. People argue that local is good for both consumers and producers (Halweil 2002). It’s good economically. It’s good gastronomically. It’s good morally. It’s noble, virtuous, pure. It is home. You’d *better* eat it! One image retrieved from a now-defunct website demands “Local FOOD, Mother Fucker” in big white letters on black. Small and at the bottom, it admonishes “Eat it.” (www.youarewhereyoueat.com) (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Local Food: Eat it. Original: www.youarewhereyoueat.com, <http://www.thomascheng.com/images/localfood.jpg>

The intersection of morality with this topic is complex. By *morality* I mean both explicit prescription and more affective or aesthetic scenarios, scripts, and images of desirable behaviors (Kean 2016, Zigon 2008). Different arguments, different emphases, and different aesthetics suggest different solutions to different problems. Having been involved in marketing, persuasion, media accounts, and countless meetings with everyone from growers to student interns, from other co-ops' board members to skeptical citizens, I have been interested in observing the entailments and commitments of *local food*. As I aimed to better grasp the multiple ways *local foods* were represented beyond my local co-op, I ended up curious about how local food was promoted elsewhere as well.

In demonstrating the multiple aspects (orders [Silverstein 2003], types [Ochs 1992], levels [Hanks 1992]) of indexicality of *local food*, I show that it indexes all at once location, contact, proximity, and multiple other qualities (Chumley and Harkness 2013). As advertisers and others know (Luntz 2007, Puntoni, Schroeder, and Ritson 2010), the more positive associations that can be bundled into a single term, the more effective it can be. While only some advocates of *local food* would regard themselves as advertisers (Figure 3), virtually all see their task as *promotion* or *education* or *advocacy* or *communication*, sometimes veering into *marketing*.



Figure 3. Advertising LOCAL at the Atlanta airport. Photo by Susan D. Blum

Local food is, like so much else, inherently material, just as clothing is (Keane 2006), with affordances and consequences, but it is also always semiotic (symbolic and indexical) as well. The semiotic aspects may or may not be carefully examined by those who promote them. In this article I analyze some efforts to promote local food and the unstated or sometimes stated assumptions and contrasts embedded in the invoking of “local,” showing how *local food* is being employed as a multivariant indexical sign for local food promotion.

Local Food Emerges

Local food came to prominence in the United States in 2007 with the publication of Barbara Kingsolver’s popular book *Animal Vegetable Miracle: A Year of Eating Locally*. The neologism *locavore*, coined by Jessica Prentice in 2005, in turn became the “word of the year” in 2007 with clear political dimensions.² *Local food* was taking its turn in a series of formulations challenging the big industrial food system (Mitchell 2014, Waltz 2010, Weiss 2010), starting perhaps with vegetarianism, inspired by Frances Moore Lappé’s *Diet for a Small Planet* (1971) (allied with E.F. Schumacher’s book *Small Is Beautiful* (1973)). This series of qualities—*qualia* in C.S. Peirce’s term (see Harkness 2015)—competing for our attention includes: “natural” food, “whole” food, “organic” food. And while *local food* shares many implied characteristics with those other ideal types of food, it is the only explicitly *deictic* one—i.e., taking its meaning from the conditions of utterance, meaning ‘local’ in contrast to ‘distal.’³ Further, none of these *qualia* is directly perceptible, unlike other well-studied sensuous *qualia* such as vocal tone (Harkness 2013b) or the taste of drinks (Manning 2012). These two features—its abstract quality (*quale*) and its deictic nature—make *local food* semiotically intriguing.⁴

A hundred years ago nobody wrote of “local food” or “organic food” or “natural food” (Mintz 1997). There was simply food, and once in a while some could be brought from somewhere far away. Humans have long had some sort of exchange of costly precious items—red ochre, shells, metals—both enabled by high status and contributing to recipients’ prestige. For thousands of years there has been a spice trade; the history of the last five hundred years cannot be understood without including the central role of circulation and exchange of rare foods—spices, fruits, nuts, sugar, drinks (tea, coffee, chocolate) (Braudel 1982-84, Mintz 1985, Wolf 1982). Food researchers have traced the origins and spread of potatoes, tomatoes, chilies, bananas, and much else in the Columbian Exchange, the mixing up of plants and animals from the “New World” into Europe, Asia, and Africa (Crosby 1972, Cumo 2015, Kiple 2007, Pilcher 2006). What began as local became global and has then been relocalized. When I buy blue potatoes from my friends Chris or Joe, these are local potatoes, though they may originally have been bred in Peru. In the US, *local* refers to proximate, not ultimate, origin—an exclusion that is rarely stated overtly.

Beloved author Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote of the amazement she had felt not quite a hundred and fifty years ago at eating an orange in the middle of the Wisconsin Christmas season. She wrote of the character representing herself when a child, “Laura was wondering about the orange before her. If those oranges were meant to be eaten, she did not know when or how. They were so pretty, it was a pity to spoil them. Still, she had once eaten part of an orange, so she knew how good an orange tastes” (Wilder 2007: 301). Exhortation to eat *local food* would have been meaningless then, when virtually all food was local, and it would be meaningless to people without the means to procure food from elsewhere except at very high price—as Richard Wilk showed in “Eating Belizean Food” (1999): in the Belize of the 1980s, local food was the default, unmarked, nonvalued form of food, though it was not so called. It was just food. Only imports were seen as worthy to feed to foreign guests.

Different actors promote *local food* from a variety of perspectives. Some emphasize that food should be artisanal, unique, natural, sustainable, small. Real. Authentic. Beautiful. A model of the good. Or that *local food* is efficient, nutritious, healthy, economical. *Local food* can be promoted for marketing (Byczynski 2013), for tourism (Martin 2014), for food security (Beckford and Campbell 2013), or for protection of national markets (DeSoucey 2010) or in opposition to national centralization (Nonini 2013, Pritchard 2013).

This quest for the local, the authentic, small-scale, plant-centered, modest, a return to earlier foodways, is largely a privilege of educated first-world consumers, following its wholesale abandonment decades ago. Return to or protection of *local food* is worldwide to some extent, though often with varying emphases. In France, Italy, England, Norway, movements celebrating *terroir*, the flavor of the local, combine with the relatively elite Slow Food movement, with heritage, and with nationalism to promote local products. The emerging “kilometer zero” movement that began in Italy aims to source food from as nearby as possible—directly from nearby farmers or foraged on the spot (Frey 2012). Elsewhere, such as China and Japan, local food intersects with concerns about clean and safe food. In the US local food can be co-opted, branded, hijacked, as in marketing campaigns by corporations such as Whole Foods. An article in the online magazine *Slate* in 2006 (Maloney 2006) accuses the retailer of misrepresenting the small family farmers providing produce because notwithstanding signs extolling the importance of small local farmers, in fact most of the organic produce is produced by large-scale producers in California.

Local food itself is a sign. What kind(s) requires some analysis.

Signs, Signs, Everywhere

The revival of Charles Sanders Peirce's recursive triadic account of the sign (three types, three parts, three levels...) (Silverstein 1976) has given rise to useful and thought-provoking social analyses of ritual, advertising, and nearly every aspect of communicative behavior. One especially illuminating aspect of a sign, according to contemporary linguistic anthropologists, is its indexical nature: signs gain meaning through logical or proximate association. And indexicality itself is multiple. In any given instance the potential associations are infinite but the actual associations are limited by a variety of contingent factors, discoverable not in advance but only through investigation. As firstness, in Peirce's schema, *local* is a *quality*, instantiated as a secondness in particular cases and in relation to other signs as a thirdness.

The quintessential deictic, indexical linguistic sign, is *here* (Hanks 1992). Such terms cannot be interpreted without knowledge of the context of utterance. *Here* points to the speaker's and hearer's shared location and knowledge (Nakassis 2014). Building on assumed knowledge—dare I say *local knowledge*?—many advocates of *local food* rely on the fact that the indexicality of *local* exceeds its semantic meaning of location and indexes moral and aesthetic qualities as well. Potential negative aspects of *local* (such as *parochial*) are excluded from interpretation, though only by omission. As is always the case, without explicit instruction a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998), a community of interpreters, has been trained to know what *local food* invokes, while being identical in form to a commonplace term that requires no special expertise to learn. Promotion of *local food* takes many forms but it consistently appeals to recipients' attachment to and knowledge of certain aspects of life indexed by *local*, indexing *quality* along with *location*. It is common for linguistic anthropologists to distinguish one aspect of indexicality as central or fundamental (Blom and Gumperz 1972, Hanks 1992, Ochs 1992, Silverstein 2003)—say, female—and others as somehow parasitical, derivative, secondary, metaphorical—say, flighty or weak. As in most examples, the contiguity and associational aspects of *local food* do not *necessarily* imply one another though they can become iconic (iconized) that is, they seem to resemble each other. These two ways of gaining meaning may overlap, giving extra power to a particular use of a particular sign in a particular context. Interpreters of signs may not share all the associations intended, which are rarely enumerated.

The indexical dimensions of signs are always underspecified. Signs may be energetically circulated to promote some entailments and to prevent others—taking advantage of shifting (Urcuioli 2008) and bundling (Keane 2006) aspects of indexicality. Branding, a cousin of marketing, is one well-studied form of deliberate semiotic circulation with pragmatic effects (Manning 2010). *Local food* is a brand—a quality (quale)—that is essentially an anti-brand (Beautiful Trouble n.d.; see Kockelman 2006, Nakassis 2012).

In its most basic sense, *local* means, points to, indicates, a particular place. In some kind of “commonplace” usage, from union *locals* to pointing out the *locals* in contrast to tourists in resort towns, *local* indicates something specific and particular, perhaps delineating a boundary between insiders and the rest. It tends to emphasize particularity and sometimes smallness, in contrast to more general or widespread features. Applied to people, it may mean *us* (a deictic)—or those other folks who live *here*. Though there are many potential secondary indexical meanings of *local*, a number are excluded from the usage I invoke here: *Local food* is not taken to include industrial agriculture from a nearby region, despite potential literal contiguity or proximity, because it lacks the primary associational aspects. *Local* does not include unsophisticated, isolated, “backward,” or unenlightened. *Local yokel*, *rural rube*, and other pejorative associations are excluded. But that may be true only for the believers—which likely has racial and class dimensions (see Weiss 2011).

Indexical Sign of Place: Local Food IS Us

Anthropological accounts of local food throughout the world include studies of tourism and heritage, analysis of European and Californian branding of *terroir* used to sell wines and cheeses, and investigation into the medical, religious, and psychobiological meanings of food in Asian medical systems and indigenous health.

Tourism, personal and physical experience of the *local*, the specific and particular place, always—even obligatorily (Richards 2002)—includes some focus on *local food* (Bessiere and Tibere 2013, Hjalager and Richards 2002, Long 2004, Mak, Lumbers, and Eves 2012, Mason and Paggiaro 2012). It is impossible to imagine a travel brochure, website, or book that fails to mention food. Travelers in East Asia, for example, are expected to bring back *local specialties*. (Airports offer them as a last-chance opportunity to fulfill this obligation.) There is even a field of *culinary tourism* (Long 2004). A form of rural tourism in China, *nongjiale*, began in southwest China’s Chengdu in the early 1990s and has been promoted by the government since the late 1990s, resulting in more than 300 million tourists visiting rural areas (Su 2013: 616) and staying with local families, eating their food (Park 2008). Certain wild vegetables, collected “from the garden within the diner’s sight,” are associated with “wildness, authenticity, greenness, health, and rusticity” (Park 2008: 187-88)—that is, right there, proximate, super-local.

Sometimes *local food* connects with heritage and tradition, as in France and Italy—whether a tradition that is constructed and changing, or one that is enduring (Trubek 2008). *Terroir*, quintessentially, as depicted in a travel site (Wine Folly 2013) (Figure 4), includes the material dimensions of terrain, soil, and climate as well as the “traditions” indexically associated with a particular place.

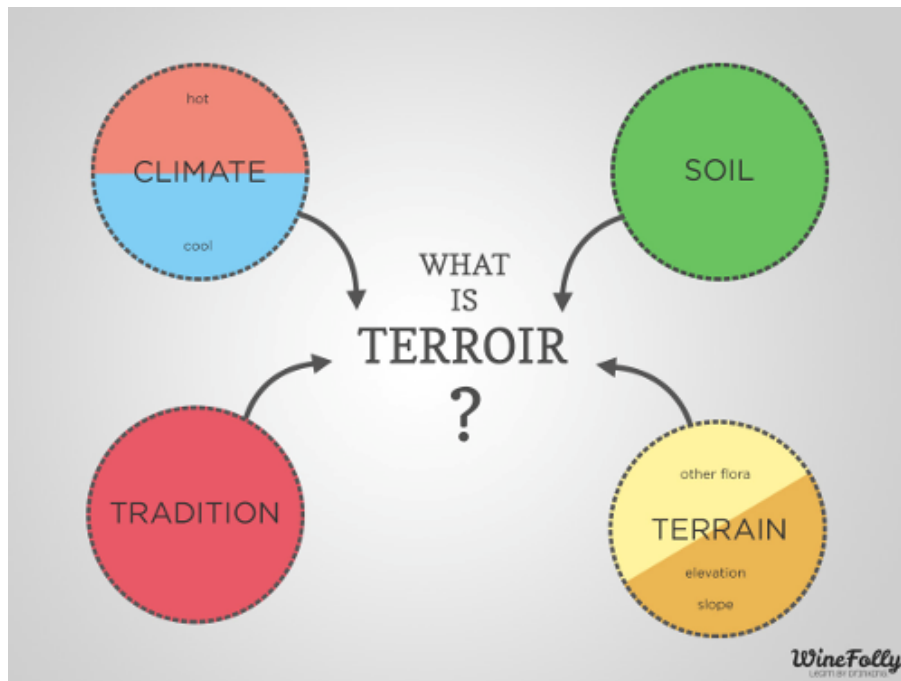


Figure 4. Terroir.

<http://winefolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/terroir-definition-for-wine.jpg>

Battles over wine appellations and cheese names associated with each region reveal the complex intertwining of place, brand, exchange, and associations, as for example feta cheese, Brie, champagne, lard, which are all defined by their source, the place where they are “local” and authentic (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014). And such efforts have political components. Amy Trubek, who studied the *terroir*-inspired foods of France, California, Madison, Wisconsin, and Vermont, reminds us “in Europe and the United States eating has never been less connected to where people live and how people farm....If we want to have a relationship to food based on location, we must *make it happen*, for tasting place and eating locally now more than ever require the ‘truant freedom of practices’ described by Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard” (2008: 246). Gastronationalism explicitly connects the political and culinary (DeSoucey 2010).⁵

Local food increasingly includes foraging, with foods literally contiguous with the place of consumption—permeating, not just touching. The “Nordic Food revolution,” associated with René Redzepi, celebrity chef of Copenhagen’s Noma restaurant (Voigt 2011), has been credited with promoting local and regionally sourced food in the Nordic countries. Redzepi’s cookbook *Noma: Time and Place in Nordic Cuisine* (2010) emphasizes contiguity and proximity, the first indexical order of *local* (see also Karrebaek and Maegaard, this issue). Local foraged foods, such as green leafy vegetables, fruits, roots, and flowers, and rice-field grasshoppers in Korea, demonstrate resistance to international, imported food (Pemberton 2001).

But local food can also be consubstantial, emphasizing sameness and shared nature. When students in China go away to school, they often take rice with them. The expression 水土不服 *shuitu bu fu*, ‘the water and soil are not suitable,’ is a reminder that people are not separable units passing billiard-ball-style through an environment. Deeply rooted in Chinese medicine, food, philosophy, and psychology, people’s nature is assumed to be affected by their place. Connoisseurs of tea were said to be able to identify the source of the water used—presumably through direct past experience of a specific locality (Lin 1964 [1935]: 342-344). A Korean slogan, *sint’oburi*, ‘body, earth, not two’, supports nationalist rejection of foreign food imports such as McDonald’s hamburgers or other global foods (Bak 1997: 154-55, Pemberton 2001, Walraven 2001: 97). People’s bodies, the argument goes, must be fed by food from nearby. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney has written of the Japanese view of “rice as self”—but it is not just any rice (1993). It must be Japanese rice.

Along the same lines, according to E. Valentine Daniel, in South India people of different groups (*jāti*) have different substances. Places are consubstantial with the people and the soil; they are made of the same thing. Writing of specific locales, villages, termed *ūr* in Tamil, Daniel writes that “The soil substance is ultimately mixed with the bodily substance of the *ūr*’s inhabitants” (1984: 79). Every substance consists of *kuṇans*, ‘qualities,’ “a substance that fuses the particular qualities of mind and body” (p. 89). And though not often achieved, “It is the ideal of every Tamil to reside in his conta *ūr*—that *ūr* the soil substance of which is most compatible with his own bodily substance.⁶ Such compatibility can only be achieved when the *kuṇam* of the soil is the same as the *kuṇam* of one’s own *jāti* [lineage, kinship group]” (p. 101). Thus location is critically important to people’s thriving; the *qualia* should match—as Lasater-Wille (this issue) shows in Peruvian assumptions about *sazón* and *palatar* being imbued bodily through childhood in a certain place and socialized only with difficulty in adulthood.

In a fascinating piece of food anthropology and medical anthropology, Gary Paul Nabhan has been writing about the history built into our genes and our abilities to process foods—with optimal foods being those that arose in people’s “ancestral” location. He provides substantial evidence that some diseases such as heart disease and diabetes may be reduced when native people learn to “eat in place” (2004: 192), eating the foods native to their ancestors’ environment, such as taro in Hawaii or cactus in Arizona. Though such foods can improve the health of anyone, the improvements are substantially greater for those with ancestral ties to the place. This may apply especially in somewhat isolated deserts and on islands where evolutionary constraints may have promoted coevolution of humans and foods available in a location, where there are few other options; thus survival is aided by the ability to process certain widely available foods (Agustín Fuentes, personal communication). Despite potentially confusing complications, given that foods have circulated widely and “native” and “indigenous” and “local” may change over time (like

potatoes in Europe and tomatoes in Asia), because of the scale of evolution, ancestral dispositions remain—as an indexical clue to physical heritage.

It is no wonder, given all this—the overlap between heritage and food, the religious overtones of some foods, as well as the more familiar celebrations of local food—that when I started to interrogate my co-op’s experience in promoting local food, I found great complexity. *Local food* is both *symbol* in all the conventional senses—as an emblem to wave in a crusade, as something *standing for* a constellation of concepts, as a *condensation* of values—and also an *index* of hipness, coolness, counterculturalism, environmental savvy, social justice, anti-industrialism and anti-large-ism. And it is represented vividly in *iconic* imagery of farms, rough-hewn signs, the harmony of nature. In the contemporary US version, it is represented in a homespun ordinary phrase (*local*) that is just long enough and just short enough, common-sense and not-high-falutin’ enough, to be repeated easily, unlike *sustainable* which because of its indexical association with college-educated youth sounds—and has been labeled by interested challengers as—comparatively elitist (Schlosser 2011, Stallman 2011).⁷ *Local* may index acceptance of a whole theory of environmental disaster, potentially averted. But *local* could also just mean *folks* (but see Leibovich 2015). It could mean the folksy anti-elite rejection of cosmopolitanism, which brings in all kinds of exotic—literally—stuffs from outside, and then ships the profits to fat-cat shareholders far away. The confusion connected to the exhortation to *buy local* is understandable especially once we grasp its multiple pragmatic, rhetorical, indexical aspects (as I am attempting to do in this essay). In the final section of the article I analyze in some detail efforts to promote local food, aiming to discern which qualia are bundled with “local” by many different originators. (I do not claim to have studied how they were received.) I did not conduct fieldwork for this, except to collect publicly available materials from the Internet. This article emerged organically (as it were), as I reflected retrospectively on my prior experience which had spanned years, but not as a deliberate research project. Hence, I aimed to take my substantial local experience and place it into broader context, looking for many local efforts in many places.

Advocating *Local Food*

Advocates of *local food* as a moral choice invoke semiotic—material, symbolic, indexical, and iconic—aspects of their topic to persuade. Some employ visual methods, where aesthetic dimensions of “the good” convey a beacon of the ideal, the virtuous, and every attempt to persuade promotes *local food* as antidote to an ill. Aesthetics convey morality and “The Good,” or in Wittgenstein’s pithy and evocative phrase, “Ethics and aesthetics are one” (Wittgenstein 1999 [1922]: 6.421; see also Stengel 2004). We see a portrayal of the ideal, aesthetically pleasing and virtuous, or of the evil to be superseded and rejected. Through words, colors, images, and implied contrasts, different audiences are targeted.

Images may be simple or complex, beautiful or utilitarian. I noted especially the way appeals to science rely on appeals to reason or a personal challenge (like pedometers or other calculators of activity), while overtly affective appeals demonstrate nostalgia, roughness, virtue, emotion, longing, and relationships. Both types bundle qualities; some may be more obvious than others. “Scientific” aesthetics are often unremarked, conveying the quality of “simple fact” — itself an aesthetic quality — *appearing* unmediated semiotically, when of course they aren’t....

Material Advantages of *Local*

Appeals based on what I call “material advantages” emphasize scientific arguments, which may be sorted into three subcategories: environmental, economic, and health. Exhortations to eat local are presented with graphs, data, numbers, correlations, projections, and footnotes. They tend to use unembellished, practical fonts and intricate graphics, with a lot of red.

The most well-known reason for promoting local food is that it is environmentally disastrous to ship it from far away. The concept of “food miles” derives from research showing that most food in the US travels at least 1500 miles (at least for food purchased in Chicago [Pirog et al. 2001]). In contrast, local food needs little or no shipping, thus does not contribute to increased carbon. Some dispute the claim that by reducing “food miles” we can diminish our “carbon footprint” (Carlisle 2014). Challengers may argue that some foods are better grown in other places, with lesser environmental impact (DeLind 2011, DeWeerd 2013), and that not all shipping has equal environmental effects, or that the gas spent getting to farmers markets instead of supermarkets should be counted. Competing calculations challenge each other.

This aspect of *local* emphasizes *science*. As *local* is used with data, figures, charts, graphs, comparisons, it invokes the authority of science and makes an argument for the topic of *sustainability*, the discourse revolving around comparison of units of energy required to grow, transport, consume, etc. the food.

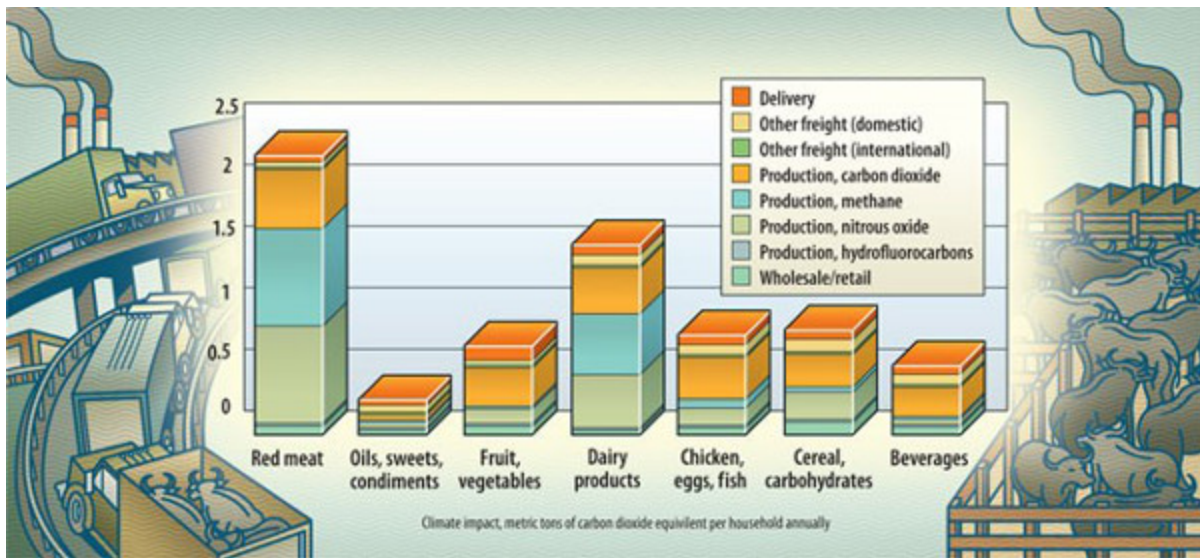


Figure 5. Locavore. http://vault.sierraclub.org/sierra/200901/images/GR_locavore.jpg

In Figure 5 we see an image from the Sierra Club showing a bar graph framed with smokestacks, with grayish brown factory-farmed cattle, mirroring the exhaust-producing trucks on gray highways on the other side. This chart represents the annual carbon costs (CO₂, methane, etc.) of the industrial food system. The graph is detailed enough that it cannot be (nor is it intended to be) processed at a glance, other than to note that “red meat” is the most productive of carbon emissions. But the semiotic bundling of emissions with herds entering trucks and factories in the background illustrates how these characteristics are conflated.

In contrast to environmental considerations, economic arguments invoking *local* may center on the production or maintenance of jobs in a particular community, or on the location of economic control. Such arguments may also emphasize farmers, economic justice, equality, and fair trade (Petrini 2007). Attempts to calculate the economic benefits of buying local are complex; the commonly circulating figure is that local keeps eighty or ninety cents of every dollar returning to the farmer, in contrast to only about sixteen cents conventionally (McMillan 2012), and doubles the economic contribution of food consumption to a given community.

As in the organization Farm Aid, founded in 1985 by musicians Willie Nelson, Neil Young, and John Mellencamp, this version of local food highlights the plight of small farmers, in contrast to huge industrial agriculture, or what they term “corporate concentration in agriculture” (FarmAid 2013). Local food is then a matter of economic and social justice—as well as consumers’ moral responsibility. Efforts to persuade elite consumers to identify with producers may attempt to create an emotional connection between them.

In the US a corporate-sponsored movement emphasizing shopping at local stores, *Buy Local* or *Small Business Saturday* (American Express 2015, Retail Merchants Association 2015), shows the popularity of this phrasing as well as the bundling of *local* and *small*. The anti-franchise association of *independence* and *local* appears in the kindred effort to support independent bookstores (American Booksellers Association 2014). Sometimes the arguments are that this keeps money in the local community, supporting local producers. Sometimes urban gardening/farming, combined with school gardens and environmental education (Ackerman-Leist 2013), allies with local food movements. What could be more local than growing food in front of your own house?

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) support for local food employs this argument. As Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack announced a “historic” \$78 million investment in local and regional food, he mentioned only economic benefits:

The 2014 Farm Bill has given USDA new tools, resources and authority to support the rural economy....Consumer demand for locally-produced food is strong and growing, and farmers are positioning their businesses to meet that demand....[Our new program’s funds] give farmers and ranchers more market opportunities, provide consumers with more choices, and create jobs in both rural and urban communities. (USDA 2014)

Other approaches to promoting local food include an assumed conflation of local and organic, toxin-free foods. While “local” products may not by definition—its primary indexical meaning of place—use fewer pesticides and herbicides, by association (secondary or tertiary association) this entails that it is easier for consumers to learn about the growing practices. As I explained earlier, at my own co-op we emphasize something we call “transparency”: knowing the details of our food, from its production to its transport to its economic beneficiaries.

A comment on an NPR article about a 2015 Whole Foods effort to grade the organic produce they sell challenges the value of official certification of certain crops as organic. One commenter writes

“I’m lucky enough to live in a place where I know several of the farmers who grow my food. I value their sensible and human approach to their farms, to their animals, and to their workers. Many of them can’t afford organic certification, even though these farms patently outshine some of the major organic farms that

dominate the organic niche at the grocery store. Even for those who operate more or less conventionally, there's a lot to be said for the food grown in my county when considered against organic mangoes shipped half way around the world in some climate-controlled container.”

In response, a farmer responds:

“We are a small, diversified organic farm that can't possibly take the time, nor consider the added expense, of going through organic certification. However, there is a far greater value in actually connecting with our customers, directly, so that they feel they truly know their farmer and trust the sustainable methods that we, as land stewards, have always used.” (Charles 2015)

A chain of associations between small and direct contact leads consumers to regard local food as healthier for producers, animals, workers, consumers, and planets.

“Why we all should be EATING LOCAL” includes environmental, economic, and health reasons (Figure 6), overall aiming to persuade viewers that if every US citizen ate locally once a week, 1.1 million barrels of oil would be saved a week, and that ninety instead of twenty-seven cents on the dollar would be returned to farmers.

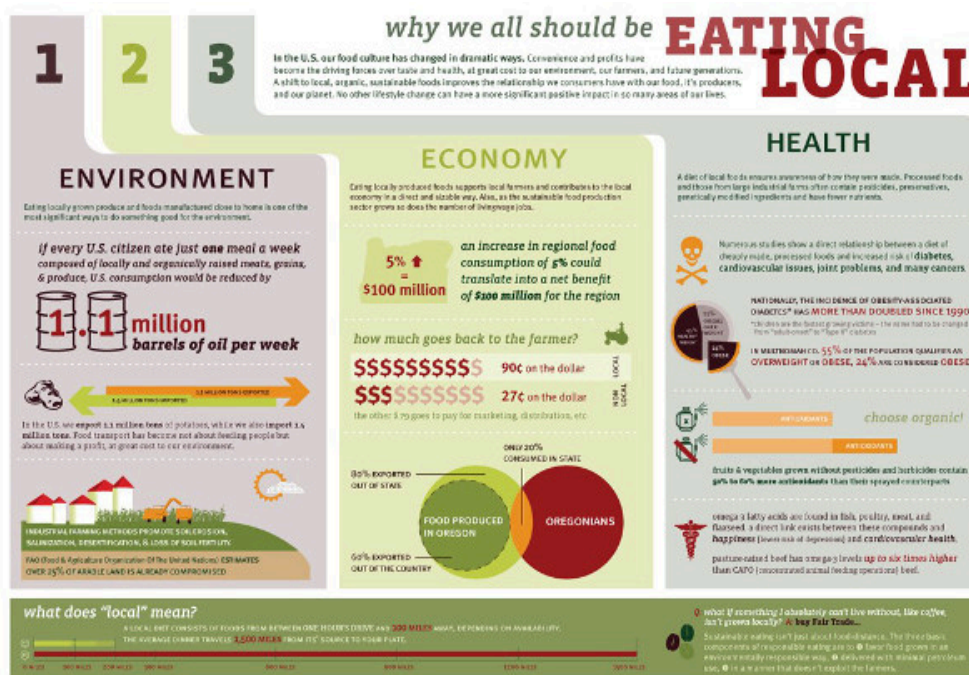


Figure 6. Why we all should be EATING LOCAL. http://www.jen-drivenbydesign.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/WHY_eat_local1.jpg

Further, this graph asserts, obesity-associated diabetes rates, which have doubled since 1990, would diminish through increased consumption of local food. Without explicit statement, this claim illustrates the assumption that “local” means small-scale and nutritious; it does not mean consuming the mac-and-cheese made next door in a Kraft plant. Much is elided in this type of persuasion, relying on readers’ existing knowledge. Bar graphs, diagrams, and figures dominate. Here the reasons are piled on: environmental, economic, and health benefits of “eating local” can be persuasive in the accumulation, even if not in each single aspect. The image of environment shows barrels of oil, the ridiculous fact that we both export and import potatoes, and the ill effects of industrial agriculture. Similar information and reasons are in the other sections. A somewhat motley presentation, sometimes ordinary capitalization and Roman font, and sometimes all capitals, italics, and all lower case, it seems to invoke a kitchen-sink approach reminiscent of my own initial approach: How many ways can we use to persuade? Are more better? At the bottom an additional graphic shows the answer to the question “what does ‘local’ mean?,” here defining it as between one hour’s drive and 200 miles, in contrast to the average 1,500 miles that food travels. The colors are mauve, light green, and gray, with a lot of red accents. The bar explaining “local” on the bottom is a more pleasing dusky green—bringing nature into the food system.

These “material” and “scientific” rationales are presented primarily through logic, evidence, quantification, and argument, though they obviously have aesthetic and emotional aspects as well. A second broad type of appeals is more overt about its approach.

Aesthetic, Ethical, and Affective Appeals of *Local*

A second type of appeal for local food appeals to consumers’ attachments, directly and overtly employing powerful affective devices, imagery, and arguments that invoke associations: nostalgia, community, authenticity. Representations of the local are often noticeably iconic, illustrating the beauty of bucolic settings, in contrast to industrial or alienating settings. For example one site shows a healthy, warm-colored rooster in a country setting, with rolling hills, invoking the aesthetic comforts of a nonindustrial world, three cows in the distance and apples, carrots, garlic, corn, beets, strawberries, and greens surrounding the animals in the foreground (Jubilee Farm 2013) (See Figure 7).



Figure 7. Bucolic localism.

<http://responsibletechnology.org/images/content/586.jpg>

The chronotopic nostalgia for a bygone, perhaps more innocent and pure era, is evident in the common indexing of early twentieth-century typography through lettering and format. Another image, “Support your local farmers. Buy local. Eat local”—for sale as a decal, no less!—depicts a stylized sunrise, echoing the neat lines of planted farms, with simple trees and a small house nestled among them (CafePress 2015). The setting is gently hilled, like upstate New York. The rays of the stylized sun look almost like a flying saucer or egg, but also convey a manageable size (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Support local farmers.

My reading is that viewers are to conclude that *this* is what local means, aesthetically as well as conceptually.

Yet another way of promoting local food is to emphasize its connection to social relations, whether in the “direct-to-consumer” aspect mentioned by the USDA or the images of face-to-face relations conveyed, e.g., by images of “community,” small town, small scale, and people known to each other, “friends” (assumed to be more tangible and real than social media friendships). An image of a simple American Gothic-style farmer holding hands with a customer invokes the Grant Wood painting (which was actually a farmer and daughter, not wife) with the pitchfork held upright (GreenPatriotPosters.org 2012) (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Friend a farmer.

In the location of hearts are white apples. Here the message, on rough-textured paper-bag-colored background is “Friend a farmer; eat locally” which also calls attention to the nonindustrial nature of the local and personal face-to-face relationships that are possible only through co-presence, signaling proximity and contiguity.

Local food indexes the real, according to this discourse, in contrast to the industrialized, processed, ersatz food that fills impersonal megastores, Big Box stores. It has real taste, made in the old-fashioned, genuine fashion that invokes a past when things were more authentic rather than foods made to *look like* food. Local apples and strawberries, for instance, are praised for their “real flavor” in contrast to supermarket strawberries that *look like* strawberries. Rejecting the simulacrum in favor of the real, authentic (Baudrillard 1994 [1981], Cobb 2014), rejecting the hyperreal for the actually real, sometimes this discourse has an unexamined nostalgia as it appears to long for restoration of a more authentic and less alienated world (Autio et al. 2013, Harvey 2008, Schrank 2014). (But remember the nightmare of the early twentieth-century meatpacking industry revealed by Upton Sinclair—the old days were not all so good.)⁸

One image of “real food” (Northwest Agriculture Business Center 2012) found on the blog of the Northwest Agricultural Business Center was originally painted on a white bed sheet with a title in all capitals, “What is Real Food?” (Figure 10).

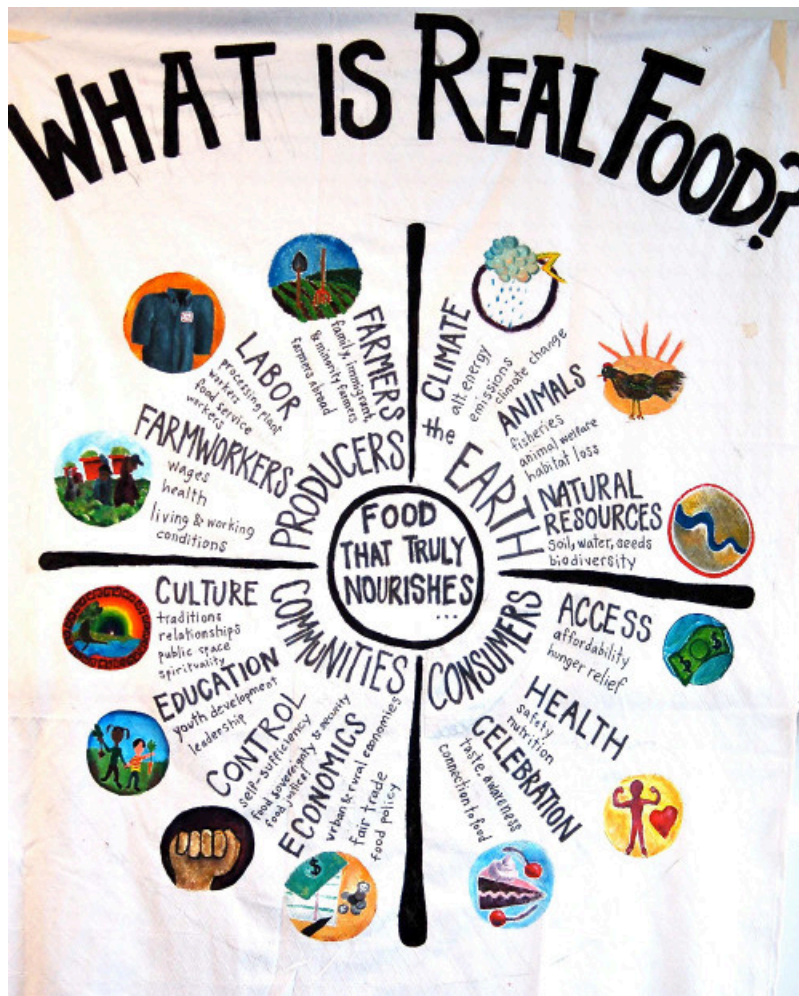


Figure 10. What is Real Food?

<http://agbizcenter.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Real-Food-Wheel.jpg>

The center of a crude mandala says “Food that truly nourishes....” and depicts four components, each with subcomponents: Producers, the Earth, Consumers, and Communities. Because the portrayal of real food is painted, by hand, on a bed sheet, it is iconic of homespun: irregular, not machined, a single object, not mass produced. The drawings are simple and crude, almost childlike—quite distinct from any sort of polished, uniform, mass-produced image (or food) as might appear in supermarket advertising.

Finally, one promotion for local food provides “top ten reasons” to buy local (Figure 11):



Figure 11. Top Ten Reasons to Buy Local. Edinburgh Pound 2011.

“Strengthen your local economy; Reduce climate change impacts; Support community groups; Keep our community unique; Create more good jobs; Get better service; Invest in your community; Buy what you need. Don’t buy the hype; Put your taxes to good use. Encourage local prosperity.” This is presented not only through the content but through the form as well, one invoking simple composition with a swirl and in shades of green, brownish, yellow, originally posted with some slightly different wording on Sustainable South Sound but now on Edinburgh Pound (Edinburgh Pound 2011). A small green-and-snow-capped mountain in an oval text box midway on the right—iconic of and indexing the Pacific northwest—tells viewers “Think local. Buy local. Be local.” Toward the bottom left is the Sustainable South Sound logo. Again indexing a location, this organization is devoted to “improving the quality of life in the South Puget Sound region” (Sustainable South Sound 2015). Clearly it is south of some places, north of others, but it assumes readers within the region who can locate the point of orientation.

Superbundling: The Challenge

Combining the two approaches—the material/scientific and the aesthetic, ethical, and affective—to promoting local food is the personal challenge. Reminiscent, to me, of other North American self-improvement challenges (Veit 2013), one approach for individuals is to increase their virtue through taking on a “challenge” to “eat local” or reduce their reliance on imported food. One image—filled with complex figures, multiple lists and charts—aims to persuade that eating local can be “made easy” (Figure 12).



Figure 13. 30-mile meal.

Sometimes they depict weathervanes featuring roosters, with green lettering, off-center images, and much white space, depicting rustic simplicity.

Colin Beavan, who recounted in *Low Impact Man* (Beavan 2009) his year of attempting to avoid buying or discarding anything at all, included a local food component. An ad for the movie made from the book (Figure 14) depicts a healthy-looking white man in his thirties, accompanied by a white woman and a toddler, walking in a park-like setting, with trimmed green grass, a few trees, a light blue sky, serving to indicate urban nature.



Figure 14. No Impact Man.

Health, confidence, and well-being exude from the striding, the relationship, and the setting. The family seems able to withstand apparent deprivation. The bundled qualia invoked here are calm, confidence, integration into the setting.

All these aspects of explaining, promoting, marketing *local food* in the United States may emphasize various of the associations: environmental virtue, economic panacea, health promotion, beauty, peacefulness, authenticity, or more. Each of these indexical aspects of the sign is observable in the various ways it is marketed, with iconic components of the visual representation. Overall, the aesthetic dimensions of local food are iconized signs of agrarianism, indexing the positive qualities and purported meaningfulness and happiness that accompany small-scale communities. Omitted are other potentially serious negative aspects—shortage, tenuous livelihood, gossip, even the sometimes insular nature of small rural communities.

Local Food As Antidote to What Ails Us

Local—an ordinary term, in frequent usage—is polysemous, condensed, diverse. Like the opposite of a *moral panic*, one might regard *local food* as a talisman, something used protectively, to ward off myriad ills of contemporary life and with the power to bring about desired beneficial results of multiple types. This anti-brand brand invokes a pre-commodity period that is nonetheless integrated into a broader food system, incoherent as it is. Like other aspects of life, *local food* is also material and the fight for more local food, over imported, industrial food, has economic, political, personal, and ecological—even temporal—dimensions (Francis 2010, Hewitt 2009), as we have seen.

Local is used indexically to point to 1) location [specifying shared knowledge of place], 2) connection between producers and consumers [contact, proximity], and 3) multiple qualities that may or may not derive from the primary meaning of place, such as sustainably grown, of high culinary value, unadulterated. The virtues of *local food* lie in its growing practices, its inputs (compost versus synthetic fertilizers), its small scale (Salatin, Barsamian, and Brown 2011), its plant protections (interspersing species rather than monocropping, integrated pest management rather than powerful pesticides), its harvesting (small scale, by hand, humanely), its treatment of workers (fair) and animals (humane, living “natural” lives outside), and its transport (less). Not all foods with these virtues are local, and not all local foods are virtuous in these ways, but in the use of *local foods* that is found in places like my co-op, or the several co-ops called Local Roots (Buffalo, Minnesota; Estes Park, Colorado; Goochland, Virginia; Wooster, Ohio) such characteristics are implied through multiple Discourses as well as representations within their communities of practice.

The apparent multiple dimensions of *local food* as antidote to what ails us could be regarded as fuzzy-headed confusion. Or it could be seen as a brilliant, rare way to accomplish many goals all at once, killing many ills with one sign. As a result of the combination of all these meanings, *local* is *talismanic* in the sense that it offers protection from taint, from powerlessness, from the outside and alien.

As talisman, local food helps avert disasters.

Use of a sign can accomplish any number of feats. It can produce tears (*mother*) or self-sacrifice (a flag); it can lead some to kill (for prestige goods such as jewels or name-brand sneakers) or to cheat (grades in school). It can lead to love (professions of affection) and to adulation (art). The intersections between the material effects and the circulation of signs are multifaceted (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014, Keane 2003). Humans often participate in such multifarious exchanges without analyzing them. But as anthropologists examine how such signs produce their effects, we observe a connection to all that is distinctively social and cultural and linguistic and aesthetic. In other words, we need to know everything to understand anything. If the indexical associations of *local food* appear here to be unlimited, it is because like all signs, the limits may never be specified.

It is also a way for an anthropologist observing the world to see how people conceptualize the ills of their own condition, extrapolating back from the *prescription* of the antidote to the *diagnosis* of the poison. We can see in the efforts—so multifaceted, so impassioned—how strong is the sense that the *is* of the contemporary world is miles from the *ought* of the world we envision, a world filled with small, beautiful, safe, delicious, healthful food shared by all and produced by trusted neighbors.

No wonder my own *local* co-op's efforts to persuade are only partly successful. By saying Eat Food From Here, we are saying dozens of other things as well, some of which are more convincing than others.

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Endnotes

1. Cost is a significant aspect of materiality that plays a role in perceptions of local food. Like at Whole Foods Market, nicknamed "Whole Paycheck," the perception—and often the reality—of Purple Porch prices is that they are higher than those for comparable products at, say, Costco or local supermarkets. ↩

2. Political dimensions of *local food* can be on the liberal or conservative side of the spectrum. Writers like Wendell Berry challenge the dominance of impersonal, corporate, environmentally careless forces (e.g. 2009), and he has been embraced by libertarians, permaculturalists, anti-government survivalists, and more. The notion of *local* may be supported by anyone wishing to counteract powerlessness in the face of the corporate, to overcome depersonalization. In this sense local farmers are invoked, indexed, as the backbone of community. Nonetheless, Philpott 2010 explains how conservatives, who ordinarily decry government subsidies, have come to regard anti-industrial-agriculture as too aligned with liberal intellectuals, and thus champion government-supported industrial agriculture. ↩

3. I take deixis to be a specific subset of indexicality. All deictics are indexicals; not all indexicals are deictics. See Nunberg 1993. *Local* is understandable only from a specific position—a subject's position. This may be part of its complexity; unlike "organic" or "whole," this is meaningful only through subjective factors, despite efforts to give it "scientific" or measurable definitions, such as mileage traveled. (Kate Riley, personal communication) ↩

4. Chris Ball (personal communication) wonders if local has been hypostatically abstracted into *local-ness* as Harkness claims has occurred in South Korea with *softness* (Harkness 2013a). I am not sure. Because *local* can only be known cognitively, from a subjective position, and is not perceived directly through sensory interaction, I think it differs from some other categories treated as *qualia*. ↩

5. Claims of identity lead to more questions: Is curry English (Fielding 2014; also Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983)? Could pizza be American (Ceccarini 2014)? Who is the gatekeeper for these claims? Who profits from them? ↩

6. Beliefs about the consubstantiality of food, place, and person are reminiscent of the Herderian, nationalistic ideology that regards language, nation, territory and people as consubstantial. These similarities reflect beliefs, not facts, and would bear further scrutiny. I'm grateful to Kate Riley for suggesting this. ↩

7. It is also iconized in its length—four syllables—and addition of derivational morphemes, as well as its Latin, as opposed to Germanic, roots, as this distinction has indexical associations with abstractness and pretentiousness for English speakers (Freuenfelder 2014). ↩

8. It can become nearly a fetish, as it is for me, and lead to *orthorexia*, the fixation on eating the right foods (<http://www.orthorexia.com/>). ↩

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