I think, therefore I eat (with apologies to Descartes)

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Would you agree we are what we eat? If that is the case you might want to swear off butterball turkey, suckling pig and notably boneless chicken. This isn't a criticism of anyone, especially livestock producers but rather a metaphor about thinking about the implications of our food choices. Perhaps it is a movement beyond price, which for most of us is insignificant, to thoughts of how health is linked to food and how food, locally produced, can contribute to the health of our communities and landscapes.

I grew up a locavore without knowing it, not by choice but by necessity. The farm I was raised on supplied most of our needs and we also traded with the neighbors. I remember fondly the cured bacon and sausages from our German neighbor. Beef, milk, chicken, potatoes and turnips were a year-round mainstay. Cream from our milk cows came back to us in the form of butter. The rest happened by season and there was great anticipation for the first peas and carrots from the garden, as well as raspberries, strawberries and saskatoons. It didn't take much to connect the dots between the food on the plate and its origins at that time.

But, in the emerging phenomena that was television and its advertising and marketing genius those local foods seemed pedestrian, at least to a child. So began the slide towards bananas from Ecuador, oranges from Florida and sugar enriched, fat infused snacks from everywhere. I ask you, how can a home grown turnip compete with a tangerine or taco chips? I left the farm and pursued a career as a biologist- one concerned about fish and wildlife and their habitats. I continued to eat wild game and fish but mostly the food choices were made from supermarket shelves, a place much removed from the farm. Many of those essential connections between land and food became frayed.

I used to consider only the size of the burger; volume and quantity were key decisions. I was fully behind the lady shilling for a major fast food enterprise who asked, "Where's the beef?" One patty wasn't enough and often one burger wasn't either. From that foundation I progressed to whether or not the burger was warm. Next on the road to enlightenment I added ketchup, mustard, pickles and, in time, lettuce and tomato. In my evolution a whole wheat bun enclosed the meat. Then, I considered a lean patty of meat and

taste became paramount. I moved from fuel to food at this point. Finally my thoughts now range around the origin of the hamburger patty, how the animal was raised and what the landscape looks like where it once grazed. I think about the producer and their commitment to raising livestock sustainably. This is, I hope, the trajectory many other people are on; a growing trend of thought about our food.

As consumers how do we make decisions about the food we buy (and eat)? Price may have a bearing as does health, taste, image/look and variety. Our thoughts could wander to where the food comes from, who produced it and how it was produced. This progression in thought moves us into the arena of the environmental and societal aspects of food. Perhaps it's too much for many consumers to weigh the energy costs of California carrots against locally grown ones, or the implications of a food item processed by a multinational agri-business conglomerate instead of an Alberta farmer. But we all have to start somewhere with the sense consumers make choices and as consumers we can vote for good food, raised locally and sustainably, three times a day.

Consumers also need to face the reality we have been conditioned to expect strawberries and grapes in winter, the seemingly endless choices irrespective of season or geography. This can only be accomplished with unit costs for energy to transport food from around the globe that exceed the unit energy embodied in the food by multiple orders of magnitude. It's not an expression of sustainability and it won't, it can't last.

We need to acknowledge local food producers face huge challenges. Just a short list includes competition from large corporations, seasonality of many food items, restricted choice, scale, transportation, sales outlets, storage, labor, weather and processing capability. If those weren't enough to demoralize the strongest of producers consider the lack of government support as well as the impediments of regulations and policy that seem designed to thwart local food production. Much of this pales beside the challenges of simultaneously maintaining biodiversity, soil fertility, protecting watersheds, open space provision, sustaining local jobs and communities, reducing energy use (especially for transporting food) and amongst all of this being profitable.

Are we, as consumers, obligated to support local Alberta producers? If we want to continue to drink water, breathe the air, have space to escape our

cities, see wildlife, angle for a fish and, oh yes, eat when other sources of food are unavailable because of supply issues, transportation costs or political instability the answer is obvious. We can't ask producers, Alberta's primary landowners, to practice stewardship of shared resources as a solely altruistic act; in an act of pragmatism those who eat need to meet those who produce part way along this journey.

When we gaze at our plate, laden with food, we can move beyond the thought of instant gratification and consider the food as a window that opens up a view of a landscape, a producer and the sense of a connection. Imagine, getting at least two things from a food purchase, a material meal and a perhaps equally tangible sense of place. To get that sort of bang for our food buying buck we will need to focus more on local markets, on locally produced food and on producers we can get to know and trust.

A breakfast with friends in the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia was an epiphany for me. The bacon was from a small hog producer a few kilometers away and was processed even closer to the breakfast table. We could see the place where the eggs had been laid. As for the strawberry jam, the berries were grown down the road and put up by a small, boutique operation. The bread I layered the jam on was baked in a tiny bakery in the nearby town. A fruit cup contained locally grown items, including two of the 42 varieties of apples grown in Nova Scotia. Only the orange juice (Florida) and the coffee (Central America, but shade-grown) were imports. My friends knew where their food came from, how it was produced and were on a first name basis with the producers. It was a meal from the neighbors; it felt homey, secure and satisfying. Breakfast was a local event, not a nameless, faceless, ambiguous multinational offering. It dawned on me what a profoundly positive experience it can be to eat locally produced food, often within site of its production and supplied by caring hands working at a community scale.

Ironically, a high proportion of Nova Scotia's agriculture barely shows up as a blip on the provinces economic radar and is invisible nationally. Yet, small, local and community based farms seem to feed people and connect with those that eat their products. Of course Alberta isn't Nova Scotia, although there are times when the lure of lobsters and Digby scallops makes me wonder if we shouldn't drag our province closer to an ocean.

But, how do we construct this alchemy of connections between consumer and producer? How does a motivated consumer find a responsible producer and vice versa? This isn't an exhaustive list but is a beginning for the two dots to be connected:

- Organic certification conveys a sense of the commitment by selected farmers and ranchers to greater environmental sustainability and food choices raised without agro-chemicals.
- The Cows and Fish REAL Beef initiative (Ranchers Enhancing Alberta's Landscapes) is a small, creative start towards giving producers a measuring stick for stewardship. It engages producers to tell their stewardship stories and have consumers respond with what is important to them about landscapes and food.
- Producers who are part of a local watershed group convey a sense of personal responsibility for their own actions as well as a commitment to work at a larger scale of community involvement.
- Look for producers who have been the recipients of environmental or stewardship awards.
- Those producers that have gone through the Environmental Farm Plan process have demonstrated a commitment to identifying environmental risks plus are moving towards sustainable forms of agricultural production.
- Farmers markets are often the intersection between those who eat and those who supply eaters; because the meeting is more personal than grabbing something from a supermarket shelf the opportunity to get to know one another is enhanced.
- There are independent and specialty grocers who cater to local foods, organically-raised foods and foods grown or produced at scales incompatible with the volume requirements of large supermarkets.
- Web searches can turn up an impressive array of food choices and sources, outside of the conventional supermarket ones.
- Ironically, linkages are still made through word of mouth within community groups, churches, conservation groups, friends, family and chance encounters while having coffee.

None of these are slam dunks for finding another food path. There will always be issues of trust, verification and continuity. What this implies is investing some time, especially on the part of us consumers, to meet a

producer, walk the farm and get a sense of the landscape and how it is managed. That's how real connections begin and persist.

Sounds like work doesn't it? There isn't the convenience, detachment and anonymity of chain store grocery shopping. And therein is the point. Connecting personally to a producer isn't about buying a package of pork chops or a bag of carrots. It's buying food from someone you know.

I think if there is a unique food experience it must be when the food transcends taste, texture and satisfaction, taking the eater past food as fuel to a place where the landscape becomes visible, one knows the place is healthy and, where the face of the producer connects with place and product. Let me take you to a place called Sunrise Farm, in east central Alberta, where I was transported to a place of optimism, hope and solutions. It looked like a typical central Alberta farm at first blush, but there was no array of expensive heavy metal lined up. No big dual-wheeled, four wheel drive tractor, no immense tillage equipment, no combine with a maw large enough to hoover up a small town and, most telling, no sprayer.

Instead it was a scene of green pastures, some with small groups of cattle managed with electric fences and, moveable pens housing poultry and pigs. These pens were not cages, in the sense of industrial growth chambers for incarcerated animals but rather outdoor spas where interaction with sun, grass and fresh air was the reality. I knew pigs couldn't fly but watching them I hadn't realized they were capable of smiling. I eat meat; as the joke goes- I didn't claw my way to the top of the food chain to be a vegetarian. But, I am concerned as many are, about how animals are raised and treated. The animals on Don Ruzicka's farm look well treated, healthy and, if I can engage in momentary anthropomorphism, happy.

As a biologist whose concern, outside of mealtime, is the health of landscapes Don Ruzicka's farm embodies the principles of stewardship, caring for soil, water, vegetation and biodiversity. The elements of stewardship are three-fold; however these elements are not divisible, they are related and are a continuum.

The first element of stewardship is achieving a level of understanding or knowledge, which provides the foundation for the next two. It is sparked by awareness and leads to ecological literacy. The second is the development of an ethic- an encoded set of responsibilities and obligations to care for land,

water and air as part of our conscience. This ecological ethic rests on a single premise, that an individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts and actions are guided by an instinct for community welfare. The third and most crucial element is exhibiting appropriate choice, which embodies balance, restraint and a sense of legacy. It is the melding of ecological literacy with a land ethic that leads to appropriate, responsible action.

Aldo Leopold, the dean of ecological thinkers said, in 1938: "We end, I think, at what might be called the standard paradox of the twentieth century: our tools are better than we are, and grow better faster than we do. They suffice to crack the atom, to command the tides. But they do not suffice for the oldest task in human history: to live on a piece of land without spoiling it."

What Don Ruzicka does on Sunrise Farm is an example of someone who, in Leopold's terms, has figured out how to live on a piece of land without spoiling it, indeed improving it, by using the elements of stewardship. Consumers need to examine the many stewardship examples because these are the practical embodiments that can inform our food choices. One person practicing stewardship and being able to demonstrate the benefits is better than fifty preaching it! It follows that one person buying food from someone practicing stewardship participates in a step towards rewarding such responsible behavior.

To follow that coin turn how can producers examine stewardship from the standpoint of marketability? A scan of store shelves and ads these days suggests many brands are more interested in raising dollars for charities and causes than making or selling products. Or, so they would have you believe. Stock up on toilet paper and you may be donating to the fight against cancer; buy some chocolate and you're helping to build a school in Ghana. What is happening is the levering of emotional equity embedded in a cause to help forge a deeper connection with consumers. This can have the effect of empowering consumers; by our food choices we can have an influence on positive change.

When the food on my plate connects me to a piece of the landscape I can conjure up images of healthy fescue grassland in the foothills where cattle share space with grizzlies and bull trout. It could be a parkland scene of wetlands, willows and aspen groves, punctuated with saskatoons and

sharptail grouse. In my minds eye it's also a sweeping prairie vista of drought adapted native grass complete with antelope and vivid sunsets. Isolated as many of us are, bounded by suburbia, pavement and traffic we need some reassurance natural, complete landscapes still exist and that we can have a connection to them. Try as I might I can't develop such a connection, or emotional equity eating a Hawaiian pineapple, a California avocado or a piece of New Zealand lamb. As tasty as each are none convey a picture of clean water, air without the taint of exhaust fumes or a sense of space to see oneself as part of the natural world.

Yet, all of those things, and more, are part of food production when undertaken with care, stewardship and a sense of community. Are these images marketable? Most advertisements that are dangled in front of us are largely about image and rarely about substance. Corporations mask the scale of their operations marketing an image to us with homey, folksy ads, touching on our sense of trust. They try to capitalize on something local producers already have, an image of a neighbor in the community.

Stewardship actions reassert who owns that image- local, Alberta producers. This has value, is saleable and is a package that transcends food. Producers with a stewardship product can seize the ecological high ground. No one else is so appropriately placed to transport a consumer to a connection with their food and a landscape displaying the hand of stewardship. Properly conveyed, many people would pay a premium price for such a package and the producer is rewarded for the care of shared resources.

I don't believe it is much of a leap for Alberta's agricultural producers to champion healthy landscapes, clean water, fertile soil, breathable air and abundant wildlife as part of food production. It is about marketing stewardship, expanding its value and rationalizing the effort and cost to care for landscapes. Selling stewardship follows another path from the conventional marketing of food as healthy, fresh and nutritious. Of course this implies the development of trust between consumers and producers. That trust will be part of employing measuring sticks of landscape quality, food safety and animal welfare to verify the stewardship actions.

We can't eat stewardship, but we can start to understand the implications to us as consumers and enjoy, even more, the food from responsible, caring producers. As consumers we can engage in stewardship, in the ways we make food selections. In a world where it can seem difficult to influence

things, to make a difference, what we eat and our choices of who we purchase food from can be empowering. Although not simple it may just start with a reciprocal arrangement, a gesture taken by consumers and producers. The gesture might be this: Shake the hand of someone who feeds you and, shake the hand of someone who eats your food.

Industrial (or conventional) agriculture currently rides a wave of abundantly produced, cheap food underwritten by non-renewable energy and nutrient sources, supported by policy development favoring agribusiness. There is mounting evidence this will be followed by a wash of broken natural systems, pollution of surface and ground water, depopulated rural areas, instability in food production and supply, and a backlash to agricultural subsidies disconnected from landscape health, food safety and food supply. Society, the corporate world and government have become blind to our essential needs for survival. Water, soil and biodiversity have become victims of this indifference. We as consumers can signal our preference, otherwise.

Alberta's agricultural landscapes do more, much more than produce food, sustain rural residents and support communities. These are our watersheds; there is space, a place for wildlife and a visual tonic from a busy cityscape. When we buy food we can make choices, not just of food but also how we support local producers and their efforts to feed us, while sustaining landscapes with a greater suite of values.

I'd like to take you back to where we began- the point that we are what we eat. You may want to reconsider premium baloney at this point. More to the point, you might want to consider not just the act of eating but also thinking about what we eat. Then it's a small step to the path connecting with producers who raise food for us in ways we find responsible.

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