Viewpoint: Forget environmental and organic mumbo-jumbo — Here’s what you really get at farmer’s markets

There is populist rhetoric about Buy Local but what few in the public realize is that the definition is subjective. Restaurants in Manhattan often claim they buy local, but in the fine print it reads ‘when available’, and they don’t tell you when it was not locally available, and local to them may be up to 500 miles away.

Farmer’s markets are often going to be more local than that. They want to cut out the middleman, the distributor and grocery store, and sell direct, but that may actually mean your food is less safe. Larger food corporations create safety standards because they are the ones that lawyers are waiting to sue and if one farmer fails to meet the standard, another one will. A farmer struggling to sell their produce to a distributor because of quality issues will instead go to a farmer’s market.

Does that mean the food at a farmer’s market is less safe? Probably not, all but a few desperate farmers care about their product, it is how they buy TVs and pay taxes, but there are some who will be deceptive to make money.

A farmer’s market does not mean no pesticides

People who want to buy at farmer’s markets often fall prey to multiple fallacies. The first is that they are going to eat all of the produce they buy. They are not, on a per capita basis people who buy at farmer’s markets exceed the food waste of both (successful) restaurants and those who shop at grocery stores. The second is that the food will somehow be healthier. It is the same food. A strawberry is a strawberry, just because organic corporations pay Environmental Working Group to put out a Dirty Dozen list (while exempting the pesticides used by the organic companies funding EWG) does not mean an organic strawberry is better unless it is simply better. A varietal you like more is going to taste better to you regardless if the grower used old pesticides from the 1950s or a superior one from 25 years ago.

If someone claims they use no chemicals at all they’re lying or you are at real risk

The number one foodborne illness risk in America is raw milk. Nothing else even comes close. Pasteurization has saved a billion lives but if you are the kind of person who believes in Chakra and crystals and that vaccines cause autism, you may want raw milk – and food grown with manure.

I grew up on an organic farm well before President Clinton handed his constituents a huge win by banning nuclear energy research, giving acupuncture a government endorsement, and letting organic food lobbyists carve out their own marketing group inside USDA. When I was young, organic farming was just called being poor. We couldn’t afford chemicals.
If I buy produce I am going to wash it well and wealthy elites who buy organic may think I do it because of chemicals. Nope, those are safe unless you fall into a vat of them and drown. I automatically do it because eating feces is what will make you sick.

If you believe a farmer uses no artificial chemicals, you can be certain they are using manure, and that is going to put you at the same level of risk as raw milk.

**So is the farmer’s market safer and better or not?**

Forget environmental mumbo-jumbo about how buying local means fewer emissions. It does not, on a per-calorie basis. Farmers surrounded by other farmers are not selling at a farmer’s market, they are driving to where rich people walk around with lattes and selling there. For hauling food, nothing is as close to being emissions-benevolent as 18-wheelers, boats, and trains.

Farmers are making more money. If the price is the same as the grocery store, and you aren’t just throwing it all out five days from now because you aspirationally believed if you buy it your family will eat it, the farmer wins and you break even. The losers are grocery store union workers, you rarely see a grocery store employee bragging about farmer’s markets.

**In nearly all cases the food will be just as safe**

In most cases, if you have a booth at a farmer’s market or selling on a street corner, you have a permit, and to get the permit you had to watch a food safety video and sign a piece of paper saying you understood government. More importantly, most farmers are ethical and they want you coming back next weekend. They are often required to keep logs showing that they practice safe handling practices but if that were a perfect system, organic lettuce wouldn’t be giving people *E. coli* once a month. Small farmers may be exempt in some places.

Someone making jam at their house and selling it at a farmer’s market will have a label stating that it has not been ‘state inspected’ and I actually trust them most of all. They are like me, and if I had my way nothing my family eats would be killed, grown, processed, or cooked by any hand but mine. Unless they are truly lazy, jams and canned foods will be from a pressure canner, and that is as safe as a grocery store.

If you are only buying an apple should you be *that guy* and demand to see their food safety training certificate? I wouldn’t, but I trust farmers, even if I trust organic ones slightly less because some in that industry treat people like we are a dumb resource to be exploited for financial gain.

Just don’t touch the apple at the farmer’s market stall and then put it back. Clueless shoppers at farmer’s markets worry me a lot more than the food practices of farmers do.

**Notes:**
(1) So do other retailers, which is why you see so many psychics and people selling crystals and other woo nonsense at farmer’s markets.

(2) The way government panels claim that giving poor people bus rides and government debit cards to use at farmer’s markets will make them healthier. They are out of touch with reality.

(3) California used to make organic farmers log how many pounds of pesticides they use but after we detailed how much higher their chemical inputs are than regular farming, organic industry lobbyists got the government to stop noting which acreage was organic. So they still have to log that they use it, but it is impossible to accurately state how much higher the level of chemicals for organic food is. Other states simply let organic farmers exempt themselves from record-keeping, while regular farmers must keep accurate logs, which is why Environmental Working Group can continue their Dirty Dozen grift. Their clients and donors are exempted…by themselves.

There is a reason Big Organic resists efforts to list which pesticides were used on food packaging labels – which nearly all people would like to know – and instead created meaningless fluff like Non-GMO Project. They are going out of business when customers learn they have been lied to since the late 1990s.

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