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Pierre Desrochers and Hiroko Shimizu

THE LOCAVORE'S DILEMMA - In praise of the 1,000 mile diet

288pp. Perseus. £18.99 (US \$26.99).

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Jennifer Cockrall-King

FOOD AND THE CITY - Urban agriculture and the new food revolution

372pp. Prometheus. Paperback, £18.99 (US \$21).

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The New Oxford American Dictionary's Word of the Year for 2007 was "locavore", meaning "someone who endeavors to eat only locally produced food". But does eating locally necessarily entail a regression to subsistence farming? According to Hiroko Shimizu and Pierre Desrochers it does. In *The Locavore's Dilemma*, a riposte to Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), they pillory "locavorism" as nostalgic bunk and thinly disguised protectionism that would be disastrous if adopted on a large scale. They ask, "If our agricultural past was so great, why were modern animal and plant breeds, long distance trade in food, and modern production and processing technologies developed?". The "good old days" were, according to them, rife with famine and inefficiency - low-yield, disease-prone crops, laborious weeding and pest control, aggressive "heritage" livestock. International trade, on the other hand, allows areas to specialize in particular crops, distributing risk, increasing output, and liberating people from farm labour. Locavorism, Shimizu and Desrochers insist, is a method that failed for good reason.

They are right to question the limits of "local" - 100 miles, 400, your state or region? We certainly need a more sophisticated metric than "food miles". For example, Shimizu and Desrochers point out that, since most of the Kenyan green beans in British supermarkets are flown in on passenger planes, mileage alone is no reason to boycott. Also, studies have shown that transporting food contributes a relatively small amount of greenhouse gas. Yet many of their arguments are generalized or incomplete; they describe farmers' markets as unhygienic and praise industrial systems for their ability to track E. coli outbreaks while failing to address the superbugs and pollution created by concentrated animal feeding operations.

A central flaw in their argument is their view of locavorism as low-tech, rural subsistence of the kind condemning many to poverty and starvation in sub-Saharan Africa, a tenet dismissed by Jennifer Cockrall-King in *Food and the City*. Locavorism can be cutting-edge. Cockrall-King charts the burgeoning urban agricultural movement in eight European and American communities, showing that cities are good sites for producing everything from wine to honey because they are warmer than the countryside and contain a diversity of plants, rather than monocrops.

The stories Cockrall-King uncovers add weight to the claims for locavorism that Shimizu and Desrochers attempt to discredit: it nurtures social capital, provides economic and environmental benefits, increases food security, and offers tastier, healthier, and safer food. Its future lies in an innovative blend of old technologies, such as vermiculture and the planting of compatible species, and modern technologies such as aquaponics. New models are evolving, including smallscale vertical farms in city buildings with tenants who subsidize food-growing space. She talks to everyone from Parisian beekeepers on the roof of l'Opéra to a London gardener growing more on his balcony than most allotments can produce, and a "Yes-in-My-Back-Yard" farm in Toronto that brings together the elderly and the young. By emphasizing "food justice" as a means of rebuilding communities, these projects reveal the pernicious nature of Shimizu and Desrochers's laissezfaire attitude towards what Cockrall-King calls "chemical-fertilizer-laden, pesticidedependent, fossil-fuel-guzzling industrial food". When Shimizu and Desrochers stereotype locavorism as elitist, insist that eaters endorse cheap food by buying it, and contend that only economic growth via trade liberalization can ensure food security, they give the illusion of choice - since the cheapest calories are the unhealthiest, the poor have few options - while ignoring the fact that supermarkets flee poor inner-city neighbourhoods. This creates "food deserts" where the only options are fast-food outlets and convenience stores. Many locavore projects address this by holding farmers' markets in housing estates or creating farms in the abandoned buildings and empty plots of cities such as Chicago, Detroit and Milwaukee, where one entrepreneur has established a high-tech model farm that helps feed the community and teaches skills to troubled teenagers.

Even Walmart is interested in the Milwaukee project, demonstrating that, contrary to Shimizu and Desrochers's claims, locavorism does not have to be anti-business. Street markets can be incubators for small businesses; a self-made millionaire wants to build the world's largest commercial, urban farm in Detroit; one farmer has developed a franchise of small-plot intensive farms (SPIN) to prove that small-scale can be viable.

Cockrall-King's examples suggest that local governments should encourage these entrepreneurs by loosening zoning restrictions and providing hubs where farmers can sell produce wholesale. Without this support, greed can trump community. Residents of a food-desert neighbourhood in Los Angeles created a farm on a disused strip of land that provided food to residents and a place where children could play safely, but the farm was bulldozed when the city sold it back to the former owner; the land is now derelict again.

Jennifer Cockrall-King is at times too optimistic about the small-scale movement she charts, when even her interviewees admit that their projects will supplement and not replace global food. Locavorism should be a spur to tackling the problems of industrial food, not a goal in itself, and since moving food is less harmful to the environment than moving people, high-density living should be encouraged along with urban agriculture. Yet, insofar as it raises social and environmental awareness, locavorism is invaluable, and if one believes predictions that we are approaching a point of maximum yield for oil, land and water - Hiroko Shimizu and Pierre Desrochers believe crisis rhetoric is alarmist and assure readers that human ingenuity will triumph - then the news that more households (50 per cent in some cities, including Vancouver) are growing food in their front gardens will be welcome.