

ROB GERLSBECK
EDITOR

The great defender

Pierre Desrochers thinks local food is no substitute for industrialized food. Not that anyone's listening

The most interesting

guy in grocery today doesn't work in a store or a CPG's swanky head office. He teaches geography to university students in Toronto. Pierre Desrochers is his name and if he sounds familiar it's because you've heard him on radio or read about him in the paper. More likely, though, you've heard others speak about him. And not in a nice way.

Desrochers is co-author of a new book on local food vs. modern industrialized food. It's called *The Locavore's Dilemma*. To understand what side he's on, read the subtitle: *In Praise of the 10,000-Mile Diet*. Yes, the two extra zeros are supposed to be there.

In a nutshell, Desrochers and co-author Hiroko Shimizu (a policy analyst and also his wife), argue that local food's benefits are close to zilch. Helping farmers? Nope. Improving the economy? Hardly. Saving the planet? You gotta be kidding. Safer and healthier food? Actually, it's the opposite.

As you can imagine, Desrochers isn't getting invites to many tofu soirees. But he's gotten nasty e-mails. "Someone called me a baby killer," he told me over coffee. Locavores won't like him any more when they read what he thinks of Galen Weston's comments earlier this year about food safety at farmers' markets. Weston, you'll recall, said this: "Farmers' markets are great... One day they're going to kill some people though." Desrochers' response: "There are not enough Galen Westons out there."

Meeting up with Desrochers was my idea. I picked up his book this summer and couldn't put it down. I'm surprised, however, when the first thing he says to me is, "Why did I have to write this book? Why didn't someone else?" What he means is, why doesn't today's food industry do a better job explaining its benefits to consumers? Because it won't,

Desrochers and Shimizu do it for them.

Many of their points aren't a surprise. The food at supermarkets today is vastly safer and healthier than at any time in history. The efficiencies modern farmers, manufacturers and grocery chains have squeezed out has made food affordable and plentiful to more people worldwide. But they also dispel a few myths, like that local food is greener. In fact, "food miles," the currency of the 100-mile diet is plain crap.

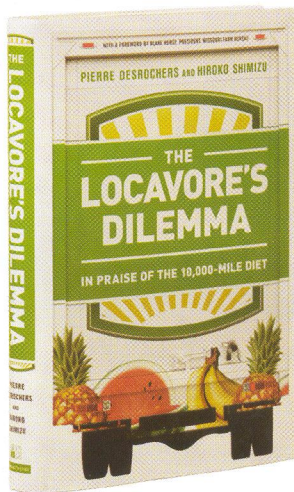
Moving food from farm to retailer contributes only four per cent of emissions created by grocery products.

Industrial agriculture also uses fewer resources such as water. And it preserves wildlife. How? Better farming practices, which means less land is required to make more food for more people. In France, forests expanded by a third between 1830 and 1960 and by a further quarter since then as farmland got turned back to nature. The same thing has happened here.

I ask Desrochers one question though. What's wrong with buying local or knowing where my food comes from? Nothing really, he responds. The trouble is when people convince themselves that local is better and governments react with local-food policies

that may turn an efficient food system inefficient.

For now, Desrochers has an uphill argument. Farmers are gods and local is untouchable. Not only are grocers expected to carry local products, they'd better get chummy with a farmer nearby. Nothing wrong with that in my book, especially if it means more interesting and diverse products in stores. But if we want to have a debate about the role of local food in the larger food system and whether it's better, I suggest we all read Desrochers' book first. **CG**



rob.gerlsbeck@canadiangrocer.rogers.com

One more thing

This is our special issue devoted to independent grocers. You'll see the logo to the right on articles about independents throughout the magazine. And don't forget to check us out online at CanadianGrocer.com and on Twitter during Grocery Innovations Canada, Oct. 1 and 2. We'll be posting live from the show.

