



Blessing the Hands That Feed Us

What Eating Closer to Home Can Teach Us About Food, Community, and Our Place on Earth

Vicki Robin

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Rating

8

- 7 Applicability
- 8 Innovation
- 7 Style

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Take-Aways

- Most people don't know who provides their food, and they have no connection to the hands and lands that feed them.
- A huge, industrialized, anonymous system produces most American food.
- The new normal is to eat at restaurants, order takeout food and cook packaged meals.
- Your relationship with food affects your eating choices.
- Local food is more expensive than industrial food, partly because of various laws related to safety and commerce.
- However, local food could be cheaper than industrialized food.
- You can support your community, including its farmers and gardeners, by choosing to eat locally.
- Sustainable-living activist Vicki Robin ate only food grown within 10 miles of her home for 30 days.
- She met local farmers, decreased her environmental impact and ate healthful produce.
- She felt connected to her community as never before.

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) Why eating locally matters, 2) Why sustainable-living activist Vicki Robin chose to eat only foods from within 10 miles of her home and 3) How you can benefit from incorporating local food into your diet.

Review

Vicki Robin, a sustainable-living activist, gave herself a month-long challenge. She would eat only locally farmed food produced within 10 miles of her house on Whidbey Island in Washington state. Her experiment changed her. She formed deep bonds with the neighbors who gave or sold her fresh produce, dairy, chicken and beef. Eating locally knit her more closely to her community. She rediscovered the flavors and taste of fresh food. Robin bemoans that people don't know where their food comes from and rails against processed, packaged food being cheap and convenient while small farmers struggle. She shows how to support local farmers and explains the benefits of eating locally. Some will find her activism inspirational and contagious, while those less interested in sustainability may be put off by her vehemence. *getAbstract* recommends her journey to those willing to examine the choices they make about what to eat.

Summary

"If you cannot grow your own food, if you don't know any farmers whose food you can buy, if you are...dependent on supermarkets and takeout...you are a prisoner of the industrial food system."

"Relational eating involves my heart and soul, not just my mouth, because I now live somewhere, not just anywhere."

Accepting the Challenge

In 2004, Vicki Robin had been diagnosed with stage-three colon cancer. While she recovered, food became personal. As an activist, she had encouraged others to consume less. Now she needed to clean her own house after a lifetime of yo-yo dieting, losing weight and gaining it back.

At a Fourth of July potluck picnic on her home island, South Whidbey Island in the state of Washington, she ran into her friends, Tricia Beckner and her husband Kent Ratekin. When they began talking about Morgan Spurlock's movie, *Super Size Me*, Tricia told Kent, "You should do a 'super-veggie me.' Eat only what grows in my garden for 30 days." Kent wasn't interested, but Robin said, "I'll do it." This experiment fit her "kind of quirky" thinking. She wondered if she could live on vegetables for a month without the fat- and sugar-laden foods she craved. What about meat or dairy? Could she feed herself using only local resources?

Pam Mitchell, a market gardener, helped Robin calculate her food intake. Tricia Beckner and Robin planned to start the experiment in August. But Beckner's all-vegetable diet proposition seemed a bit harsh. Robin suggested an alternative: eating food grown within 10 miles of her house, so she could still have meat and dairy. She says, "I was your typical food slut. While I had your standard good dietary intentions, I 'ate around'." Her main go-to foods were anything with cheese, anything easy to cook and eat, and whatever was on sale. "My mind was a nonstop cash register – registering the cost of everything. I was a volume eater and a value shopper."

When Robin saw a road sign that said "Meat Sale Today 10-2," she discovered the Long Family Farm, a five-generation family farm started in 1912. The original owners began with 300 chickens and some cows. Today, Leland Long and his grandsons Robert and Loren Long raise 1,200-pound, grass-fed cows that are humanely slaughtered by the nearest

“How could I challenge our food insanity when I had my own hand in the cookie jar?”

Eating locally uniquely connects you...with the hands that feed you – your farmer, the food s/he cultivates and harvests, and the place you both live.”

“How do we wean ourselves from utter dependence on food that seems to come out of nowhere, produced by nobody we know?”

“Once you participate in growing food or...in the lives of the farmers who grow your food, you are less likely to waste it.”

USDA-approved butcher. Robin looked through the meat for sale and chatted with Leland’s wife, Stephani, who put out beef liver and tongue when Robin mentioned how much she liked them. Robin went home happy, knowing her freezer would be well-stocked with meat that fit the requirements of her one-month food challenge. Stephani also gave her a week’s worth of zucchini.

When Robin asked a local dairy farmer, a friend, for milk, the response was, “Sorry, no, can’t do...Unpasteurized milk is illegal to sell.” Public health concerns about E. coli, listeria and salmonella meant that the law required farmers to pasteurize any milk sold to the public. However, it is legal to drink the milk from your own goat or cow. Robin found a couple willing to sell her two quarts of raw cow’s milk per week. Supplementing the rules of the challenge, she added her “exotics” to the allowed foods: oil, lemons and limes, Indian spices, salt and caffeine.

Weeks One and Two

Robin’s first locavore day arrived. Beckner sent over her initial box of garden produce: turnips, potatoes, onions, green beans, cabbage, lettuce, kale, chard, apples, pints of cherry tomatoes and strawberries, three Asian pears, three small cucumbers and a dozen eggs, along with a kind note. Robin yearned for nuts – “a major Vicki food group.” Resigned to giving up her nut addiction, she realized that her contraband milk wouldn’t be delivered for a few days. What would she do without morning tea? She remembered seeing her neighbor bringing in milk from her barn and borrowed some against her first delivery. She recalls, “I’d just borrowed the proverbial cup of sugar from her...I’d crossed the divide between living in a neighborhood and being a neighbor.”

Robin picked up milk from her neighbors, gardening tips from nearby newlyweds, local goat cheese from a dairy farmer, anonymous here for legal protection, and further wisdom from Pam Mitchell. This “gave a new meaning to home cooking.” Word about Robin’s 10-mile diet spread throughout her community on Whidbey Island; neighbors contributed to the cause.

Robin went to Bayview, the farmers’ market that Mitchell ran. The market was the epicenter of the debate about what’s local enough to be sold in the village. In 2008, as part of the Food, Conservation and Energy Act, the government issued the definition that “the total distance that a product can be transported and still be considered a ‘locally or regionally produced agricultural food product’ is less than 400 miles from its origin, or within the state in which it is produced.”

By the second week, Robin faced a food addiction she didn’t realize she had: crunch. She missed snack food. Enter “zackers,” or zucchini crackers. She discovered that the “DEH” setting on her countertop convection oven meant dehydrate, a feature she now needed. She sliced up zucchini and baked them at 125 to 145 degrees until they were crispy, but not torched. Robin found that she was not alone in her “crunch” addiction; grocery stores carry crunchy-sounding and crunchy-named food: crackers, granola bars, breakfast cereals, cookies, and more. Although zackers were less satisfying than the artificial stuff, adding salt and butter helped. Robin learned to make her own butter. She put raw cream in a jar and shook it vigorously. She found that “zookies” – buttered zackers with a touch of local honey – satisfied her sweet tooth.

Robin became resourceful and creative. Cookbooks proved useless, because she couldn’t work with flour, sugar, baking soda, rice, wheat, corn and a variety of other ingredients. Kale

“The strength of local is the very everywhere-ness of it, the guerilla-ness of it.”

“A license is a license, no matter what size your herd. Inspection fees are inspection fees, no matter what size your operation.”

“Because my tax dollars are subsidizing the big guys but not the little guys, consider the price disparity to be due, in part, to how my government tilts the playing field toward the factories rather than the farms.”

“When I was a global eater, 10 miles was a struggle. Compared to that, 50 miles – with roots and squash and flour and barley and beans and winter greens – was heaven.”

became a go-to food because Robin could steam, dehydrate or stir-fry it and add it to soups. She could put kale in salads or eat it as a snack. Potatoes and apples had multiple purposes. Apples provide crunch factor and could become applesauce or apple butter. Robin learned to cook from scratch. She derived inspiration from Rebecca Katz’s cookbook, *One Bite at a Time*, which Katz wrote to help cancer survivors eat despite their diminished appetites. Katz introduced Robin to the FASS food choice method: fat, acid, salty and sweet. The FASS list was similar to Robin’s “exotic” list.

During her second week, Robin noticed three changes. She grew closer to her farmer friends. She felt more connected to her community in general. Her relationship to food became more intimate. Robin paid much more attention to flavor and taste when she cooked with fresh ingredients. She added wild foods she never would have considered, including burdock, dandelion leaves, nettles, rose hips and different kinds of local mushrooms. By the end of her second week, she developed a new routine: picking up milk from the dairy farmers, getting cheese from another farm and going to Beckner’s house to see what would be in next week’s box. She now felt comfortable stopping by to see her friends unannounced.

People argue that fast food costs less, eating locally is too expensive and cooking is too time-consuming. Many consumers eat quick, cheap meals to fulfill their calorie intake so they don’t have to cook. Many don’t cook, forget how or never learned, because they rely on packaged food. A big fast-food hamburger averages about \$3; a quarter-pound of local grass-fed beef cost Robin about \$1.25. Her local veggies – lettuce, tomato, onions – cost pennies, and a fresh, bakery-made bun was about 50 cents. For fries, she could slice up Beckner’s potatoes, coat them with oil and sprinkle them with salt before baking them in the convection oven. While not “saying there is anything inherently wrong with that fast food meal,” Robin found that homegrown was cheaper.

Weeks Three and Four

By the third week, Robin was bored with her daily routine and her food. Breakfast was a frittata made from Beckner’s eggs, onions, potatoes, a sun-dried tomato or two, plus tea with milk and a little added honey from Island Apiaries. Lunch was usually a vegetable salad. Dinner was some combination of local meat and produce. Robin missed eating out. She felt guilty whining over self-imposed limitations, but she had to get out of the house.

Fortunately, she had an event to attend: a Transition Town group meeting 100 miles north in Bellingham. She packed up a one-day food supply. As 60-odd people exchanged stories and ideas, she ogled the buffet tables with envy. As her stomach gnawed, Chris Wolfe of Transition Whatcom County told the crowd that dinner was ready. When Wolfe offered Robin a meal, she felt ungracious turning it down. Maybe her limits were too stringent. Could she redefine local as wherever she was? Perhaps distance mattered less than community. One Bellingham participant said to her, “All well and good to do this experiment in September. Try doing it in January.” That comment made her ponder how she could continue her local diet during the winter.

Robin’s 10-mile diet forced her to cut down on meat. Pre-diet, she paid \$5 to \$8 for a chicken; a local, organically raised chicken cost five times as much. When she met Tobey, the chicken farmer, she was excited, until she learned that she faced a cost of \$25 per chicken. Why was it so expensive? According to chicken farmers online, raising a chicken costs roughly \$2 per pound, factoring in the chickens, their feed, local electricity and the cost of labor. One local farmer estimated that 75 chickens needed about 20 hours of labor. If the farmer pays a low wage of \$10 per hour for labor, that’s \$250 for 25 chickens, so that

“Local is a place in the heart as well as one way to fill my stomach.”

“Pay for your values. If it hurts, don’t have fewer values, just eat less food.”

“Substitution of food for love makes sense only in a society where food is abundant and distraction is epidemic, where love is difficult, but ice cream is easy.”

raises the cost up to \$4 per pound. Adding real estate costs – the birds’ housing and water, plus taxes and insurance – makes it \$5 per pound, which is what Robin paid for Tobey’s five-pound chicken.

Industrially bred chicken is less expensive because of government subsidies, cheaper bulk feed and minimum-wage labor. If Robin ate less chicken, she could stick to her 10-mile diet. Eating two chickens a month at \$5 per pound was roughly equivalent to eating four chickens per month at grocery-store prices of \$2 per pound. “Frugal Girl was happy again. She’d halved the cost by halving the portion.”

Robin found that “Local eating isn’t a sport, isn’t for sissies and isn’t sincerely practiced by anyone but farmers, a few diehard eaters and a whole bunch of free-range animals chewing local grass.” After reading Rebecca Thistlethwaite’s article, “So You Say You Want a Food Revolution,” Robin created a list of ways to support local farmers. Pam Mitchell, organic berry farmer Gene Kahn and Robin calculated that their island couldn’t sustain itself without industrial food. An either-or-system would not work. Of necessity, the future will call for a combination of local and industrial food. Consumers will drive this change incrementally.

Week Four

Robin reached the end of her experiment. She lost six pounds by averaging 1,600 daily calories; her total cholesterol was down three points, with HDL (good cholesterol) up seven and LDL (bad cholesterol) down nine, lowering her risk ratio from 4.2 (average range) to 3.7 (low range). Over the course of the month, about half Robin’s calories came from the produce farm. She realized that without her few exotics – and small amounts of dairy and meat – she would have been malnourished, consuming only 750 calories per day. As her final week ended, she worried about falling back into old food habits.

Because Beckner’s garden supplied so much of her food, Robin wanted the “last supper” to be with Tricia and Kent. She baked a \$25 chicken, adding Beckner’s garlic and rosemary. She made a salad with Beckner’s vegetables, roasted her onions, potatoes, turnips and carrots, and served her apples for dessert with local honey inside. On October 1, Robin celebrated with toast, almond butter and her standard tea, milk and honey for breakfast. She tweaked her experiment for the winter. For February, she promised she would obtain 50% of her food within a 50-mile radius. She’d already found local suppliers for staples.

“Relational Eating”

Relational eating fosters a sense of community and belonging. You choose food from neighbors you can befriend. When you break bread together, you nourish your bodies and your souls. You might think of buying local food as merely a transaction, and that’s fine, too. Maybe you don’t want to have new friends, but you’d still like to support local farmers. Purchase local food because it’s fresh, tasty and healthy. You are much less likely to ingest chemicals from fresh produce. Improve your palate by eating ripe, in-season vegetables. Save money by growing your own. Support your community by advocating designated areas as protected farmland to inhibit construction of subdivisions and malls. Say no to industrialized food, encourage local economic growth and decrease your carbon footprint.

About the Author

Sustainable-living activist **Vicki Robin** also wrote the bestseller *Your Money or Your Life*.