

THE ECOLOGICAL MEAL

Background and Context

The ecological meal is a celebration of good food, friendship, and sustainable living. The goal is to put together a meal and an experience small in its environmental impact but big in its greatness. Thus, where possible, the meal should be composed of foods that are locally and organically grown, purchased at locally owned and operated markets, and otherwise free of artificial or genetically modified ingredients. The meal is an opportunity to reflect on how the food one eats can and does impact the environment. It is also a time to explore and acknowledge our habits of relationship—that we have or could have, both good and bad—to food and how we eat it.

Eating is a celebration of life. The meal is a wonderful introduction to sustainable eating practices. This exercise allows us the opportunity to experiment in relatively low-impact eating and to think about our current eating lifestyle. Through the preparation of an ecologically sensitive meal, we can become more aware of not only sound nutrition, but of our bioregional surroundings and the different types of food it has to offer (and does). The meal might also allow us to experience what it is like to eat slowly and peacefully with others. This meal gives us the opportunity to think about what we normally ignore, and to mindfully prepare a meal with others. In short, what we eat and how we eat it says a lot about who we are and who we are becoming.

When we eat, we literally take parts of Earth into our bodies and Earth becomes us. When we walk, it is Earth's energy—bequeathed from the Sun—that walks us! Mother Earth and Father Sun participate in a cosmic marriage, and we are, quite literally, the progeny of this union. The Sun animates the plant world which, in turn, provides food (directly or indirectly) for us. It is food that is our umbilical cord to both Earth and Sun! If this sounds hokey, you aren't getting it.

The act of eating provides an unparalleled opportunity to cultivate intimacy with Earth, especially when that eating occurs directly from “Earth to Mouth” with no intermediaries. After all, there are few things more sensuous and juicy than picking and eating wild berries or digging up potatoes from a backyard garden, or pan-frying fish caught in a pond or foraging for wild mushroom in the forest.

But all too often, rather than connecting us with directly with Earth in a visceral way, eating leaves us feeling separated and disconnected because almost all of what we eat these days is no longer grown close to the places where we live. Moreover, much of what arrives on our plates is highly processed, bearing no resemblance to the actual living plants and animals that comprise our food. Strikingly, many people, including grocery store cashiers, can no longer identify raw foods such as garlic, ginger, turnips, and blueberries.

As we become more distant from our food, the act of eating is rendered abstract; it becomes something akin to stopping at a gas station to put gas in our car. Both food and body, rendered objects; the sacred communion of subject with subject obliterated. The growing and eating of food which only a century ago were intensely communal acts have now become

individualized, lonely. Family farms, farming communities, and family meals at the dining room table are anachronisms in this new age of industrial farming and pit-stop feeding.

These lamentations aside, food has primal power—it's the stuff of life. Thus, the Ecological Meal is not only an affair during which we can come together as a group to prepare and eat a meal of ecological soundness, but, really, it is pure biology.

Preparing For The Meal

Groups & Meal Components

It seems to make the most sense to choose a meal consisting of a salad, an entrée, and a dessert. In this way, the whole section can divide into smaller groups that will each handle all the logistics of procuring and preparing their respective component of the meal. That is, one group will be in charge of the salad; another, in charge of dessert; etc. If a section wishes to have more components—or more groups—it is easy enough to add appetizers and beverages to the mix.

Choosing the Menu

So, what are we going to eat? Are there any family recipes to share? Quirky alterations to a standard that everyone will love? Have you called your mom lately?... cause now's a good time. If you spend a few minutes online, Googling, "apple desserts," you can verify that the internet is 47% recipes ... you could start there for inspiration.

Because everyone in the section will be eating the meal together, it is common sense (and courtesy) that each group discuss their plans with the rest of the class. Perhaps someone is allergic to peanuts, wheat, or dairy; or, maybe, the group as a whole happens to have a preference between two choices for the entrée.

Lastly, meals with a fair amount of preparation are best, that way everyone can get involved—e.g., with chopping fruit or veggies, making garlic butter, etc.

Where to Go for the Food: The 100 Mile Challenge

If you've made it this far and aren't sure why eating food grown within a 100 mile radius of home is qualitatively different from the standard American diet, with respect to social and environmental impact (and probably nutrition, as well), simply reflect back on the "ecological footprint" and "transform the ordinary" explorations. In doing so you may come to appreciate yourself why weirdoes all over the place list, "gardening," as their favorite past-time—really, why?—and why even stranger sorts jump track from a life of prestige and economic plenty to wake with the sun, walk in the rain, and share the food they grow on their small organic farm.

Meanwhile consider these numbers from the Eat Local Challenge

(<http://eatlocalchallenge.com/>):

- * Minimum miles that U.S. produce typically travels from farm to plate: 1,500
- * Estimated number of plant species worldwide with edible parts: 30,000
- * Number of species that currently provide 90 percent of the world's food: 20
- * Share of each U.S. consumer food dollar that returned to the farmer in 1910: 40¢
- * Share that returned to the farmer in 1997: 7¢
- * Ratio of prisoners to farmers in the U.S. population: 5:2

So, how far is 100 miles? Visit <http://100milediet.org/map/> for a look. If you center yourself here, at Penn State, you can go as far as Butler to the West (nearly to Pittsburgh), Frederick, MD to the South, Reading and Hazleton to the East, and just past Elmira, NY to the

North. When you consider all the land farmed in the state of Pennsylvania—most of the east by Philadelphia is megalopolis, much of the west is development fueled by Pittsburgh, and much of the North is too mountainous for farming, leaving farms to the center—you pretty much have it all. That is, if it's growing in Pennsylvania, you can get to it in 100 miles or less. This 100 Mile rule is not hard and fast, and, perhaps, should be viewed more as a guideline or a goal. Yet, it is one you can largely achieve, and are expected to (largely achieve). If it's not grown locally, the next best thing is something “produced” locally—e.g., fresh-made bread, locally mixed jams, etc.

You have 100 miles to go, but where should you start? Perhaps the easiest way to go about this is to visit a Farmers' Market for the bulk of your meal, then shop at a local market (not a supermarket) for the remainder—such as spices or sweeteners. If a local farm sells its produce or products on-site, it would be a lovely trip to make, if you can. Of course, don't forget the mountains, with their springs, if you're bringing water to the meal. Also, wherever you end up going, ask questions: ask them to yourself, ask them to other customers, ask them to the proprietor. There's always something interesting to learn.

Farmers' Markets: What's a Farmers' Markets? It's a place and time where and when farmers from around the region gather to sell their produce and products. It gives the farmers a central location and plenty of traffic, something they're not likely to find at the end of their driveway; and it gives you good, local food. State College, Bellefonte, and Boalsburg all have their own market.

State College: Fridays, 11:30 to 5:30, Locust Lane, June 6 to November 7 AND Saturdays, 10:00 to 2:00, 200 block of Allen Street (excluding home football weekends).

Bellefonte: Wednesdays & Saturdays, 7:00 to Noon, the Courthouse, Year-round.

Boalsburg: Tuesdays, 3:00 to 7:00, the Military Museum, June 22 - October 26.

Some other Markets: <http://www.statecollegecentral.com/scc2/market/farmers.html>

Local Farms: If you'd like to visit a local farm, perhaps the easiest experience would be a trip to *Harner Farm*, located at the junction of West College Avenue and Whitehall Road, 3 miles from campus. They specialize in seasonal fresh fruits and vegetables—though they are not organic—and are known for their apples and pumpkins. You can find them on a map at: 2191 West Whitehall Road State College, PA 16801. Visit their website (<http://www.harnerfarm.com/>) or call (814-237-7919) if you have questions.

Try *Local Harvest* (<http://www.localharvest.org/>) or Penn State's *AgMap* (<http://agmap.psu.edu/>) for an updated list of local farms. If you do use AgMap, try their advanced search feature to locate "businesses" within a 20 mile radius of our zip code, 16801, while searching for "Farm." It's not the ideal return tool, but you are smart enough to parse the results.

Stone Soup Market: Located on East College (on the left about ½ mile past the College/Beaver bifurcation, as you leave town heading to the mall, a little before you get to Damon's) right in front of the Centre Furnace Mansion. It is possible to walk to it from campus—Porter road would be the safest approach. On a map, you can find it at: 1011 E. College Ave. Suite C State College, PA 16801. Check their website

(<http://www.stonesoupmarket.org/>) or call (814-234-3135) for hours, as they may be closed on Sunday and Monday.

O.W. Houts: You can find this historic, family-run grocery and department store on the corner of West College and Buckhout St. (about 5 blocks west of Atherton St.) They sell some produce (some of which is local), cheese, fresh bread (get there early in the day), canned goods, just about anything a supermarket would have. The main significance is that it is a “family run” supermarket established many years ago—well before the advent of national chain supermarkets—yet are still managing to survive. They are well worth patronizing, and are an easy walk from campus (you can even ogle the selection at the Bicycle Shop on the way). On a map, you can find it at: 120 North Buckhout Street, State College, PA 16801. They're open Monday through Saturday, 8 to 5:30. Call the Grocery Department (814-238-6701 ext. 226) or visit their website (<http://www.owhouts.com/gro-1.htm>) if you have any questions.

Nature's Pantry: This "natural foods alternative" market is just ¼ mile past Stone Soup Market, on the right of College Ave, just before the turnoff to Lemont. They are a great organic food store, though they sell predominantly non-local items. That said, you can still find local honey, butter, cheese, beef, lamb, chicken, and eggs. On a map, you can find it at: 1350 E College Ave, State College, PA 16801. They are open 10-6, Mon, Wednesday, and Friday; 10 to 8, Tuesday and Thursday; 10 to 4 on Saturday; and closed on Sunday. If you have questions, visit their website (<http://www.naturespantry.com>) or call (814-861-5200).

The Granary: This "natural, organic, and ethnic foods" store is well past the bend on West College avenue, about 2 miles outside of town (before the super-Unimart, on the left hand side of the road, or Harner Farm on the right). It's probably out of walking range if you're coming from campus, but is definitely a feasible bike ride. Like Nature's Pantry, they sell a wide variety of non-local and organic goods, yet they still have some local animal-based products. They're open: Monday-Wednesday, Friday & Saturday 10am-6pm; Thursday 10am - 8pm; closed on Sunday. On a map, you can find them at: 2766 W College Ave, State College, 16801. Visit their website (<http://www.granarynaturalfoods.com/>) or call them (814-238-4844) if you have questions.

Preparing and Cooking The Meal

Presents

Yes, presents. That is what we're bringing when we're bringing food. Presents. And all presents require a presentation. You asked questions when you got your food, right? Now's a good time to teach everyone else what you learned. Here is your chance to introduce the group to the food that they will be eating. Tell us what you got, where you got it, who grew it, where it came from, what you thought of the whole shopping experience, why you went with *this* pumpkin and not another, or *this* farmer and not another. Tell us what it is we're going to eat, we want to know.

Preparation

Each individual/group brings an ingredient(s), we all chop, cook, and bake together. There are many ways to go about this, so think about how you might want to do it. However you do it, though, please include everyone. Consider this: you didn't realize how much you wanted to cut carrots, until you started cutting them. Really. Think also of the atmosphere. Do you want music? Everyone could bring a CD, or someone could volunteer to collect a pile of MP3s from the group. Or, maybe, you want silence? Who decides? When it's time, would a candle light dinner work for you?

Eating The Meal

A Thanksgiving Grace

Look around, you are in good *company*. And the person to your left, to your right, don't they make a fine *companion*? For that really is the root of the word—from the Latin *com*, "with," and *panis*, "bread"—company and a companion is who you eat your bread with. All words of our day have their ancient roots, as do our actions. It is redundant to speak the term, Thanksgiving grace, for the word grace, in the vein of gratitude, comes from the Latin, *gratus*, meaning, "thankful." A grace is always already a thanksgiving. That is the root of the word, but what is the root of the action? Before you eat, do you stop to give thanks? And if you do, or if you don't, what compelled those before you to not only speak that first time, but to make it a practice ever after? Some call it the blessing, this saying of "grace," yet they might be confused, for if you know the root of the word and its feeling, you would not think to bless the meal, for you know that it is the meal that is the blessing.

What is it to be grateful? What is it to feel blessed? Perhaps the day has been too hectic, or the year has been a landslide. Maybe, in a million seconds, you cannot find one of them in which to breathe. That is why there is the practice of grace, to step off the tracks and watch the train rush by; to breathe deeply and, even if for just a moment, to feel blessed.

So, let's take that moment. For the next minute, in silence, find what you are thankful for ... including this meal, of course.

Eating Together

You have spent considerable time and effort preparing this meal. It is has been different from the normal routine. So allow yourself to appreciate this good work, this good food. Here's how: Take your first bite, but don't chew. Let it stew, instead. That is, don't chew, stew. Know what you've put into your mouth. What it tastes like. Where it came from. Then chew and swallow. Chew your second bite 20 times. Chew your third bite 30 times. Chew your fourth bite 40 times. Chew your fifth bite 50 times. Chew your sixth bite 60 times. You're on your own after that.

Check Out

What is one thing you learned through this experience that really means something to you?

FURTHER *FOOD* FOR THOUGHT AND EXPERIMENTATION

The Sticks Option: Prior to the meal, find an arm's length stick, and bring it. Right before eating, we will all put a stick up one of our sleeves, then place a rubber band, each, at our wrist and bicep to hold the stick in place. Once the stick is secure, place your free arm behind your back, and keep it there. Now, go ahead, Eat.

If you eventually come upon a solution, you may have also come upon the understanding that **giving is receiving**. Once you have this solution, you can all take the sticks out. But take a moment to discuss the depth of that statement—giving is receiving—as it pertains to this meal?

Eating in Community: Hear how the members of the Plum Village Buddhist Community in France eat together:

We should take our time as we eat, chewing each mouthful at least 30 times, until the food becomes liquefied. This aids the digestive process. Let us enjoy every morsel of our food and the presence of the ... brothers and sisters around us. Let us establish ourselves in the present moment, eating in such a way that solidity, joy and peace be possible during the time of eating.

Eating in silence, the food becomes real with our mindfulness and we are fully aware of its nourishment. In order to deepen our practice of mindful eating and support the peaceful atmosphere, we remain seated during this silent period. After twenty minutes of silent eating, two sounds of the bell will be invited. We may then start a mindful conversation with our friend or begin to get up from the table.

Upon finishing our meal, we take a few moments to notice that we have finished, our bowl is now empty and our hunger is satisfied. Gratitude fills us as we realize how fortunate we are to have had this nourishing food to eat, supporting us on the path of love and understanding.

[-http://www.plumvillage.org/practice/eatingTogether.htm](http://www.plumvillage.org/practice/eatingTogether.htm)

Eating an Apple: *Cradle an apple in your hand and close your eyes. As you hold the apple, remember that the ancestor of all apple trees arose in southwestern Asia. Protected and nourished by observant stewards for thousands of years through their system of agriculture, their culture of the land, the apple contains their vision. In this moment, remember their contribution and offer your gratitude to these ancestors for their foresight, diligence and skillful means. Without them you would not be holding this treasure in your hands.*

The original apple, now called the Siberian Crabapple, has traveled far and wide. Remains of apple trees have been unearthed near lake dwellings in Switzerland, evidence of the western migration of the apple thousands of years ago. The apple was carried, as all food crops have been carried into the world, by helping agents; blown by the wind, caught in the coat of the fox, dropped by the quail and the crow, wrapped safe in the pocket of an adventurer, sewn into the hems of garments by refugees running to safe ground. The apple contains their journeys. In this moment, remember their contribution and offer your gratitude to these many agents of dispersal who carry seed to the four directions. Without them, you would not be holding this treasure in your hands.

The apple is the oldest of the rose-family fruits, sharing a direct lineage with the pear, the quince, and many other Rosacea ancestors, among them the wild fruits of the woodlands and

mountains: alpine strawberry and thorny gooseberry. All apples have a true core. If sliced at the middle latitude, the cut reveals a five-pointed star at the heart of the fruit. In each protected oval chamber of the star rests a sable-colored seed. Apple trees of the past and the future are contained within the apple seed...

Now, in the gathering fall, in the season known as "locking," the apple tree loosens her leaves. All summer long these leaves have been breathing, making sweetness from sunlight, breathing to form the apple in your hand. It takes the work of 40 apple leaves to breathe an apple into life. As they breathe, the apple leaves exhale the moisture drawn up by their roots from deep beneath the soil horizon. A single apple tree, in full growth, returns fifteen tons of transpired water to the atmosphere in one growing season. The apple contains the breath of the apple tree. In this moment, remember to breathe deeply, inhaling and exhaling with the apple tree, air made sweet with apple making. Thank the apple tree that, through the process of life itself, renews the planet and fills our lives with sweetness. Without these labors, you would not be holding this treasure in your hands.

Everywhere, apple leaves are releasing their hold, drifting back to earth to be broken down into richness by the winter rains and the living beings of the soil. In this world beneath our feet, filled with mystery and action, many creatures yet unnamed and uncounted, contribute to our sustenance. We are all dependant on the living soil for our needs. In each crumb of living soil, billions of organisms are growing, reproducing, and dying. The apple contains their lives. In this moment remember the natural cycles of growth and decay and the unseen creators of the skin of the earth, the soil community of bacteria, protozoa and nematodes, the molds, yeasts and fungi, the mites, springtails, and earthworms, the spiders, beetles, and moles. Without them, you would not be holding this treasure in your hands.

Lift the apple and breathe in its perfume. Rest the smooth burnished red skin of the fruit on your skin. Imagine the work of the bees, visiting the apple blossoms in spring, reaching into the apple flower to pollinate the fruit you hold. In her lifetime a honeybee produces a teaspoon of honey, each drop carefully stored in the waxy comb. The apple contains the artful bee. In this moment, remember her work in the sweetness of the fruit. Remember too the work of all pollinators; the butterflies, moths, and bats who, in their search for ethereal sweetness, feed us. Without them, you would not be holding this treasure in your hands.

Now, the apple rests in your hands. Raise the apple to your lips and taste it. As you do, savor the millions of agreements and simple actions, held in a web of relationships, arrayed across time and space, connecting you to each other and to the land. The apple contains all these. They are its sweetness and beauty. In this moment, remember all that is given to you in the form of this apple and enjoy the fruit of these labors and intentions. Without all this, you would not be holding this treasure in your hands.

"Meditations on an Apple" by Janet Brown (<http://www.ecoliteracy.org>)

Why Chew so much? *Chewing is weird. Chewing is disgusting. Chewing does not lend itself to scintillating conversation. Chewing is a pain in the butt. But you won't get all the insanely wonderful benefits of eating good food without chewing at least some of the time.*

Here's why: the digestion of complex carbohydrates (grains and vegetables) begins in the mouth. We secrete an enzyme called ptyalin, which needs to be mixed well with the food. This mixing happens only through chewing. And if the food is not well broken down in the mouth, other digestive enzymes along your gastro intestinal tract cannot work as well. The whole system gets messed up, and you don't absorb the goodness from the food.

Plus, when you chew, you're actually crushing the food into tiny pieces. As you break down the molecular structure of the food, all the energy, vitamins, and minerals of the food become available to your body. Uncrushed, they get sent down the digestive tract in their pseudo-whole form., their insides never used by the body. This uncrushed food causes fartiness and is just dead weight that the body either stores or flushes out, either way requiring unnecessary energy for no real benefits. ...

When you chew a mouthful of rice one hundred times, it becomes sweet because it is breaking down into glucose in your mouth. What you're left with is an exceptionally sweet liquid with little bits of fiber floating in it. The liquid is perfect fuel for your body. It will be absorbed magically and happily by your small intestine, elevating your blood sugar in a smooth and balanced way, allowing your pancreas a rest, and it will register a type of satisfaction in your brain that is totally amazing. ...

*It doesn't work just because chewing takes so long you get bored with eating (although that happens). It's not just that you chew right past those magic twenty minutes needed for the brain to register fullness (although that happens, too). **It works because, for the first time in your life, you're actually eating.** The food is finally going in as the fuel that it is*

And you don't have to chew every mouthful. I only chew about a third of what I eat because I like to have conversations with other human beings during mealtimes. But a third of my food is enough to give me that feeling of satisfaction, delivers good energy, and keeps me nourished. ...

Being truly nourished is not about the amounts, or what we eat, or even the quality. It is how we eat that determines whether the food gets in and does its thing. Try it. You'll be amazed.

-From: [The Hip Chicks Guide to Macrobiotic Cooking](#)