Locally Grown Food

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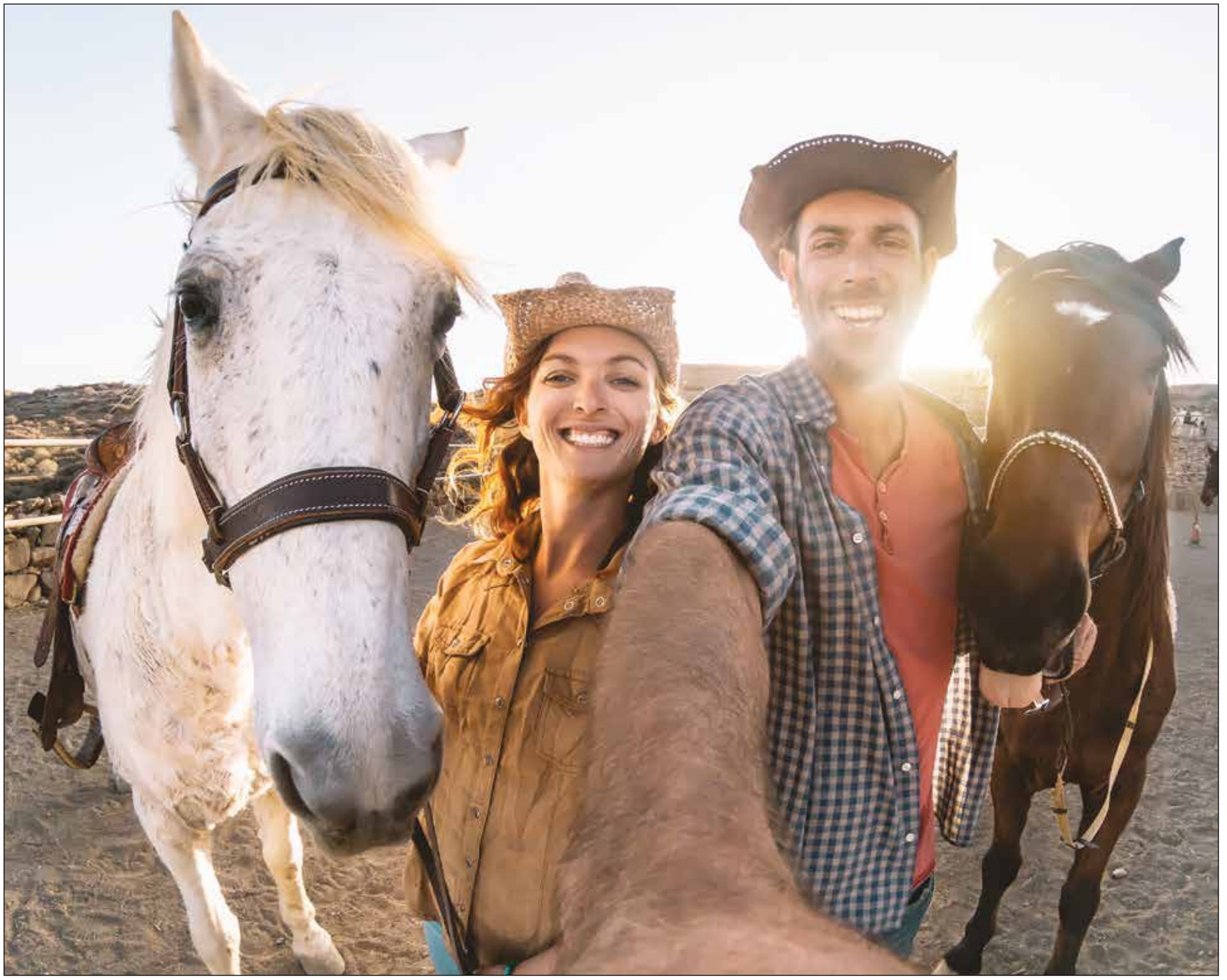
Agritourism

Agritourism is an agriculturally based operation or activity that brings visitors, or tourists, to a farm or ranch.



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Examples of agritourism range from rescue farms and dude ranches to corn mazes and farm stays. You can pick your own fruits and veggies, ride horses or learn about other farm animals, taste honey and learn about farm crafts such as wine and cheesemaking.

You can find a farm to visit either through your state's agriculture department or through national organizations like the U.S. Farm Stay Association or the Dude Ranchers Association of America. Keep reading for more tips on finding an agricultural experience that's right for you.

WHAT DOES IT COST?

The Farm Stay Association says the average rate for lodgings on their site is around $125 per night, which may also include breakfast. Accommodations vary widely, the group says, from a wood-floored tent to your own farmhouse. Pricing is usually commensurate; the more luxurious the accommodations, the more you should expect to pay. You will usually be able to source food directly from the farm if it's not provided for you, the group says.

WHAT WILL I LEARN?

A farm stay is a great way to find out how the food you eat at home is produced. You should expect, with most farm stays, to get hands-on for at least part of the process. That means you're going to get dirty, but you will come away with a better appreciation of where your food comes from. The Farm Stay Association says that work may not be required, per se. Most farmers want you to get comfortable and go home refreshed, not worn out from hard work.

DAY VISITS

You don't have to spend the night to have a great farm trip. Many local farms offer day trips that will allow you to pick your own fruits or vegetables, meet some farm animals and maybe even do a little shopping in a farm gift shop. Look to your local department of agriculture for listings or visit a local farm supply store and ask around. You may uncover a hidden gym in your own backyard.

Slow Food Movement

Slow Food International is a global grassroots movement to encourage and support local food cultures and traditions, counteract the rise of fast life, and combat people's dwindling interest in the food they eat.

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Since the organization was founded in 1989 in Italy, it has spread to more than 160 countries and involves millions every day.

GOOD, CLEAN AND FAIR

Slow Food wants to build a world where everyone can access and enjoy food that's good for them and good for the planet. That means food that's good, clean and fair.

Good food means a food's flavor and aroma is recognizable and a result of the competence of the producer and of the choice of raw materials and production methods. Clean food means the environment is respected and farming and ranching are done sustainably with the protection of ecosystems and biodiversity kept in mind. Fair food means it was produced using respectful labor relationships with adequate rewards.

THE FARMER'S ROLE

Slow Food says the farmer or rancher plays a key role in the slow food movement as they share knowledge, sustainable practices as a common group of food producers. Consumers, the group says, should move the market with their food choices, making themselves aware of good, clean and fair food and food production. Eating, the group says, is a part of the agricultural process and should be treated as such.

SUPPORTING SLOW FOOD AND SLOW FOOD USA

There are more than 1,600 Slow Food groups, call "convivia," and communities around the world, many in the United States and likely one near you. These groups organize local activities around the local food culture, including shared meals, visits to local producers and farms, conferences, film screenings, festivals and more.

• **Slow Food USA.** The movement in the United States, has several campaigns to promote local, community-driven food production, including:

• **Plant a Seed Campaign.** Plant seeds to learn how to preserve endangered plants.

• **Biodiversity.** Promoting sustainable agriculture, small-scale food production and the preservation of traditional foods and knowledge.

• **Food and Farm Policy and Equity, Inclusion and Justice.** Advocating for positive change in public policy.

• **School Gardens.** Educate and grow the next generation of food-aware people.

• **Slow Meat and Slow Fish.** Promoting better meat and fisheries that improve animal welfare and respects resources.

You can learn more about Slow Food at www.slowfood.com.

Heritage Produce

Heirloom plants are an old cultivar of a plant used for food. These varieties may only be found in isolated minority communities and while they were grown historically, are no longer used in modern large-scale agriculture.

MERCEDESFROMTHEEIGHTIES

BEFORE MODERN AGRICULTURE

Historically, food crops were much more diverse than they are today. Farmers and gardeners grew many kinds of fruits and vegetables, each doing well in its specific locale. Producers saved their own seeds and cuttings for future plantings. Post-World War II, food crops were mass-produced and very few varieties of each crop are grown to ensure consistency. The varieties are often chosen not for taste, but for the durability to picking, transportation and processing. Mass-producing our fruits and vegetables has caused biodiversity to drop by 75%.

WHAT ARE HEIRLOOM PLANTS?

Experts disagree on what exactly makes an heirloom variety. Generally, however, these are old cultivars that are at least as old as the end of World War II. They may come from seed companies or be handed down the old way, through seeds and cuttings preserved by family growers over generations. They are generally open-pollinated and bred for taste and suitability to a certain locale. The fruits and vegetables may not look like the ones we see in the grocery store; tomatoes can be purple, watermelons yellow or even white.

Some examples of heirloom fruits and vegetables are:

- **Citron red-seeded watermelon:** A white-fleshed watermelon with red seeds.
- **Dragon carrots:** A blood-red carrot.
- **Glass gem corn:** Jewel-colored corn kernels dot these cobbs.
- **Casper eggplant:** Snow-white eggplant.

WHERE DO I FIND HEIRLOOM PLANTS?

You can join seed exchanges or local seed banks, or you can make friends with local gardeners through clubs, gatherings and plant sales. Some commercial seed companies now sell heirloom varieties of fruits and vegetables.

You can also find heirloom fruits and vegetables at local farmers markets and produce stands. Remember, these fruits and vegetables may look, smell and taste different from their grocery store counterparts, and they may not ripen at the same time.

Canning and Preserving

Locally grown food, especially if you're buying heirloom produce, may not have the shelf life of grocery store varieties. Canning and preserving can extend the life and nutritional value of these delicious foods, and, if you do it right, is perfectly safe.

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HOW DOES CANNING WORK?

Canning goes bad when oxygen is introduced. Good canning practices all focus on removing oxygen and bad bacteria from the food. Always use the best locally grown foods in your canning, wash them well and peel them. Use good canning practices such as hot packing, adding enough acid, using proper jars and lids, and using the right type and length of processing. And don't forget storing correctly. Home-canned foods should be stored below 95 degrees and ideally from 50 to 70 degrees.

BOILING WATER CANNERS

Boiling water processing is safe only for high-acid foods and recipes. Think fruit jams and jellies. To process food in a boiling water canner, follow these steps from the USDA:

• Fill the canner halfway with clean water. This is about the amount you need for pint jars. Make sure the water is 1-2 inches over the top of a full jar.

• Preheat the water to 140 degrees for raw-packed foods and 180 degrees for hot-packed foods.

• Load filled and lidded jars into a canner rack or plate and add more boiling water if needed.

• Turn the heat all the way up, cover the canner with the lid and heat until the water boils vigorously.

• Set a timer for the total minutes called for in your recipe. Keep the lid on and boil throughout the time called for. If the water stops boiling, bring it back to a boil and start the process over.

• When the time is up, turn off the heat and remove the lid. Wait five minutes, then remove the jars to a towel. Let the jars sit undisturbed to cool at room temperature for 12 to 24 hours.

PRESSURE CANNING

Low-acid recipes need to be pressure canned for safety. It's a little more complicated and a longer process than boiling water canning, but it uses much less water. You can pressure can with just 2-3 inches of water in the bottom of your canner. Follow your recipe. To process food in a pressure canner, follow these steps from the USDA:

• Place the appropriate amount of water in your canner and put filled jars in your rack inside the pot.

• Turn the heat to high and put the lid on the canner, leaving the vent port or petcock open. Heat until steam flows freely from the opening.

• Pressurize the canner by putting the weight on the vent port. Start the recipe timer when the weight starts to rock or jiggle. If you're using a gauge, start it when it reads the correct pressure.

• Regulate heat to keep pressure steady until the timer goes off. Turn off the heat, wait 10 minutes or until the pressure decreases appropriately, then open the cooker. Keep the lid opening away from you.

• Place the jars on a rack and allow to cool for several hours.

Farm-to-Table Food

Serving locally grown food is becoming more popular at restaurants and even in some schools.

Farm-to-table service usually means the restaurant or school got the food directly from the producer itself through a direct sale, a community-supported agriculture arrangement, a farmers market or other direct distribution.

WHY FARM-TO-TABLE

In 2012, local and regional food systems, including farm-to-table agriculture and food service, totaled $6.1 billion in sales. Farm-to-table food isn't just more fresh, but it also cuts down on transportation and refrigeration costs.

Local and regional food systems improve the vitality of communities by keeping food dollars local and working for small businesses, like farms, according to the Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education program, a division of the USDA.

READ THE LABELS

It's important to remember that there's no universal, regulated definition for farm-to-table foods. Your best bet is to look at the label, which should list which producer the food is from and where the producer is located. Look for producers and processors that are close to your community for the freshest taste.

Since farm-to-table is growing in popularity, many stores and restaurants see locally produced food as something to brag about. You can also ask your server or store manager; they'll be happy to point you to their favorite local products.

Finding local food goes beyond the supermarket and the restaurant. You can also source local food from cooperatives, community-supported agriculture, farmers markets and food hubs. Many local farmers markets even accept SNAP, WIC and other food benefits. Find a local farmers market on the USDA's Local Food National Farmers Market Director at ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/farmersmarkets.

FARM-TO-SCHOOL

School purchasing is a powerful support for farmers and ranchers able to tap into that network. The National Farm to School Network says that in 2013-14, schools spent $789 million on local food. The organization says these connections give students access to healthy, local foods and provide education opportunities such as farm trips, cooking lessons and school gardens. The USDA also supports farm-to-school programs with close to $8 million in grants in 2019-20. These grants were sent to 5,400 schools and reached 3.4 million students.

Buying Organic

Unlike farm-to-table food, there is a definition for organic food. USDA-certified organic foods are grown and processed according to federal guidelines pertaining to soil quality, animal-raising practices, pest and weed control and the use of additives.

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WHAT IS ORGANIC?

According to the USDA, organic producers rely on natural substances and physical, mechanical or biologically based farming methods. Basically, synthetic substances aren't allowed, with some exceptions. For example, pheromones can be used to confuse insects that target crops or vaccines can be given to animals to prevent infectious diseases. However, the rules also prohibit naturally occurring toxic substances, such as strychnine and arsenic.

MULTI-INGREDIENT FOODS

When it comes to foods with more than one ingredient, such as baked goods, there are even more considerations behind the organic label. Processed organic foods can't contain artificial preservatives, colors or flavors. All of the ingredients must themselves be organic, with the exception of some non-agricultural ingredients, such as pectin in fruit jams or baking soda in baked goods.

GMOS

USDA regulations prohibit the use of genetically modified organisms. Purdue University says GMOs are largely used to address yield problems caused by insects or weeds. A plant might be genetically modified, for instance, to be resistant to a particular type of insect or herbicides. GMOs are pretty new, the university says, but there isn't evidence yet that GMOs are unsafe in any way.

Still, organic food producers cannot use genetically modified seeds or other materials, and they work to keep their products from getting cross-contaminated by near-by non-organic farms.

WHY DOES IT COST MORE?

Many organic foods cost more than their non-organic counterparts. Organic food generally takes more effort. The supply is also limited compared with demand, meaning the price is higher. Harvests of organic food are also smaller, and organic food costs more to process and transport because it must be kept separately from non-organic food. The small volume of organic foods also means that marketing and distribution chains are less efficient.

However, according to the United Nations, organic food has many benefits, including a boost to the environment, higher standards for animal welfare, better health for farmers and a positive impact on rural development.

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Buying Meat Locally

Getting meat locally might be tougher than buying locally grown fruits and vegetables. This is largely because meat production and processing is tightly regulated. It is still, however, entirely possible — and delicious.

BEEF

Beef ranching on a massive scale can be detrimental to the environment. Getting your meat from a small, local farm is a great way to go greener while still enjoying beef. Grass-fed beef could be available through a local CSA or farmers market, but you can also reach out to farmers directly and buy portions of a cow with several other families. Your cow will be more likely to be raised and slaughtered humanely, and the meat will reflect that quality.

If you're shopping in the grocery, look for phrases like "pasture-raised" and "grass-fed" on the labels in addition to the usual information about producers and processing.

CHICKEN, DUCK AND TURKEY

These fowl are smaller, so you won't be buying a portion here but a whole bird. Be aware that commercially raised chickens, ducks and turkeys are different from small farm, local birds. You may get a different taste that some people prefer. The phrases you want to look for on fowl labels include free-range and cage-free.

EGGS

Each state has different rules for selling eggs; make sure your producer complies with these. If you're buying yard or farm-fresh eggs, make sure the producer follows these rules from the University of Minnesota:

- Eggs are collected two or three times a day.
- Eggs with broken or cracked shells are discarded.
- Eggshells are dry cleaned. If wet cleaning is used, make sure water and egg temperatures are met and the eggs are appropriately sanitized.
- The eggs should be dry.
- Chicken houses should be clean and dry.
- Feed is stored safely to prevent contamination.
- Feeding and watering equipment is cleaned.
- The eggs are checked for defects by holding it up to a bright light (candling).

SEAFOOD

The Local Catch Network, an organization committed to providing local access to local seafood, says there are four ways to make sure you're buying local seafood.

- **Community-supported fisheries:** Like community-supported agriculture, a community-supported fishery is one that links fisherman to a local market. Consumers pay for a season ahead of time and the fishermen deliver food on a regular bases.
- **Farmers markets:** A group of fishermen and processors will group together to sell their catches at a local farmers market. For the consumer, this is a great way to meet local fishermen and get tasty seafood.
- **Dock pick-ups:** You can always buy fish fresh off the boat. Visit a local marina and look for fishermen selling their catches directly.
- **Boat-to-school:** This follows the farm-to-school method, giving students access to fresh seafood and the fishermen and processors.