

Locally Grown Food



Building Lifelong Habits

Children are naturally curious, especially when it comes to food.

A bright berry, a freshly pulled carrot or the chance to stir something in a bowl can turn everyday tasks into small adventures. Bringing kids into the world of local food taps into that curiosity, helping them understand where their meals come from while building skills that last well beyond childhood.

Involving children in local food doesn't require elaborate plans. Simple, hands-on experiences can make a lasting impression and encourage healthier, more engaged eating habits.

START AT THE MARKET

Farmers markets offer a sensory-rich environment perfect for young shoppers. Let children help choose fruits and vegetables, ask questions or handle small purchases.

Giving them a sense of ownership — picking out apples for the week or selecting herbs for dinner — can make them more invested in eating what they've chosen.

Conversations matter, too. Talking with farmers about how food is grown or when it's harvested helps turn a shopping trip into a learning experience.

GET HANDS-ON IN THE KITCHEN

Cooking is one of the most



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effective ways to connect kids with food. Age-appropriate tasks such as washing produce, stirring ingredients, measuring or tearing herbs allow children to participate safely while building confidence.

Recipes don't need to be complicated. Simple dishes like salads, smoothies or homemade pizza provide opportunities to use local ingredients and see how they come together. Children are often more willing to try new foods when they've helped prepare them.

GROW SOMETHING TOGETHER

Gardening, even on a small scale, can be a meaningful and powerful experience for a young person. A backyard plot, raised bed or a few containers on a patio can introduce children to the process of growing food from seed to harvest.

Fast-growing plants like lettuce, radishes or herbs offer quick rewards, keeping young gardeners engaged. Watching something they planted grow and eventually eating it creates a direct connection that's

hard to replicate any other way.

MAKE IT A ROUTINE

Incorporating local food into regular family routines helps reinforce these experiences. Weekly market visits, seasonal cooking projects or tending a small garden can become traditions that children look forward to.

Keep expectations flexible. Not every child will embrace every new food right away. Repeated exposure, without pressure, often leads to greater acceptance over time.

BUILDING A FOUNDATION

Engaging children with local food does more than fill a plate—it builds awareness, confidence and appreciation. Kids learn that food doesn't just appear in a store; it comes from people, places and processes they can see and understand.

Those early experiences can shape how they think about food for years to come, creating habits that support both personal health and a stronger connection to their community.

CSA Subscriptions

For many shoppers, buying local food means a Saturday morning trip to the farmers market. But there's another option that goes a step further — community supported agriculture, or CSA.

These subscription-style programs connect consumers directly with local farms, offering a steady supply of fresh, seasonal food while supporting growers throughout the season.

At its core, a CSA is a partnership. Members pay upfront, often at the start of the growing season, in exchange for a share of the farm's harvest. In return, they receive regular boxes of produce, typically weekly or bi-weekly, filled with whatever is ripe at that moment.



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HOW IT WORKS

CSA programs vary, but most follow a similar model. After signing up, members pick up their share at a designated location or have it delivered. Boxes might include vegetables, fruits, herbs and sometimes extras like eggs, flowers or baked goods, depending on the farm.

Because the contents reflect the season, each box can feel a bit like a surprise. Early summer might bring leafy greens and radishes, while mid-season deliveries feature tomatoes,

zucchini and berries. This rhythm encourages members to cook with what's available rather than relying on out-of-season staples.

The upfront payment helps farmers cover costs such as seeds, equipment and labor. It also reduces uncertainty, providing a stable income regardless of how the season unfolds.

THE BENEFITS

For consumers, CSA subscriptions offer freshness that's

hard to match. Produce is often harvested within a day or two of delivery, preserving flavor and nutrients. There's also a strong sense of connection. Members know where their food comes from and who grows it.

CSAs can expand cooking habits. Receiving unfamiliar vegetables encourages experimentation, helping home cooks build new skills and recipes. Many farms include newsletters or recipe suggestions to guide

members through the contents of each box.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

While CSAs offer clear advantages, they're not for everyone. The cost is typically paid upfront, which can be a barrier for some households. Flexibility can be limited; members don't usually choose exactly what goes into their box.

There's also the question of quantity. Some weeks may feel abundant, requiring extra

planning to use everything before it spoils. Sharing a subscription with a friend or family member can help balance that out.

IS IT WORTH IT?

For those who enjoy cooking and want to eat more seasonally, a CSA can be a rewarding investment. It supports local agriculture, reduces the distance food travels and brings a sense of anticipation to each delivery.

Local Grains for Your Baking

Flour is often treated as a pantry staple, something to grab without much thought.

But a growing number of bakers are looking closer, discovering that locally grown grains can offer deeper flavor, fresher quality and a stronger connection to regional agriculture. From stone-milled wheat to heirloom cornmeal, these ingredients are changing how people approach baking.

Buying local grains means working with products that reflect the soil and climate where they were grown. Just as wine expresses a sense of place, grains can carry subtle differences in taste and texture depending on their origin. That can translate into breads, pastries and pastas with more character and complexity.

WHAT MAKES LOCAL DIFFERENT

One of the biggest distinctions is freshness. Many local flours are milled in small batches and sold soon after grinding, preserving natural oils and nutrients that can diminish over time. This often results in richer flavor and a slightly heartier texture.

Heritage grains add another dimension. Varieties like einkorn, spelt and emmer — grown long before modern wheat was standardized — offer unique profiles and can behave differently in recipes.



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Cornmeal, too, varies widely depending on the type of corn and milling process, producing everything from fine, delicate textures to coarse, rustic grinds.

ADJUSTING YOUR APPROACH

Baking with local grains may require a bit of experimentation. Because these flours are often less processed and may contain more bran and germ, they can absorb liquids differently than conventional all-purpose flour. Recipes might need slight adjustments in hydration or mix-

ing time.

Many bakers start by substituting a portion of local flour into familiar recipes, gradually increasing the amount as they become comfortable with its behavior. Even a small percentage can add noticeable flavor.

Stone-ground flours, in particular, tend to produce doughs that feel softer and more elastic. Paying attention to texture rather than strictly following measurements can help achieve the best results.

WHERE TO FIND THEM

Farmers markets, local mills

and specialty grocers are common sources for regional grains. Some farms sell directly to consumers, while others partner with bakeries or food co-ops. Labels often include information about the grain variety and where it was grown, offering a level of transparency not always found in conventional products.

BEYOND THE OVEN

Local grains aren't limited to bread. They can be used in pancakes, muffins, pasta and even savory dishes like polenta or grain salads. Each application highlights a different as-

pect of their flavor and texture.

A TASTE OF PLACE

Choosing local grains is about more than baking. It's about supporting regional agriculture and preserving biodiversity. Heritage varieties, in particular, help maintain a wider range of crops, which can contribute to more resilient food systems.

For home cooks, the reward is both tangible and sensory. A loaf of bread made with local flour carries not just the aroma of fresh baking, but the story of the land it came from, one that unfolds with every slice.

Farm-to-School Programs

Across the country, school cafeterias are getting a quiet but meaningful upgrade.

Instead of relying solely on large-scale distributors, many districts are turning to local farms to bring fresher ingredients—and new learning opportunities—into the lunchroom. Known as farm-to-school programs, these efforts connect students with the food grown in their own communities, reshaping how they eat and how they think about food.

At their core, farm-to-school programs aim to source local produce, dairy and proteins for school meals. But the impact goes beyond what's on the plate.



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FROM FIELD TO CAFETERIA

Farm-to-school initiatives typically involve partnerships between schools and nearby farmers, food hubs or cooperatives. Seasonal fruits and vegetables are incorporated into menus, often replacing or supplementing processed options. In some cases, schools highlight a harvest of the month, introducing students to a featured ingredient with tastings or themed meals.

Logistics can vary depending on the size of the district and available infrastructure, but the goal remains the same: shorten the distance between where food is grown and where it's served.

LEARNING BEYOND THE LUNCH LINE

These programs often extend into the classroom. School gardens, cooking demonstrations and farm visits give students hands-on experiences that connect lessons in science, health and environmental studies to real-world practices. A tomato isn't just something on a tray — it becomes part of a larger story about soil, seasons and sustainability.

Exposure matters. Research has shown that when children are involved in growing or preparing food, they are more likely to try and enjoy fruits

and vegetables they might otherwise avoid.

SUPPORTING LOCAL ECONOMIES

Farm-to-school programs create opportunities for local farmers. By providing a consistent market, schools can help stabilize demand and keep food dollars circulating within the community. This support can be especially valuable for small and mid-sized farms looking to diversify their income streams.

At the same time, schools benefit from fresher ingredients and the ability to highlight local partnerships,

strengthening ties with families and community organizations.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Implementing farm-to-school programs isn't without challenges. Budget constraints, distribution logistics and food safety requirements can make sourcing locally more complex than traditional purchasing. However, many districts are finding creative solutions, from collaborating with regional food hubs to adjusting menus around seasonal availability.

Grants and state or federal

support have helped expand these programs, making them more accessible to a wider range of schools.

For students, the influence of farm-to-school programs can extend well beyond their school years. Early exposure to fresh, locally grown food helps shape lifelong habits and preferences, encouraging healthier choices and a deeper appreciation for where food comes from.

In the process, the cafeteria becomes more than a place to eat. It becomes a classroom, a community connector and a starting point for a more sustainable food system.

Local Meat & Poultry

Buying meat and poultry locally can feel like stepping into a different food system, one where labels carry more nuance, conversations matter and choices connect directly to farms in your community.

For shoppers interested in quality, transparency and ethical practices, understanding what to look for is key.

Local sourcing often means fewer middle steps between farm and table, giving consumers a clearer sense of how animals are raised and processed. But with that opportunity comes a learning curve.



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DECODING THE LABELS

Terms like “grass-fed,” “free-range,” “pasture-raised” and “organic” appear frequently, but they don’t always mean the same thing. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, labeling standards can vary depending on the product and certification.

“Grass-fed” typically refers to animals raised primarily on forage, while “free-range” indicates some level of outdoor access for poultry.

“Pasture-raised” often suggests more time spent outdoors on open land, though it’s not always a regulated term. Certified organic products follow

stricter guidelines related to feed, living conditions and antibiotic use.

Because definitions can differ, especially outside certified programs, it’s helpful to look beyond the label.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

One of the advantages of buying locally — whether at a farmers market, farm stand or through a CSA — is the chance to talk directly with producers. Farmers can often provide details that labels cannot.

Consider asking how animals are fed, whether they

have access to pasture and how they’re treated if they become ill. You might also ask about processing practices and where the animals are slaughtered, as this can affect both quality and local economic impact.

These conversations inform your purchase and build relationships that make future shopping easier and more meaningful.

QUALITY, ETHICS AND FLAVOR

Many consumers turn to local meat for perceived quality differences. Smaller-scale

operations may focus on animal welfare, slower growth rates and more natural diets, which can influence texture and flavor.

Ethical considerations play a role. Supporting farms that prioritize humane treatment and sustainable practices can align purchasing decisions with personal values. At the same time, buying locally keeps food dollars circulating within the community, benefiting nearby farmers and businesses.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR BUYING

Local meat and poultry can

sometimes cost more than conventional options, so planning ahead helps.

Buying in bulk — such as a quarter or half share of an animal — can reduce the per-pound cost. Freezer space becomes an important consideration, as does labeling and organizing cuts for easy use.

For those just starting out, trying a few different cuts or products before committing to a larger purchase can be a good approach. Farmers are often happy to recommend options based on cooking preferences.

Pollinators Play a Vital Role

It's easy to overlook the smallest workers in the food system.

Bees drift from blossom to blossom, butterflies hover over bright petals and even certain beetles and birds quietly go about their work.

Yet without these pollinators, many of the foods that define summer — berries, melons, tomatoes and more — would be far less abundant.

Pollinators are essential to agriculture because they help plants reproduce. As they move between flowers, they transfer pollen, enabling fruits and seeds to develop. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, a significant portion of the crops humans rely on depends, at least in part, on pollination.

MORE THAN JUST BEES

While honeybees often get the spotlight, they're only part of the story. Native bees, such as bumblebees and mason bees, are highly efficient pollinators, especially for certain crops. Butterflies, moths, birds and even bats contribute, each playing a role in different environments and with different plants.

This diversity matters. A wide range of pollinators helps ensure that crops are fertilized



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even when conditions aren't ideal for a single species. In local food systems, that resilience supports both farmers and consumers.

A DIRECT LINK TO LOCAL FOOD

For those who shop at farmers markets or grow their own produce, the connection to pollinators is especially clear. Fruits and vegetables that rely on pollination, such as cucumbers, squash and apples, are directly influenced by the health of local pollinator populations.

When pollinators thrive,

yields are often higher and more consistent. When they struggle, farmers may see reduced harvests, which can affect availability and prices. In this way, pollinators are an invisible but essential partner in bringing local food to the table.

CHALLENGES FACING POLLINATORS

Pollinator populations have faced increasing pressure in recent years. Habitat loss, pesticide use, climate change and disease all contribute to declines in certain species. These challenges can disrupt local

ecosystems and, in turn, the food systems that depend on them.

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, nearly 34.7% of native bee species and 19.5% of butterflies are at risk of extinction. Pollinator.org said the decline in pollinator populations have contributed to a 3 to 5% loss in fruit, vegetable and nut production.

Supporting pollinators doesn't require large-scale changes, however. Small actions at home and in the community can make a meaningful difference.

SIMPLE WAYS TO HELP

Planting pollinator-friendly flowers and herbs is one of the easiest ways to provide food and habitat. Native plants are especially beneficial, as they're adapted to local conditions and attract native species. Reducing pesticide use and allowing a portion of the yard to grow more naturally can also create a welcoming environment.

Even container gardens on patios or balconies can contribute, offering nectar and pollen in urban settings where green space may be limited.

‘Ugly’ Produce Finds New Life

Not every tomato is perfectly round. Carrots twist, apples bruise and peppers grow in unexpected shapes.

For years, these so-called ugly fruits and vegetables were often left behind, passed over in stores or discarded before they ever reached a kitchen. Today, they’re getting a second look, and a growing number of home cooks are discovering that imperfect produce can be just as delicious as its picture-perfect counterparts.

Cooking with ugly produce is part of a broader effort to reduce food waste. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, a significant portion of food waste happens before it even reaches consumers, often due to cosmetic standards rather than quality. That adds up to nearly six billion pounds of food waste each year in the U.S., according to Food Waste Feast.

By embracing produce that looks different, shoppers can help shift that pattern while stretching their food budgets.

BEAUTY ISN’T FLAVOR

Misshapen fruits and vegetables may look unusual, but their taste and nutritional value are typically unchanged. A crooked cucumber still offers the same crisp bite, and a slightly blemished peach can be just as sweet and juicy once the



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imperfect spot is trimmed away.

In fact, many cooks find that ugly produce works especially well in recipes where appearance matters less. Soups, sauces, smoothies and baked goods all benefit from fresh ingredients without requiring flawless presentation. A batch of tomato sauce, for example, is just as rich when made with irregularly shaped tomatoes as it is with uniform ones.

SMART SHOPPING AND STORAGE

Finding imperfect produce is becoming easier. Some farmers markets and grocery stores now offer discounted bins or sections dedicated to less-than-perfect items. Community supported agriculture (CSA) boxes are another reliable source, often including a mix of shapes and sizes straight from the field.

Once home, a little planning

goes a long way. Prioritize using produce with visible blemishes first, and store it properly to extend freshness. Washing, trimming and prepping items shortly after purchase can make them easier to use throughout the week.

CREATIVE IN THE KITCHEN

Cooking with ugly produce encourages flexibility and creativity. Overripe bananas

become quick breads, soft berries turn into compotes and extra vegetables can be roasted or blended into hearty soups. Even scraps such as carrot tops or herb stems can be repurposed into stocks or pesto.

Preserving is another option. Freezing, canning or pickling allows cooks to extend the life of produce that might otherwise go unused. It’s a practical way to capture seasonal flavors while reducing waste.