

Carpe Lycopersicon Esculentum (Seize the Tomato): One food shopper finds “tasting good” usually means organic

by Colin Ilsley

I used to drive to the grocery store. It was awesome. These were the halcyon grocery shopping days before I had to consider whether the refreshing nature of a 2-liter of sparkling water literally outweighed itself. (The answer is no, just get it at the bodega around the corner on a separate trip.)

Now.

Here in Brooklyn such “conveniences” as cars are reserved for the affluent and the insane. That means that one either has to go into Sherpa mode or delivery mode.

I personally can't go into delivery mode (I'm talking grocery delivery here) for a couple of reasons. One- I like food. I like touching it and smelling it and picking out the perfect piece. This means not much packaged goods. And two- my fridge is super small. Not European small, but pretty small. (I don't have a freezer I have an icebox, and rest assured it sucks out loud.)

That leaves sherpa mode. For those of you who don't have Discovery Channel a sherpa is a well-used misnomer* describing the Nepalese local men employed as porters (and guides) for mountaineering expeditions in the Himalayas. I actually don't mind shopping at little stores all over the neighborhood. I've got a granny cart. It's blue. The wheel squeaks and it's a bit low for my height but it works. My neighborhood actually has a green grocer, a butcher, a pork butcher, a fishmonger, and 80,000 Italian bakeries-most of which close at 5 or 5:30. I don't know about you all but I have a tough time making it out of work by 4:30. There are also two MET Grocery Stores that smell like the community service I served at Second Harvest for part of the summer of my sophomore year (an odiferous mélange of cardboard, rotting produce, cleaning supplies, and meat.) There's an organic grocery store around the corner that might

have the world's most expensive leaf lettuce, and definitely has the standard issue Burt's Beeswax and Dr. Bronner's Soap contingent. There's a farmer's market on Saturdays. Oh and there's the Fairway that just opened up a 20 minute bus ride away in Redhook. There's been a lot of to do about this grocery store. From what I gather it's huge and actually splits its difference between organic and...conventional.

I actually saw “regular” food labeled “conventional” for the first time the other day. I began to think that they named it conventional on purpose just so they could sell more expensive organic food. Who, after all, wants to buy anything labeled conventional? Then I wondered if selling more organic food actually even meant a bigger profit for them. The truth of the matter is I have no idea.

I am, in fact, all over the board when it comes to many things food. For example I eat only organic chicken because I really think it tastes better. I also eat non-organic cereal for the same reason**. I really try to support small, independently own grocery stores but will hit up the chains when convenient. I think I might be a typical American shopper this way.

The grocery store trend seems to be that the mega chain grocery stores are starting to carry organic food. That bothers me, although I'm not sure it should. Maybe I've just gotten used to buying organic food from places that smell like bulk food. Places that have those pygmy shopping carts and dreadlocked stock boys. Then again, maybe it's good that organic food will be available to more people. Maybe organic food will become the standard for U.S grocery stores. I've heard, though, that a lot of these organic milk farms have become so big that they're actually harming the environment. Would the same become true for all organic food if it becomes the norm?

In the end I know this much. I love to eat. I love having dinner parties, shopping all day and cooking for them all night. I relish turning friends on to new food. To me there is nothing more important than breaking bread with those you love. That being said for many getting the food gets confusing and a bit overwhelming at times. People are so inundated with conflicting food information that they seem to either not deal with shopping by getting take-out, or stay within those safe boundaries of only eating what they had growing up, which is a real shame^{***}. I now tend to just follow my taste buds. If it tastes good, I buy it. This invariably means eating organic.

As far as grocery stores go I know that the lightly salted almonds from Trader Joes are delicious and a true value, it makes me feel good to buy produce from the third-generation Italian American guy in my neighborhood, and that I will never, ever, buy food from Wal-Mart, even if it is organic.

*The term 'sherpa' is used incorrectly to refer to local people, typically men, employed as porters or guides for mountaineering expeditions in the Himalayas. They are highly regarded as experts in mountaineering and their local terrain, as well as having good physical endurance and resilience to high altitude conditions. However, a sherpa is not necessarily a member of the Sherpa ethnic group. A female sherpa is known as a "sherpani".

** Note: I've tried pretty much the whole line of Kashi cereals and I really don't think they're worth the price. In fact, I'll go as far as saying their Raisin Bran tastes like cardboard. And that packaging with the big smiley faces on them? Sorry guys, but the last thing I want to see first thing in the morning is someone's toothy gob.

***Not that there's anything wrong with Mom's cooking, there's just so much out there to try. In the Andes mountains farmers grow over 200 species of potatoes, and 5,000 varieties. To the people of these mountains, different types of potatoes are as different as the meat from a pig and a chicken. They eat one kind of potato for breakfast, another for lunch, and a third for dinner. By this token you could make mom's tater casserole 200 different ways.