

WHAT IS FARM-TO-TABLE?

By Laura Fitzgerald

The term “farm-to-table” often brings to mind images of cows and chickens roaming in open fields, or of hard-working farmers in overalls carting around wooden crates of fresh vegetables. Those images are all well and good, but farm-to-table is a phrase that can mean different things to different people.

At its heart, farm-to-table means that the food you eat at your table came directly from a specific farm. This could mean directly from a farm to your home, or it could mean directly from a farm to a restaurant or grocery store, emphasizing a relationship between a farm and a restaurant owner or grocer. Farm-to-table can also refer more loosely to farmers’ markets, CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture), and other venues where people can buy food directly from growers.

The main idea behind farm-to-table is simply this: knowing where your food comes from and how it is grown is important, and helps us as consumers have more control over what we put into our bodies, as well as more control over our local economies.

More recently, the farm-to-table movement has become a political one; it can be linked to the local food movement and the organic movement due to the increasing public backlash against GMOs (genetically modified organisms) in our food supply. It has also been influenced by the public’s rising concern over food safety, food freshness, food seasonality, and small-farm economics. All three of these movements have aligned to help consumers regain control over the market quite literally.

To put it plainly, people are more concerned about where their food is coming from because they’re more concerned about their health and wellness than ever before, for a number of reasons. We want to make sure that the food we’re eating isn’t filled with unpronounceable chemicals. We want to lose a few extra pounds (or maybe a lot of extra pounds). We want to fuel our bodies with the best food possible so that we can get more out of them. We want to eat food grown locally to help support the local economy. Whatever the reason, the farm-to-table movement has provided more ways than ever for people to put the freshest food into their bellies.

You may be wondering, “How can I become part of this movement?” It’s easier than you might think. No need to get a picket sign ready (unless you’re into that sort of thing), and no need to start digging in your yard (again, unless you’re into that sort of thing; in fact, if you want to start your own farm, kudos!). Here are a few ways you can bring the farm to *your* table:

- 1. Start small.** Make a list of the fresh or frozen produce you buy every week. Then figure out what items on that list you could get at a farmer’s market or from a local butcher instead of the supermarket. Try frequenting a local grocery instead of a big-name supermarket. Small mom-and-pop type shops, though a dying breed, are more likely to have established relationships with local farms than chain supermarkets.
- 2. To the market!** Take your list of foods to a local farmers’ market and go to town! You’d be surprised at the wide variety of goods you can find—from fresh fruits and vegetables, to grains and beans, to eggs, cheeses, bread, meats and even wine from local vineyards—yum! Not sure where to find a farmers’ market? Go to www.localharvest.org/farmers-markets to search for markets in your area.

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- 3. Before you dine, look online.** Planning a night out? Do a little research on which restaurants in your area work with local farmers and butchers to be sure you’re getting the freshest food. While you’re researching restaurants...
- 4. Do your research on local farms.** While buying from local farms certainly has plenty of benefits, be sure to look into the growing and harvesting practices of area farms before you buy. You might find that the farm that’s closest to you uses harmful pesticides, while a farm a little further away uses only organic farming methods. Some farms use greenhouses to grow specific types of vegetables year round, while others only grow what will grow outside naturally (i.e. no strawberries in Maine in November!). It all depends on what you’re comfortable with, so be sure to do your research before pledging allegiance to one farm. Different farms may specialize in different types of produce, so shop around and find the best of the best! You’ll be glad you did.
- 5. Join a CSA.** CSAs are a great way to buy local, seasonal foods directly from farmers. Here are the basics: a farmer offers a certain number of “shares” to the public. Typically the shares consist of a box of vegetables or fruits, but often include things like eggs, flowers and herbs. Customers then purchase a share (aka a membership or subscription) and receive boxes of seasonal produce each week throughout the farming season. The benefits of a CSA are numerous: boost the local economy, eat ultra-fresh food, expose yourself to new foods you might not normally buy, support local farmers—the list goes on!
- 6. Make it a family affair.** A lot of local farms offer fun activities for kids (and kids at heart), like actually going out into the fields and picking fresh fruit and veggies yourself. Speaking from personal experience, there’s nothing quite like eating an apple right off the tree, and the benefits of learning about where food really comes from—farms, not supermarket freezer aisles—have stuck with me through adulthood. Let your kids see and experience for themselves the wonders of farm fresh goods.

By making a few small changes in how you purchase your food, you can really make a difference in not only your local economy, but on your health and your family’s health as well. Start bringing the farm to your table—I promise you won’t be disappointed!



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