

Thought for Food

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The High Cost of Cheap Food

Gail Southall

It seems we don't want to eat a thing these days that isn't quick, convenient, and especially, cheap. In the past few decades we've demanded so much from our food system that, income percentage-wise, we're actually paying less for our food today than we did 10 years ago. But does the price tag alone on a bag of potatoes truly reflect the total cost? What if we consider some of the intangibles, or external costs, that because they cannot be measured in dollars and cents, are simply not counted. Let's listen to the story of that bag of potatoes and see what it tells us about the high cost of cheap food.

I spoke with a local potato farmer not long ago. For every 10 pounds of potatoes he planted, cultivated, watered, fertilized, harvested, washed, weighed, packaged, then delivered to the grocery store, he received \$1.89. How can a farmer possibly make a living on that? The truth is, they can't. More and more Canadian farmers are being forced off the land, their life-giving earth being swallowed up by huge multinational agribusiness firms or going to non-farming country estate dwellers. Small farming communities have withered and died, and our ability to grow our own food weakened, all in the name of cheap food.

And to ensure a steady supply of those inexpensive eats, the handful of mega-corporations that control our food supply will take their business to whatever country can produce the most for the least. So now those potatoes that used to come from down the road may come from across a vast ocean. But how can that be cheaper? Well, a lot of the countries across that vast ocean do not have the same regulations as our country that protect the air, land and water. Nor do they have the same food safety and inspection standards, worker health and safety standards or fair living wage policies that have become integral to our way of life in Canada. Add the hidden costs associated with all of that fuel-guzzling shipping, and hmmm... the 'price' of those potatoes is starting to go up.

And what about the potatoes themselves? How are they handling intensive cultivation and long-distance travel? According to an analysis conducted by the Globe and Mail and CTV News in 2002, over the past 50 years the average spud has lost 100 per cent of its vitamin A, 57 per cent of its vitamin C and iron, and 28 per cent of its calcium. It also lost 50 per cent of its riboflavin and 18 per cent of its thiamine. Industrial farming methods and long-haul transportation are believed to be responsible for the drop in vitamins and minerals.

Economic costs, social costs, control costs, ecological costs, costs of human worth, nutritional costs... they carry no measurable monetary value, yet clearly there is a fee that we all are paying. And the simple tater is just an example; we would hear a similar story from most of our food.

The good news is, obtaining inexpensive food without the external costs is possible:

- Grow your own, and practice environmental stewardship. Grow foods that preserve and store well. Donate some to the Food Bank to give those less fortunate more nutritious options.
- Buy locally-grown from a farmer you trust. Ask about their land management style. See the Farm Fresh Guide at www.crestonfarmfresh.ca and visit the Saturday Market for sources.
- Plan ahead, team up with friends and neighbours and buy cheaper in bulk quantities.
- Take the time to preserve foods and cut down on costs during the winter months.

Next time you're in the grocery store, don't just look at the price tags. Think about the intangible

costs attached to the things you buy.

Gail Southall is Coordinator for the Creston Valley Food Action Coalition, a group of people dedicated to better feeding our community using local resources. For more information call 250-254-0254 or email cvfoodaction@gmail.com.