

THE FOOD FACTOR



Growth spurt ... Richard and Tiffany Cornish, with children Sunday (left) and Ginger, try to use local produce whenever possible. Photo: Rodger Cummins

Extra miles all add up

Those nuts or oranges might have travelled a long way to get to you, writes **Sue White**.

■ CLOSE TO HOME

When you next sit down for breakfast, you've probably only travelled from the bedroom to the kitchen. But chances are your meal has racked up substantial food miles en route to your table.

The term "food miles" refers to the distance involved in transporting food from source to plate. "It's an intriguing concept that has been a little misunderstood," says Christopher Zinn from Choice. "Food miles are very useful in generating discussion because it's a simple concept but it's only part of the picture."

A long journey

Calculating the full environmental impact of our food is complex. We need to consider the energy in the packaging (as a general rule: less is best); how it was transported (planes emit the most emissions, followed by trucks, then ships); and the energy that went into growing it.

"Food miles should be seen as just one indicator of the total environmental impact of food production," Zinn says.

Loads of trouble

Although only part of the environmental cost of food, it can be startling to discover where our food comes from. Researchers at Melbourne's sustainability centre, CERES Community Environment Park, recently conducted one of Australia's first studies on food miles. They found that a typical food basket

EATING LOCAL

Food writer Richard Cornish, his wife Tiffany Treloar and daughters Sunday and Ginger (pictured above) tried for a week to eat only food produced within 160 kilometres of their home outside Melbourne. The aim was to reduce the amount of transport needed to bring food from afar, to reduce the amount of packaging needed and also to support local growers. Living outside a major city helped – Cornish found little farms producing flour, chickens, milk and butter, honey and all sorts of vegetables. Locally-raised lamb and beef were also available and the family ate fish caught in Port Phillip Bay. They grew some of their own food, such as lemons, olives, garlic and parsley. But some things proved tricky: coffee, beer, salt and spices were impossible to source nearby.

containing 29 items, ranging from sausages and eggs to chocolate and chips, has travelled at least 40,072 kilometres – almost twice the Earth's circumference – to reach a house in Melbourne.

The emissions from transporting loads of the items in the basket "are over 11,000 tonnes, equivalent to 2832 cars driving for one year," CERES education manager Judy Glick says.

Near and far

To reduce food miles, "locavores" try sourcing most of their food locally, usually aiming for a distance of less than 160 kilometres from home. Known as the "100-mile diet", the practice was popularised by two Canadians who spent a year trying to only eat foods produced within 100 miles of their home. Determining

your own 100-mile limits soon shows the challenges of eating locally (try it at 100milediet.org).

"You can't deny in a city like Sydney it's hard to source food locally," says Alison Drover from Slow Food Sydney. "Food co-operatives and farmers' markets are great places to start. Or you can grow things like herbs and tomatoes in your garden."

In season

Australia has a diverse range of climates but most of us are used to eating the food we want year-round.

"We want access to fruit and vegetables all year and technology can deliver that," Zinn says.

Most foodies recommend asking questions to discover where your food is grown and finding out when food is in season near you. Slow Food Sydney is currently putting together a NSW seasonal food calendar to help people do this.

Freezing food can be a good option, letting you buy seasonal produce at its best (and cheapest). "We've found frozen vegetables can have higher vitamin levels than fresh equivalent," Zinn says. "If they're frozen close to the paddock that can mean better nutritional levels than sitting in your fridge for a while fresh."

Drover agrees: "In Europe they preserve fruits in season, while they are fresh and affordable, and freeze them to enjoy all year. This is great to do with fruits like mangoes."

Once it's reached you, don't waste it. According to the Australia Institute, Australians waste more than \$5 billion worth of food a year, so eat up and make sure all those miles were worthwhile.

