



BALLE BEAT

Ann Bartz

I'LL BET you've shopped at a Whole Foods market — with 181 stores in the U.S., U.K. and Canada — they're everywhere. The one near me is where I go for meat. At Whole Foods, I never worry about how or where the beef, lamb, and pork were raised, and they always have some cut of free-range poultry on sale. My housemate works as a checker there. She was glad to get a job with a company known for treating its workers well.

Now that I've read up on Whole Foods, I'm really glad I shop there. They have led the mainstreaming of organic food in this country for a long time, and recently started using their clout to press for the humane treatment of farm animals. Having upped the demand for organic food so decidedly, they take credit for Wal-Mart's decision to start stocking organics. They take pride in giving a lot of money to the community, and they've worked hard to become the sort of business that has the extra funds to contribute substantially to local programs such as food banks, public radio, and other nonprofits.

But what if I could walk to a New Seasons Market (instead of having to jump on a plane to Oregon)? How would I choose?

I'll never know exactly, because New Seasons is so rooted in Portland. Though the company is adding three new stores for a total of nine (eventually to be ten), it has no plans to expand beyond the city's suburbs. Which is

WHERE FOOD DOLLARS DO THE MOST GOOD

great for Portland — and for the Northwest. The stores emphasize “home-grown” food — that is grown, caught, or processed in the Northwest, including Northern California. More than a quarter of the items in each store sit above yellow shelf tags that mark them as locally grown. The milk is so local it's never ultrapasteurized. The produce is a day or two off the farm. Farmers can deliver directly to the stores without going through a central distribution warehouse.

SUPPORT FROM NEW SEASONS

New Seasons is a leading member of the Portland BALLE network, but we'll never ask Whole Foods to join: Whole Foods will never be able to support local farmers and local economies the way New Seasons does. Whole Foods has an idea of what it means: “Think local” tops the list of ways to protect the environment printed on their brown paper shopping bags. My housemate says they talk at employee meetings about “doing the best they can” to support local food producers. But all those stores necessitate high-volume purchases from high-output farmers that go through central warehouses (meaning extra travel and storage time along with more carbon dioxide in the air). Small farmers can't keep up with their orders, so Whole Foods tends to buy from larger, more industrialized organic operations.

New Seasons, meanwhile, is single-handedly keeping some Oregon ranchers in business. It buys from smaller farms, which are more likely to use sustainable agricultural practices. It's building Oregon's regional food economy, ensuring a livelihood for local farms and sustaining Oregon's food supply lines.

Whole Foods is doing things that no small local group of stores would ever have the means to do: They support organic farming and sustainable agriculture on a global basis, which goes a long way in protecting the environment and the health and safety of farm workers.

When you shop there, you help Whole Foods make a big statement about humane treatment of farm animals, better conditions for farm and grocery store workers, organic food and sustainable agriculture. But they can't help but leave out a crucial piece of the sustainability puzzle — commitment to place.

Because New Seasons is locally owned, profits stay in Portland and recirculate as much as possible around Oregon. The lawyer, accountant, web designer, and PR and advertising firms for New Seasons are all in Portland. In contrast, profits from my Berkeley Whole Foods land first in Austin, Texas, and then go out to stockholders around the world. Whole Foods is, in effect, absentee-owned.

New Seasons stocks locally made products from small producers such as Pirate's Choice Kombucha. While Whole Foods (known widely by its joke nickname “Whole Paycheck”) stocks mainly organic and specialty products, which can be pricey, New Seasons stocks regular products as well, attracting more than 90 percent of residents in the vicinity of its 33rd and Killingsworth store — a neighborhood with an average income below that of the Portland average (survey by Portland State University sociology department). New Seasons supports other local businesses, such as the local coffee shop they use to cater employee events.

It's a great question to ask, as an Indymedia blogger on New Seasons did, “Where will my dollars do the most good?” Locally or globally? I actually live equidistant from Whole Foods and a great locally owned supermarket, the Berkeley Bowl. I shop at both. □

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