

# Miles to Go Before You Eat

## Why it pays to buy locally grown food

The energy-efficient refrigerator is almost empty, so you gather up the canvas shopping bags and ride your bike to the grocery store. OK, let's see, what have they got? The pineapples look delicious, you always need bananas, and the kids love those green grapes—and you can get them all organically grown. You pat yourself on the back and cycle home with a contented smile on your face.

You're doing good, but you could do better. As consumers increasingly reach for environmentally friendly alternatives, the market is taking notice. If people are willing to pay a few cents more for organic bananas, for example, more of them will appear on the shelves—in fact, sales of organic bananas are growing by 20 percent a year.

But why stop there? The next frontier for discriminating eaters in a rapidly warming world may well be “food miles,” the dis-

tance products must travel to get to your market. Recently, Richard Pirog and others at the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University have been studying food transport, fuel usage, and the resultant greenhouse-gas emissions. In one study, they worked out how much energy it takes to transport various items from their points of origin to Des Moines, Iowa. (See [sierraclub.org/sierra/200605/decoder.asp](http://sierraclub.org/sierra/200605/decoder.asp) for details.) The sometimes surprising results are pictured below (calculations are based on the weight of the produce shown).

The easiest way to cut down on your food's gas bill is to eat locally grown fare. Pirog is also looking into the feasibility of food labels indicating point of origin and miles traveled. Meanwhile, it wouldn't hurt to ask how far (and fast) those strawberries had to travel to get to your table in January. Remember to take into account your own location: As they say, your mileage may vary.



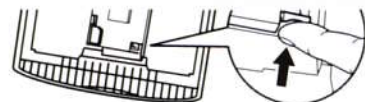
**PINEAPPLE (COSTA RICA)** 0.3 gallons of gasoline

Pineapples are a fuel splurge, but those from Costa Rica are relatively less so than their Hawaiian counterparts—because half their journey is by sea, an extremely efficient mode of



**PINEAPPLE (HAWAII)** 2.8 gallons of gasoline

transportation. Hawaiian pineapples, however, demonstrate that the most *inefficient* way to get produce from point A to point B is by air.





**APPLE (IOWA)** 1.7 teaspoons of gasoline

Apples grown in Iowa travel only 60 miles in small trucks to market in Des Moines. Those grown in Washington State—the



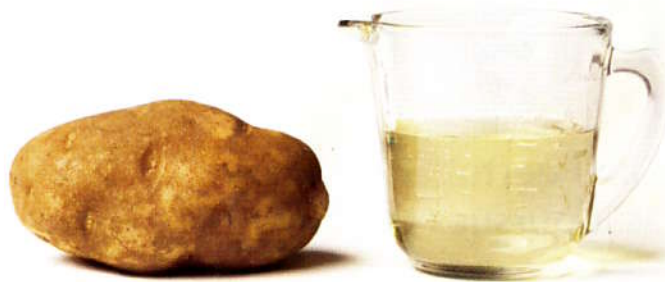
**APPLE (WASHINGTON)** 1 cup of gasoline

source of more than half of all fresh eating apples in the United States—are shipped 1,722 miles in semitrailers.



**POTATO (NORTH DAKOTA)** 0.6 cups of gasoline

Long-distance food transportation encourages unhealthy monocultures—the planting of vast areas with a single crop. Idaho, for example, produces a third of the nation's potatoes, mostly



**POTATO (IDAHO)** 1.3 cups of gasoline

in the form of french fries. Were Idahoans to consume the state's potato crop themselves, notes the U.S. Department of Agriculture, they would have to eat 63 spuds a day.



**GRAPES (CALIFORNIA)** 1.9 cups of gasoline

There's more to judging the environmental impact of transporting food than knowing the absolute distance. Even though California is more than 5,000 miles closer to Iowa than Chile is, the energy savings of its grapes are only marginal. Why? Because Chilean grapes are sent to the Golden State by sea. From there



**GRAPES (CHILE)** 2.2 cups of gasoline

they continue on to Iowa by truck, the same as Californian grapes. (This effect is obviously dependent on the endpoint: The closer the destination is to the port in Los Angeles, the greater the relative energy cost of the Chilean grapes.) But good news! Grape production in Iowa is increasing fast.

