

Opinion

Shannon Traphagen: Farmers' markets offer a chance to eat healthy

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As a frequent customer of my local farmers' market, I am constantly amazed at the dedication and passion of our Western New York farmers. The special relationship between customer and farmer may be difficult to understand for those who frequent grocery stores. Trust me, I am and always will be a devoted fan of Wegmans. But during the summer, I find myself frequenting farmers' markets more often, for several reasons.

For me, supporting my local farmers' market not only financially benefits the farmers, but my community as well. It's akin to my own personal mission statement: "Contribute in some small way to the support and growth of local farms and other small businesses trying to survive."

But my mission statement contains another, slightly less noble reason: personal health. Buying from local farmers allows me to know exactly where my produce is coming from. For those like me with digestive sensitivities, obtaining certain foods from farmers' markets is a great way to control what goes in our bodies. Suffering from food allergies and lactose sensitivity since my teen years, I have learned the hard way what can happen when I ignore what my body is trying to tell me.

Through the years, I have learned to balance my cravings with healthy eating. I've also learned a great deal about ingredients that can cause or make my condition worse. As a food writer, I stumbled across some research on the effects of ingredients like carrageenan. What I learned was illuminating. Not only is carrageenan used to de-ice planes, when broken down to its most basic elements, it can be used as a "coagulant" for many foods. The research also found that it may be linked to lactose intolerance.

With my mission statement in hand, I set out to pay closer attention to those "healthy" products carrying this ingredient. I also decided to look at how other chemical products used in or on foods can cause digestive sensitivities. What I found was staggering; anything from chronic sinusitis to gluten allergies can be "casually" linked to various chemicals used in or on food products.

Along my travels, I have met others who have disclosed their own struggles with eating healthy and how hard it can be to monitor what "exactly" is going into their body. For those with gluten sensitivities, food shopping can be especially hard. Many breads, cakes, cookies, oats and even cosmetics contain wheat flour or wheat filler and additives, so the fun, creativity and freedom of shopping is literally ripped away from you.

By shopping at local farmers' markets, the feeling of freedom is restored. It gives me the opportunity to speak with farmers, ask about the produce, how it's grown and what chemicals, if any, are used. It also gives me a chance to learn a little bit about them.

These farmers truly love what they do, and they take pride in growing quality products that consumers like. Plus, many of them are taking to heart the vulnerable nature that is digestive sensitivity, offering gluten-free produce that uses ancient grains such as amaranth, millet or quinoa. The next time you're out and about on a sunny Saturday morning, stop by your local farmers' market. It's a small contribution to your community, but a big contribution to your health.