

On Language - Locavorism - NYTimes.com

By WILLIAM
SAFIRE



LIKE MANY OF US (a smarmily folksy phrase used by demagogues), at breakfast I breeze through the editorial pages of several newspapers and then focus on the newsworthy information on the packages of cereal, milk and juice.

Headline type on some orange-juice cartons these days smites the consumer with the words “Home Squeezed.” That product claim is puzzling; certainly the juice wasn’t squeezed in my home. Could it be that instead of being squeezed in some vast, impersonal factory, thousands of miles away, the juice was lovingly squeezed by hand in the nearby individual homes of thousands of orange pickers?

I checked with the product manager at Florida’s Natural of Lake Wales, Fla., a division of Citrus World Inc., to pose the question: In whose “home” had my orange juice been squeezed? As a professional alarmist, I had visions of a farmhand, half a fruit in his fist, grinding away at a green glass juicer in a broken-down shack on the edge of alligator-infested Everglades.

“When you squeeze oranges at home,” replied Nikki Black, the friendly manager at Florida’s Natural fresh and unfrozen headquarters, “you get more pulp. We use ‘home squeezed’ to differentiate between our pulpy product and our nonpulp juice.”

I get it; the meaning of home-squeezed is not “squeezed at home,” as a lexicographer might assume from the inexplicably unhyphenated compound adjective; instead, the selling phrase means only “squeezed as if you had squeezed it in your own home.” Only the consumer-cognoscenti are expected to know that, as you and I now do.

The reason for beating that juicy subject to a pulp today is to illustrate the hunger of the food industry to get on the “local is best” bandwagon. No longer is the exotic product of a foreign land the object of the gourmand’s desire; indeed, arugula — the pungent, purple-veined, edible leaves of the Mediterranean annual herb of the mustard family — has become a symbol of culinary elitism, replacing the brie and Chablis of yesteryear. (When Barack Obama asked an Iowa crowd, “Anybody gone into Whole Foods lately and see what they charge for arugula?” The Washington Post compared that with Michael Dukakis’s suggestion in his 1988 campaign that Midwest farmers diversify by raising endive; Obama has been munching good ol’ local lettuce ever since.)

As the economy began its downturn last year and imports became more expensive, localness challenged cleanliness as being next to godliness in the food dodge. The lust for the local is even competing with organic — food grown or raised without a chemical assist but often transported around the world — and Wal-Mart, having joined the organic parade two years ago, is now touting its purchases of produce grown in-state near its supercenters.

Naturally, a name was needed to describe the new anti-exoticism. The word locavore was coined in 2005 on the

analogy of carnivore, “flesh eater” (which most dictionaries prefer to “meat eater” because the Latin caro is translated as “flesh,” but nobody eats fattening flesh these days), and herbivore, “plant eater.” The suffix -vorous means “eating, devouring” and spawned the adjective “voracious.”

The coiner is Jessica Prentice, who had left a job at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market in San Francisco to write a book about “food and the hunger for connection.” While working on that, she decided to urge people in the Bay Area to eat [local food](#) for a month; Olivia Wu, a food writer for The Chronicle, challenged her to come up with a name for what Prentice had been calling the nearby foodshed, I presume on the analogy of “watershed.” She promptly melded the Latin locus, “place,” with vorare, “swallow, devour” and (gulp!) there was locavore, the noun that became the Oxford American Dictionary’s word of the year for 2007.

“The Rise of the ‘Locavore’ ” was a Business Week headline this spring about the spread of farmers’ markets: “Consumers increasingly are seeking out the flavors of fresh, vine-ripened foods grown on local farms rather than those trucked to supermarkets from faraway lands.” Name of the trend in a recent review in The New York Sun, which lamentably set last month: locavorism.

The trend was confirmed in a macabre New Yorker cartoon last month by Bruce Eric Kaplan. A man-eating shark, munching on a human arm, says to another shark, “I’m trying to eat more locals.”

Supernutraceuticals

“It’s a curd; it’s a grain; it’s superfood!”

As a word, superfood was introduced in 1915 in The Daily Gleaner, of Kingston, Jamaica, as a description of wine. After nearly a century in desuetude, it popped up again to denote a type of offbeat food loaded with vitamins and minerals, an antidote to Frankenfoods, those genetically modified meats and plants named after the misunderstood monster’s creator. Elite lips were smacked over pomegranate, a favorite fruit in biblical times, as well as a Brazilian berry named açai (pronounced ah-sigh-EE), chock full of beneficial fatty acids, amino acids and fiber. Sprinkled over a whole-grain bowl of amaranth, millet, quinoa and teff, the nourishing berry may soon be produced in your local rainforest.

But then the contrarian anti-antioxidant crowd had its say, and superfood is having to compete with nutraceuticals. This word, coined in 1990 by the foundationik Stephen DeFelice, is a portmanteau of nutrition and pharmaceutical, and also goes by the names of functional food and pharmafood. It began with garlic pills and cranberry capsules and has now moved up to other natural additives like taste-free anchovy paste in orange juice (home-squeezed, of course, at the fish market), powdered beets in apple butter and green-tea extract in ginger ale.

In the additive-happy land of Big Nutra, food is not truly edible until it is fortified or enriched, preferably by community pharmacists and neighborhood nutritionists. To paraphrase the cartoonist Jules Feiffer, I’m still hungry, but I have a great vocabulary.