

The local shop ... a personal perspective

Suzanne Farmer writes: My challenge, should I choose to take it, is to do all of the household shopping for one month without venturing into a supermarket....

Supermarkets, depending on your point of view, can be either the bane of society or the saviour of the modern world. British people adore them and have come to rely on them; they are a place where we can purchase just about everything our hearts desire, quickly and easily. We simply love them. Or do we? It seems that our love affair with the supermarket may be coming to an end. Strong objections to the way the big supermarket chains operate have greatly increased in recent times and a growing band of people now view the big supermarket chains with the same disdain previously reserved for those who make the school run in petrol-guzzling 4x4s. But why have supermarkets suddenly fallen out of favour with the great British public?

Admittedly the fact that the supermarket chains are making such huge profits hasn't gone down well, and they are viewed as being greedy and exploitive by many, but the reasons that they are falling so far out of favour appear to lie with the "3 Es" - environment, ethics and economics.

It has long been recognised that the supermarket is rarely a friend of the environment; it frequently imports food from all over the world instead of supporting local or even British product suppliers. It panders to, some might even say drives, modern society's so-called "need" to buy things completely out of season. Do we really, absolutely, have to buy strawberries in the middle of winter? Even when products are naturally in season in the UK, the supermarkets often still import goods from elsewhere, claiming that they can source them cheaper from overseas, meaning that supposedly fresh produce ends up with an astonishing amount of food miles under its belt. From an environmental stance there is also the argument that surely if we want to buy organic fruit and vegetables we are not just doing so on health grounds, but because the products haven't contributed to the pollution of land and atmosphere. But if that organic produce has come from Spain, or even further afield, then it stands to reason that the product, firstly, won't be as fresh. Secondly, it will have damaged the environment anyway, by creating pollution from its long journey by air, sea and road to the supermarket shelves. Shouldn't we be able to buy British organic produce where at all practical and feasible in British stores?

Stories of unethical behaviour towards product suppliers, especially those overseas, haven't made the supermarkets any friends either. Many British farmers are giving up on the farming life for good. They say that they cannot make a living anymore, largely due to the poor prices they are paid for their products, thanks to supermarkets continuing to relentlessly push prices down in order to increase their own profits. As a consumer, I have to admit that supermarkets are usually the cheapest place to shop but, looking at



the bigger picture, what is the real cost of this cheap food in terms of the future of food production, farming and the general economy in this country?

Which brings us onto the third "E", the economics. It seems that the big boys are stopping at nothing short of dominance of the UK retail world. The blame for the demise of the local butchers, bakers, delicatessens and much more has been laid at the door of the supermarkets. Whilst the big chains thrive, other small businesses have literally died. When you start to think about shopping in your area without utilising a supermarket you begin to realise how few alternatives there actually are out there.

So, can we survive without supermarkets? And what are the realistic alternatives? I decided to take the challenge and not darken the door of a supermarket for one month in an attempt to see what life beyond the supermarket giants is really like...

WEEK ONE

I've already discovered that alternative ways of shopping take careful planning, forward thinking and that precious commodity that we cannot buy and many of us have little of, time. I've worked out that in order to source the majority of the items that are usually included in my weekly shop, I will need to visit a local organic farm shop, a fruit and vegetable market and a health food store. Fortunately for me, they are close to work (except for the farm shop) but if they weren't, then doing all of this extra running around could well prove tricky. There's no 24 hour, seven days a week culture with these stores and markets, so if you're trying to fit everything in around work, children, family etc. then you may already be missing the 'open all hours' convenience of the supermarket.

At this point I must confess that my family are not the best at planning ahead, so along with the usual 'big' shop there are inevitably a couple of other visits to the store for those unforeseen, 'just fancy' moments when you want something that's not in the cupboard. How will we cope if we cannot make the ten-minute trip to the supermarket?

I consider myself to be a keen recycler and user of natural, environmentally friendly products wherever possible and affordable. I rebel against blatant commercialism where feasible and practical. But I'm already beginning to dread the prospect of having to traipse around several shops and markets to get the food and items that I normally chuck into the trolley in a crazed half-hour dash around the supermarket on a Thursday evening.

I visit the fruit and vegetable market and eye up the quality and prices of the products. Wow, a melon for 40p, aren't they three times that in a supermarket? But there is a downside. Yes, markets are colourful places full of character, but they're usually full of crowds too, and jostling to get served and shouting your order above the noise and bustle can be a strange experience when you're used to the anonymity of the supermarket. Strangely enough, another confusing aspect of market shopping is working out what weight of a product you want to buy, from a few 100 grams to a



that I'm supporting local food producers in general and making my own small protest against supermarket commercialism at the

kilo. We don't really think about this when we're in the supermarket, do we? Either items are pre-packaged for us or we just chuck a few onions or apples into a bag. I learn that I need to get to grips with quantity and how it equates to weight to be super efficient on the fruit and vegetable stalls.

Next, I venture to the health food store

and stock up before stashing everything in the fridge and kitchen at work; of course I must remember to collect them all again at the end of the day and get them home...

The weekend dawns and my Saturday morning task is to head to the organic farm shop. This actually turns out to be a relatively pleasant experience and it feels good to be selecting fresh produce, chatting with the farm shop owners and helping to support a local business. Admittedly, it is much nicer than trawling around a supermarket but again there can be a downside: my nearest organic farm shop specialises in meat. If you're lucky enough to find a good farm shop, organic or otherwise, that just does the fruit and vegetables then great, but if not, can you face shopping in a place that is, shall we say, very obviously a farm? Food for thought indeed.

At the end of the first week we are doing OK, although it seems some items are completely impossible to source outside of a supermarket, certainly without a bit of serious detective work and a long drive or even resorting to the internet and mail order. Being a vegetarian or vegan seems to make things even more of a challenge.

WEEK TWO

Better prepared this week, I head for the market at the end of the working day on my way to the bus, instead of at lunchtime. This not only saves having to carry everything back and forth but many of the stalls are closing up and there are some great bargains to be had. My Saturday morning trip to the farm shop is already seen as a more of a pleasure than a chore, it's certainly preferable to fighting the aggressive, always-in-a-rush people, armed with non-steering shopping trolleys that are doing battle back at the supermarket. As a veggie I'm still distinctly uneasy about some of the farming realities but as I fill my basket with truly fresh goodies, I'm pleased to feel

the same time. As an added bonus, the food also tastes much better and has more flavour than most supermarket produce, which has often built up far too many food miles travelling around the globe and spent considerable time in refrigerated storage.

WEEK THREE

There's a once-a-month Farmer's Market alongside the regular market in town today, and I head down at lunchtime to see what's available. There's a good selection of organics, including jams and breads, and it's nice to chat to the people actually involved in the production of these foods. It's one of the requirements of registered bona fide farmer's markets that the people manning the stalls must actually be involved in the making or growing of the foods themselves, and they must come from within a certain designated radius so that foods are really local.

WEEK FOUR

Well, nearing the end of the self-imposed supermarket ban and I'm feeling fairly positive about things. Yes, I admit that there are times when I would love to take the easy way out and just head to a supermarket and get everything all in one go. However, personally I think that the extra time and effort required to support local markets, farm shops and independent stores is worth it and it does make you feel that you are making your own small protest against the supermarkets and their impact on the food chain, the environment and the economy.

Will I continue to shop this way? Well, much as we might resent giving our hard earned cash to the supermarket chains instead of being able to support local businesses, it seems that most people, living the modern rush-around lifestyle, have little choice. In most areas of the country it's tricky (if not nigh on impossible) to get everything you need to run house and home and keep body and soul together without having to go to a supermarket. Maybe it's just one of those modern facts of life that we aren't that keen on but simply cannot avoid or do much about, like the price of petrol, the cost of buying a home and having minimal 'quality time' for ourselves and family. Well, in the end, I've gone for a bit of a compromise. I do a monthly shop at the supermarket for those hard-to-find-elsewhere items and a weekly shop for fresh produce at the farm shop, topped up with regular visits to the fruit and vegetable market, the farmers market and the health food store. Boycotting the supermarket can be difficult and, it seems to me, takes considerable planning, lots more time and just slightly more money. At the end of the day it's down to individuals to decide how strongly they feel on this issue and whether or not they think that it's all worth the effort.

www.farmersmarkets.net • www.soilassociation.org
www.foodlinks.uk.org • www.organicfood.co.uk