

## SUSTAINBLE LIVING GUIDE: 57. EIGHT FOOD RULES FROM MY 10-MILE DIET<sup>1</sup>

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When Tricia Beckner asked me to eat only what she can produce on her CSA farm-ette for a month, just to see what happens, I was game. We widened the circle a little to include food produced 10 miles from my home on Whidbey Island, with exceptions made for 4 essentials: oil, salt (+5 other spices), caffeine, and limes. I'm noticing that the heightened awareness of savory and sweet flavor that came with being on a 10-mile diet is fading as I expand my circle of food to include nuts and cheeses and things that come in jars with labels. I'm inclined to develop some "food rules" to remind me of the clarity that came through the experiment.

I'm not alone in generating food rules. Michael Pollan's short set in his wonderful book, *In Defense of Food*, is: (1) eat food; (2) mostly plants; and (3) not too much. Another friend's simple rule: I don't eat anything with eyes. I mentioned before a diet book that recommended: (1) eat when you are hungry; (2) stop when you're full; (3) eat what your body wants; and (4) don't eat standing up. I've watched a clerk in a store I frequent melt away. Her dieting rules: (1) no sugar; (2) no eating after 6 pm; and (3) lots of water.

Vegans have rules. Vegetarians have rules. Health nuts have rules. And locavores have rules. Here are my 10-mile derived truths, which do have rules associated with them—rules that I will surely break, but that will be there for me from this day forward to re-orient.

**1** All food comes from somewhere. I want to find out where so that I can in some way thank those that feed me, reward good practices, and protect the livelihoods of small to mid-sized farmers. This could be a daunting but fascinating task. Eating local solves that issue, so...

- **Rule:** I will purchase as much as possible direct from the producer.

**2** Food is sacred. Producing it. Cooking it. Eating it so that your body may be nourished. Death as an animal or vegetable and rebirth as us, living one more day. Our own death, if we don't rest and rot forever in stainless steel boxes, feeds life. This doesn't imply we must slather food with unctuous sanctity, but that we can make a good faith effort to honor the life sacrificed that we may eat. In the community where I lived for 35 years, we said grace before every meal. Rub dub, thanks for the grub. Bless this food to our use and our lives to your service. Thank you. Yay God. I will savor, say grace, and eat slowly and with others as often as possible in my solo, willful, and busy life.

The pausing and holding hands bound us together at the end of busy dispersed days, slowed us down to the speed of savoring, honored the cooks, and began the happy ritual of sharing our days as we shared our food. Food is social. It reminds us that we live in community—of people and food and the living world.

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- **Rule:** I will savor, say grace, and eat slowly and with others as often as possible in my solo, willful, and busy life. I will cook for others as much as possible. From scratch.

3 I am my food system, not separate from it picking and choosing but part of it, giving and receiving. This is a shift from seeing food as an automat, where we select this over that. Once you see yourself as woven into a food system, not just a shopper in a market where the system is hidden from view, it transforms more than what goes into your mouth. Apart from all the other learnings—the threshing wheat with an egg beater, the economics of paying my neighbors for food they raised—there is this startling shift of awareness that feeds my soul as well as my body.

- **Rule:** I will allow my life as an eater to make me aware of the web of life that supports me, and all of us. I can use a phrase as simple as "food system" to remember.

4 Food is political, there's no way around it. From raw milk being illegal to politically distorted feedback systems that make packaged food cheaper than real food, from school lunches of pizza and purple milk to the ever growing number of hungry people in our midst.

- **Rule:** I will inform myself about the regulations, laws, and customs that give us both obesity and starvation. I will vote about it. I will write about it. I will donate.

5 Food is complex. The way we live is shaped around the food we eat—even when eating is done in cars or cities far from its source. The spread of the human species comes from our mastery of food production. Civilization itself has marched across the face of the Earth—as Bonaparte said of armies—on its stomach. Feeding. Occupying now almost all niches where energy (food) is available for the picking or planting.

Agriculture, as we all know from our history and geography lessons, permitted human settlements, which permitted stratification of societies, money, specialization, slavery—you name it, taming grains and animals gave it to you. The intoxicating aroma and effect of spices and drugs connected the known world, Asia to Europe to Africa, from millenia before the Common Era. In our increasingly consolidated food industry, how can you find out where your food is coming from? Breakthroughs in food technologies—selective breeding, the Green Revolution, genetic modification, industrial agriculture, even the Farm Bill—feed the problems of starvation at the same time that they solve them.

Food is complex because of this history and its unintended consequences. The food problem is also the population problem, and if you want a hot potato try talking about that! I am dedicated to the work of learning to live well together within the means of the Earth. No amount of “Eat your peas, think of the starving children in China/Korea/Bangladesh/Pakistan/Africa” can solve our problems of nourishment and distribution. They are systemic. Hunger, I fear, is going to creep into lives that thought they were secure. And when we are hungry we are cranky. I don't know if I will live to see the consequences of our choices in my one short lifetime.

- **Rule:** I can nudge the system in the right direction with my choices, and I intend to. I will support local sustainable agriculture everywhere. I will work towards the ideal John Robbins talks about: “May all be fed.”

- 6 Food is highly emotionally charged. People feel pride and shame, fear and longing around weight, size, diet du jour, longevity, inability to feed the family, diet-related illness. And I am people. I am a lifelong dieter—and even if I were thin as a rail I'd still somehow have an eating disorder since I look at food as a threat or reward, as comfort or sport, as right and wrong—and myself as good or bad depending on which system I'm beating myself up with now.
- **Rule:** I will ground myself in the presence of judgment—my judgment of myself and others; others' judgment of me—and just love the one I'm with. We are all such marvelous day-glo beings, full of color and life.
- 7 Food is great. Tasty, tangy, creamy, yummy, oily, colorful, salty, biting, sweet, juicy, spicy, crunchy, crisp, meaty, fishy, slithery, chewy, nutty, hot, refreshing, subtle. Lord strike me dumb (or dumber) if I don't fully savor every bite of that miracle called food.
- **Rule:** I will enjoy the sensual, delicious act of eating.
- 8 Food is fun. It's always there to select and cook and eat, to think about, to learn about, to write about and especially to enjoy. It shouldn't be stuck between "more important things," like a gas station and wherever we're headed next. My agent thinks this endless stream of words that has poured out of me in this last month may be a book. 10-mile eating isn't a new food system, but it does open a new set of imperatives. For myself, I have stumbled into a new relationship with food. I can offer others this way of engaging with food—which may result in more justice, health, sustainability, and fun. What do you think?
- **Rule:** Continue to write about, think about, research, advocate for—and eat—food. Bon Appetit.