

## MY TEN-MILE DIET...IN A GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEM<sup>1</sup>

Vicki Robin©

For 30+ years I've been running experiments in conscious, frugal, creative, sustainable, self-sufficient living, so 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. As you'll see, we've 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 lemons (until I can find local apple cider vinegar).

This morning, while making my now habitual (how quickly habits can change) breakfast of eggs from my neighbor Tricia, onions, tomatoes, and zukes from my backyard garden, I heard a story on *Democracy Now* about the food riots in Mozambique. Wheat prices soared due to crashing supplies, and people could no longer cope. Thirteen people died when police apparently ran out of rubber bullets and started using real ones. I listen to *Democracy Now* most days. I like knowing the back stories to the NPR news, the political and social injustices that lead to world events. But I don't take it personally except to the extent I try to live a moral life and do work to make the world a tad better.

Today, though, I heard this story through the lens of the 10-mile diet. It's about the vulnerability of the global food system in an era of shrinking resources, economic downturn, and climate "events." Aware of the effect that weaning myself from dependency on that system has on my own food security, I dug in to the story of the riots. Local eating is not meant to simply pull up the drawbridge and take care of me and mine.

Here's the chain of cause and effect that Raj Patel traced in his interview today with Amy Goodman. Russia's wheat crop burned (hot dry weather, failing fire fighting infrastructure) and Putin declared that Russia would cease to export wheat. In the Guardian Patel wrote:

*"Wheat prices have soared on global markets over the summer in large part because Russia, the world's third largest exporter, has suffered catastrophic fires in its main production areas. These blazes, in turn, find their origin both in poor firefighting infrastructure and Russia's worst heatwave in over a century. On Thursday, Vladimir Putin extended an export ban in response to a new wave of wildfires in its grain belt, sending further signals to the markets that Russian wheat wouldn't be available outside the country. With Mozambique importing over 60% of the wheat its people needs, the country has been held hostage by international markets."*

Indeed, climate disruptions, poor political choices halfway around the world, and a global, rather than regional, food system can remove crucial building block of our diets in a day. There is no wheat to speak of in my 10 miles. A few home growers are experimenting with rows (not fields) of grain. Twenty miles north on Ebey's Prairie, our local Iowa, some growers for local markets and restaurants are growing grains, but I don't know of any large-scale production happening on the island, much less west of the Cascades. The Palouse region in eastern Washington is where the real fields are. On a regional diet I could have wheat and oats, yes, but still no rice.

---

<sup>1</sup> Yes! Bologs, September 10, 2010

Going without grain has been hard when I want crunch, flavor, bulk, and sticking-in-my-stomach experiences. It's hard because of daily habits. Before this diet I had converted to a breakfast of oatmeal, oat bran, flax, molasses, and prunes because the doc said my cholesterol (over 250) is too high, and I don't want to take statins. Now that strategy is out of reach and instead I'm eating cholesterol-rich milk, eggs and meat. (Part of my deal with Tricia was to measure my vitals before and after the diet, to observe change. I'm curious what will happen, but I can report that my ankles are no longer swollen and my energy is darn perky.)

What is happening in Mozambique—and, heartbreakingly, in so many other places in the world—would not happen were we all on at least a regional diet. In my community, if we were all to commit to 100-mile diets, some local farmers would become local grain suppliers. And we probably wouldn't stuff ourselves with grain to solve non-food problems (like needing love or dealing with stress).

So my hyper-local eating links me viscerally—literally—to the food security in my region and morally to food issues globally. Local eating is not meant to simply pull up the drawbridge and take care of me and mine. It is ultimately political. We are going to have to transform our food systems everywhere in the future, getting all of us off unnecessary dependencies that can lead to tragedies and starvation as in Mozambique. We'll still have our "exotics"—the food we can't grow and will always want, like oil, salt, caffeine, citrus, avocados, chocolate—but these will be produced by local growers elsewhere and our purchases will support them, not mega-producers. We'll still have trade, but not one mega global marketplace run by global corporations.

If we are to avert truly unthinkable food insecurity tragedies, a bigger but necessary project will be to return to local people everywhere the land and resources they need to do some subsistence farming for their families and communities. This is a huge—almost unthinkable—transformation of our food policies (which are also global warming and energy policies), but what else can we morally do?

My 10-mile diet—which could seem a stunt of the privileged—led me right into this line of thinking as I ate my frittata. Ultimately any fast, from Lent to Ramadan, leads you to the core of your life and to humility in understanding your weave into the larger web.