

Local & loving it

One writer's quest to help her community by celebrating birthdays closer to home

By Natalie Ermann Russell

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In my house, the "New Oxford American Dictionary's" 2007 word of the year, locavore (someone dedicated to buying local foods), was lexicological inspiration: Why not stay local with all the other stuff we buy, too?

There are good reasons for buying local. It reduces the need for shipping, which reduces pollution, and it supports the local community. "A study we did found that for every \$100 spent in a chain store, \$14 went back into the local economy. For a locally owned business, it was \$45," says Stacy Mitchell, author of "Big-Box Swindle" and researcher with the Institute for Local Self-Reliance. "Locally owned businesses buy a lot of services from other local businesses. So by buying from one local business, you're not only supporting that business, you're supporting other local businesses."

To find local shops, farms, services and so on, sites like ourmilwaukee.net (in Milwaukee), thinklocalsantacruz.org (in Santa Cruz, Calif.) and localfirstaz.com (in Tucson) offer easy-to-navigate listings. A nationwide directory of such sites can be found on liveingeconomies.org (click on "Find a network").

With resources like these, I could try going local for everything. But what if I was unable to go cold turkey (big-box stores *do* have great prices, especially on items like diapers and paper towels)? "It's not possible to buy every single thing you need from a local producer or vendor, but we advocate that people look locally first," says Ann Bartz with Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, an organization that is growing along with the trend, tripling in size over the past three years.

To start, in our family, we've made birthdays (mine, my husband's and my 2-year-old son's) totally local. For my birthday gift, it'll be easy. Dinner out at a fancy local restaurant -- one with a menu featuring locally grown or produced foods. I can find a list of them at buylocalvirginia.org, where I can search for my town of Charlottesville, Va.

I probably could find something local for my husband's birthday on Craigslist.org (the epitome of recycling and reusing). Even though what I buy wouldn't necessarily have been made in town, the money still would go to someone in my community. If that proves unsuccessful, I can find something he would like at my small-town record shop, Plan 9 (plan9music.com), à la the movie "High Fidelity," or New Dominion Bookshop (newdominionbookshop.com), & la "You've Got Mail," instead of at the big boxes.

For his birthday meal, he's all about pork chops and apple pie. So I can cook up some naturally raised pork from one of the many small-scale meat producers in the area, like Babes in the Wood (forestfed.com), and bake a pie made from the apples grown on nearby orchards (my favorite is Vintage Virginia Apples, vintagevirginiaapples.com). Lucky for him, his October birthday means apple pie is as seasonal as it gets.

For my son's birthday, I can find cute gifts on etsy.com, a site where more than 200,000 craftspeople from around the world hawk handmade things. Click on "Shop Local" to find sellers who live near you. "Connecting producer and consumer is at the very heart of our purpose," says Etsy's Matthew Stinchcomb. "Shopping locally helps facilitate this."

For the requisite birthday party, Danny Seo, "Better Homes and Gardens" living green editor, suggests using freecycle.org to swap or get someone else's unused party supplies for free. And be sure to go local with the cake. "Many bakeries use dough that is pre-made, then shipped around the country," Seo says. "So ask if the cake was ever frozen."

Now that we have mastered the local birthday, perhaps next year we'll stay local for all the other holidays, too. A year-long locabroration. Hmm -- could that be the word of the year in 2009?

Natalie Ermann Russell is the editor of a new magazine about eating local in Central Virginia, Edible Blue Ridge. To find out if there is an Edible publication in your area, go to ediblecommunities.com and click on "Edible Publications."