

Long Distance Food

Why is so much of our food travelling so far?



What on earth is going on in our supermarkets? No longer are New Zealand's supermarkets showcasing the range of fresh local food we are renowned for producing.

Instead, our supermarket shelves are stocked with imported goods that have clocked up more travel miles than some people make in a lifetime.

Despite our reputation as one of the great food producing nations of the world, we import more food than almost any other OECD country: an estimated 70 per cent of our processed food, and about 60 per cent of our total food.

This begs the question, why are fruit and vegetables being flown from around the world to our supermarkets when we produce an abundance of fresh fruit and vegetables right here?

And why do we import more than 30,000 tonnes of meat every year when we are internationally famous for the beef, lamb and mutton we produce?

The truth is that when overseas markets are paying premium prices for quality meat, our farmers export it offshore. Cheaper meat (of lesser quality) is then imported and sold (unlabelled) to unsuspecting Kiwis.

Visiting Italian Chef and TV personality, Antonio Carluccio,

when they are locally unavailable. But what's wrong with only eating fruit and vegetables when they're in season? And what is the real price we are paying for so much imported food? What is the cost to our economy, our health, our ecology and the earth's atmosphere?

Environmental Costs

Transporting food long distances is extremely inefficient. Bringing food across the world to our dinner plates requires more energy (in terms of fossil fuels) than the calories we get from the food itself. Airfreight is also the world's most polluting form of transport. Flying food across the planet is a major contributor to greenhouse gases and climate change. It requires an extravagant consumption of fossil fuels, and therefore contributes to conflicts over oil supplies.

pesticide or antibiotic residues. And much of the imported food is fumigated – often with methyl bromide, one of the most ozone depleting substances humans have invented.

Biosecurity risks:

Foreign food also carries biosecurity hazards into the country. Poisonous pests such as black widow spiders have arrived in New Zealand aboard Californian table grapes, while produce from fruitfly-infested Queensland could devastate our horticultural industries if it carries larvae across our borders.

Why buy Californian oranges when the supermarket is stocked with New Zealand mandarins? Why buy a packet of Australian biscuits when you can buy the New Zealand equivalent and support a local factory that employs Kiwi workers and uses

To check out where our food comes from, we went to two local supermarkets last week and selected 21 mostly fresh foods and calculated the distance they had travelled, from country of origin to the supermarket.

Our basket of food travelled an astonishing 214,611 kilometres

We found asparagus from the United States; spinach from the Netherlands and the US; mangoes from Mexico; grapes from Chile; bananas from the Philippines; strawberries, nectarines, peaches, oranges and grapefruit from California; beans and tomatoes from Australia; shrimps, prawns and pet food from Thailand; and Watties vegetables from China and Italy.

Some of the imported food was unlabelled. The only way we could figure out where it came from was by asking a supermarket attendant. For some items, we could not track down the country of origin even after numerous phone calls to distributors. We don't think that is good enough. Consumers have a right to know where the food they purchase comes from. That's why we want the Government to legislate to require mandatory country of origin labelling for food, just as there is for footwear and clothing.

Astonishingly, our Government is vehemently opposed to country of origin labelling, and the consumer's right to know where food originates. The Government is opposing a new joint Australia New Zealand food standard that would require country of origin food labelling. That's why we have launched a campaign to show that consumers DO want country of origin labelling.

In the meantime, we call on all retailers to declare the country of origin on all fresh and processed food.

Make sure you know where your produce comes from before you buy it. Ask your supermarket every time you're uncertain, refuse to buy food if you don't know where it's from.

	Energy consumed (kj/km/t)	Co emissions (g/km/tonne)	Hydrocarbon emissions (g/km/tonne)	Nitrogen oxide emissions (g/km/tonne)	CO emissions (g/km/t)
Rail	677	41	0.06	0.2	0.05
Sea	423	30	0.04	0.4	0.12
Road	2,890	207	0.30	3.6	2.40
Air	15,839	1,206	2.00	5.5	1.40

Source: Lucas C. 2001. Stopping the Great Food Swap - Relocalising Europe's Food Supply

The table above gives some idea of just how damaging air freighting food is, and helps you calculate some of the environmental costs associated with imported foods that may tempt you.

Health Costs

Imported food is also questionable from a health

local ingredients?

Eating food that's in season is also a good way to reduce food miles. Remember that nature has four seasons and produces fruit and vegetables accordingly. Locally-grown food that's in season comes at a much lower environmental cost than food grown on the other side of the world and air freighted for your pleasure. Shop from suppliers who provide fresh, locally-grown, real food.

Labelling woes

It's often hard working out where food has come from, because there is no legal requirement in New Zealand to declare the country of origin on any label. Some food products declare their country of origin, but a lot don't – especially 'fresh' produce such as meat, fruit and vegetables. Others try to fudge where their food comes from. A label declares it is 'manufactured in New Zealand', but fails to mention that the ingredients have been imported. Others say the produce is made with 'imported and local ingredients' - without specifying which ones come from where.

Did you know...

That the fuel used to fly each bottle of wine from the UK to NZ is equal to boiling the kettle 268 times; that for every litre of aviation fuel burnt, 2.5kgs of carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere; that burning a litre of diesel fuel (used by trucks to transport food) releases 2.7kgs of carbon dioxide; that growing cabbages organically uses less than a third of the energy needed to grow cabbages with chemicals.

was astounded to learn we export our good food and feed low-quality imports to our people. In Italy it would be considered sacrilegious to offer inferior food to local consumers. Are Kiwi consumers really treated with such low regard?

We're told long-distance transportation of food gives us more variety, and allows us to eat fruit and vegetables at times

perspective. Research has found that the further food travels, the more its nutrient content deteriorates. Imported fruit and vegetables may look fresh and wholesome but they've been found to contain fewer of the essential vitamins and minerals our bodies need for good health.

None of it is checked on arrival, to make sure it's free from excessive (or even illegal)

Garlic. From China, a journey of 10,387 kms. This garlic is extremely cheap, severely undercutting the local market. Most garlic is now imported from China, undermining our garlic industry. According to VegFed, Chinese garlic is not supposed to be planted here because it could contain plant viruses that could contaminate our garlic crops. But the supermarket bin with the cheap garlic makes no mention of this. One woman, who tried to preserve the Chinese garlic in vinegar, wrote to us because she couldn't figure out why it turned blue!

Fresh sugar snap peas. Product of 'Africa', distributed by Paragon International, Auckland. No listed phone number, no Internet contact, and after 15 phone calls, we still could not track down the company or the country of origin. The peas could be from Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa, a journey of 12,000 to 13,000 kms. It takes about 200,000 kJoules of energy to bring you 1kg of these peas.

Tomatoes. From Australia. Cherry tomatoes from Australia and New Zealand were found side by side on the supermarket shelf at the same price. But not the same cost. The Australian tomatoes have travelled 2151 kms and have been dipped in the organophosphate, insecticide dimethoate. Dimethoate is a highly toxic insecticide that has been found to disrupt reproductive function, cause chromosomal aberrations, damage the immune system, disrupt the endocrine system and affect the nervous system. You can't wash (or peel) the pesticide off the tomatoes because it is 'systemic'. These particular Australian tomatoes were labelled, but more often they are not.

Spinach. At one end of the supermarket there's good fresh New Zealand-grown spinach, and at the other end frozen chopped spinach imported all the way from the Netherlands. This is a journey of 18,170kms. Can't we even chop our own spinach?

Grapes. From Chile, a journey of 5233 kms. Most New Zealand grapes go into wine and therefore most table grapes are imported. They come from Chile and California. Californian grapes pose serious biosecurity risks such as Pierce's Disease, which would be disastrous for our growers. Deadly poisonous black widow spiders have also been found amongst consignments of Californian grapes on at least three occasions in recent times. These grapes are air freighted,

and for every 1kg of grapes from Chile there are 6.3 kg of carbon dioxide emitted en route to contribute to climate change.

Oranges. From California, a journey of 10,474 kms. These are available in our supermarkets at the same time as our locally produced mandarins. Locally-grown organic oranges and mandarins are available from many organic stores and by mail order direct from producers in New Zealand.

Grapefruit. Labelled as imported but with no actual country of origin declared. A web search located the company in California. So that's a journey of 10,474 kms. There was a time when virtually every Kiwi backyard boasted a grapefruit tree, a mere few yards from tree to tummy. What happened to the grow-your-own culture?

Nectarines, peaches. From California again. The supermarket is full of New Zealand apples, pears and citrus, so why do we need fruit that has travelled 10,474kms? Why do we think we need to have every different type of fruit available all year round instead of eating what's in season? Can't consumers survive without them?

Strawberries. California. Well out-of-season these. Californian strawberry beds are fumigated with the ozone-destroying pesticide methyl bromide. Importing 1 kg of these little red fruits is equivalent to keeping a 100-watt light bulb on for eight days. Long-distance strawberries in particular are often tasteless and white on the inside. This is because varieties are grown for shelf-life rather than flavour.

Mangoes. From Mexico, a journey of 10,952 kms. At least they are not irradiated, as will soon be the case with tropical fruit coming from Australia. Imported fruit may spend many weeks, even months, in controlled atmosphere storage on ships.

Sausages, salami, bacon. The labels of many processed meat products say "Product of New Zealand", but don't be fooled into thinking that means that the meat actually comes from New Zealand. Forty per cent of pork is imported from countries such as China, Canada (11,336 km), Australia, and much of this is processed into sausages,

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salami and bacon. But the labels don't mention where the meat originates. That's why we need country of origin labelling. If you want to have home-grown ingredients in your sausages, ask the retailer for New Zealand meat sausages. Or buy from your local organic butcher, which sells only New Zealand meat.

Beef, lamb, pork. We import about 30,000 tonnes of meat each year (much of it from Australia - 2,151 km - but also from China, Canada and other countries). This includes 9204 tonnes of beef and veal, 953 tonnes of mutton, 2078 tonnes of lamb and 16,862 tonnes of pork. All of this meat is sold without a country of origin label. We are informed that meat on special is often imported. The only way to ensure you are buying New Zealand meat is to buy organic meat or meat that carries the Quality Mark, Best of New Zealand.

Shrimps and prawns. From Thailand, a journey of 9573 km. Grown in ponds on the Thai Coast, antibiotics are used in raising these intensively reared crustacea. At one stage, the European Union imposed bans on prawns and shrimps from South East Asia following the discovery of residues of a cancer-causing antibiotic, chloramphenicol. New Zealand does not check the imported prawns and shrimps for antibiotic or pesticide residues.

Fruit juice. 'Product of New Zealand', but the fine print says 'made from local and imported concentrate'. From which countries, and how far have they travelled? Who knows, but it probably includes concentrate from Brazil (12,357 km), the Philippines and/or Florida. Most juices are made from concentrated juice because the fruit is easier to store and transport in this form. After the fruit is picked it is squeezed, and the water evaporated under a vacuum system until the concentrate is about 65 per cent solids. It is then reconstituted by adding water before it is sold.

Bananas. From the Philippines, a journey of 8012 km. These are picked green and ripened with ethylene gas, and fumigated on arrival in New Zealand. Workers in the banana plantations suffer terrible health effects from the constant aerial and ground spraying. With so much spraying, there are likely

to be pesticide residues in the bananas. Eat New Zealand-produced organic bananas. Ask your local shop for them and help the local production system.

Supercat pet food. From Thailand, a journey of 9573 km. As a major meat-producing country, and with an abundant supply of possum carcasses, why can't we make our own pet food in New Zealand?

Asparagus. From the US, a journey of 10,474 km. Air freighted. Why not wait until August when our local season begins, then you can eat lots of lovely fresh locally-grown asparagus.

Watties whole peeled tomatoes. From Italy, a journey of 18,389 km. Why on earth are Watties using imported Italian tomatoes, instead of our own home-grown ones?

Mushy Peas. From England, a journey of 18,419 kms. Why do we need mushed-up peas all the way from England? Why not purchase our own canned or frozen peas?

Watties Imperial Stir Fry Asian Sauce and Vegetables. Despite the Watties label, this is a product of China, produced with Chinese vegetables, and then imported into New Zealand, a journey of 10,387 km. Look instead for New Zealand-grown vegetables.

Chocolate biscuits. There's Arnott's 'Tim Tams' and Griffins 'Chit Chats' sitting side by side on the supermarket shelf, virtually identical. But Tim Tams come from Australia (2151 km) and Chit Chat's from New Zealand. No prizes for guessing which is the more environmentally acceptable even if neither will do your health much good. If you are buying biscuits, support your local industry so that more factories aren't forced to close.

If you find further examples of food imported from afar, let us know. Write to us with the examples and we'll post them on our website.

Green
Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand
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