“Flexitarianism”

Here’s a new word for Webster’s. Used by Barbara Kingsolver in her latest book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, she describes herself as “flexitarian.” It’s a sort of milk and egg – eating vegetarian with the occasional poultry or fish thrown in, and the very occasional grass-fed beef (of known origin), without being overly dogmatic about it all… In my mind, it’s heading toward a healthier and more balanced way of eating – both in terms of physical health, and health of the planet.

Eating locally grown, seasonal produce is one way to shrink our carbon footprint. But the type of protein we consume also makes a difference. Not all protein is created equally, when it comes to use of resources and production of greenhouse gases.

What sort of diet will sustain the 9 billion people projected to live on Earth by 2050? According to Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute, it would depend on the level and type of food consumption. The current world’s grain harvest could support only about 2.5 billion people on the protein-heavy diet of the average American. It would support about 5 billion people eating as they do in Italy. It could support 10 billion individuals eating a vegetarian diet, as the average person does in India. The key to feeding us all equitably? Lighten up on the meat.

Beef, the U.S. protein of choice, is the most water and grain-intensive livestock. According to Brown, it takes about 7 lbs. of grain to produce one pound of beef. In contrast, a pound of poultry requires a little over 2 lbs. of grain to produce. Or consider this: a pound of oats, wheat, rice or corn, direct to the human belly…

Grain-fed beef raised in feedlots raises some ethical questions for many of us, but taking the grass-fed route is also controversial. Range-fed beef doesn’t require the same grain and water resources, however it does require a lot of land. In some parts of the world, the fast-food hamburger is only possible with rangeland acquired by clearing tropical forest – this seems to me to be an impossibly high cost for the 99 cent burger.

It’s known that our meat-heavy American diet is a health risk. The lighter, Mediterranean diet still includes meat – but in healthy moderation. As Brown points out, “…life expectancy is highest in Italy, even though U.S. expenditures on medical care per person are much higher. Those who live very low on the food chain or very high on the food chain do not live as long as those in an intermediate position. The Mediterranean diet includes meats, cheeses, and seafood, but in moderation. Nutritionally, this is the healthiest way to eat.”

So we should switch to poultry and fish, right? But it’s not so simple. Take salmon, for example – our family loves those Omega 3 fatty acids in fins. Somewhat ironically, the Monterey Bay Aquarium advises that we can protect the wild salmon stock by avoiding Atlantic farmed salmon (they spread parasites to the wild salmon), and buying wild, line-caught Alaskan salmon.

But here’s the catch. Recently, I went to buy wild Alaskan salmon here in Alliance, and found that it had trotted the globe. It’s bad enough that it was caught on a diesel-burning boat, in far-away Alaska, but then it was processed in….China???! If it had just traveled straight to this part

of the US from Alaska, it would have traveled about 4,000 miles or so. But to China and back first? That's about 20,000 miles of carbon-emitting travel in energy-consuming freezer containers – nearly a lap around the globe.

Last year, researchers at the University of Chicago examined the annual carbon footprint of six different diets (including growth, harvest, transport and preparation). Diets high in red meat, and deep-ocean, top-of-the-food-chain fish, came in the highest, at 2 tons of green house gasses per year over the non-meat diet. According to their study, just cutting beef (or high-end fish) out of the average American diet reduced emissions by about a third; eliminating all but milk products and eggs nearly halved the emissions; and going vegan (no animal products at all) brings animal-caused emissions to zero.

So am I going vegan? We're not quite there, but we're definitely lightening up. We have salmon much less often, and beef hardly ever. Ground turkey substitutes very nicely for hamburger, and can be used in lesser quantities. I'm looking for better local seafood choices – small coastal fish, trout or tilapia are good, and I could live with local shrimp! I've been searching in the stores and farmer's markets for locally produced cheese and eggs, and for poultry that has been humanely treated and hasn't traveled too far to market. It's not salmon, but I hear that hens on an organic diet (bugs, slugs and weeds) produce eggs that are high in Omega 3 fatty acids…
Call me a "flexitarian."

"If every U.S. citizen ate just one meal a week (any meal) composed of locally and organically raised meats and produce, we would reduce our country's oil consumption by over 1.1 million barrels of oil every week. That's not gallons, but barrels. Small changes in buying habits can make big differences. Becoming a less energy-dependent nation may just need to start with a good breakfast." Steven L. Hopp (co-author of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*)

Check it out:

Farms & Foods of Ohio: From Garden Gate to Dinner Plate, by Marilou K. Suszko

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, by Barbara Kingsolver, and family: A family adopts local, "flexitarian," organic eating. Resources and recipes: http://www.animalvegetablemiracle.com

Harvest for Hope: a guide to mindful eating, by Jane Goodall

The China Study, by T. Colin Campbell: A large-scale scientific study on the benefits of a plant-based diet.

The Omnivore's Dilemma, by Michael Pollan: An exploration of "industrial food, organic or alternative food, and food we forage ourselves."

The Organic, Grass-fed Beef Coalition – info on health benefits of range-fed beef: http://www.organicgrassfedbeef.org/