

Shop local
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MONITOR: Where you buy is as important as what you buy

SHOPPING IS A powerful urge for many. Frocks appeal to some, art to others and in extreme cases land, or indeed entire districts. But what of food? Choosing where to buy your apples might seem, at best, a token gesture, something not to be considered too deeply on the basis that it can hardly make that much difference. You couldn't be more wrong.

The current economic scenario means that many of us do not wish to delve too deeply into where what we buy comes from. Yet never has the rationale been so relevant. Discounters spring to mind, but aren't all supermarkets in Ireland playing the same game? Huge purchasing power and a wish to supply constantly at the most competitive price means suppliers go wherever they need to. Potatoes from Ireland? Certainly, if they can be obtained at the right price and in the right condition, but if not, then foreign spuds will do just as well.

We are more influential when it comes to buying food than you might think. A study by the New Economics Foundation in London has found that every £10 spent at a local food business translates into £25 for the local area. Spend the same money in a supermarket and that £10 only generates £14 locally.

Perhaps being price sensitive should involve looking at a few other items besides the cash calculation. A constant struggle for many is the sheer scale of the Irish market, in whatever category. The lament is always the same – we are not big enough and exporting is a huge challenge.

Translate the above figures to Ireland, however, and Bord Bia has shown that things start to look pretty powerful: €472.5 million is the consumer sales value applied to the 350 small, local and speciality Irish food businesses, which results in just over €1 billion in revenue going back into local businesses. The farmer buys a drink at the local pub; the pub owner gets a car fixed by the local mechanic; the mechanic brings a shirt to the local tailor; the tailor buys some bread at the local bakery; the baker buys wheat for bread and fruit for muffins from the local farmer. When these businesses are not owned locally, money leaves the community through every transaction.

One of the major problems facing this scenario is the food we buy. Seasonality is paid lip-service to by so many, chefs included. The truth is, being seasonal is very hard, even with polytunnels and the overwintering of animals. We also need to actually want to buy what is local, and this is not always possible, or indeed in keeping with our lifestyles. Olive oil, tomatoes and mozzarella are just three examples. Our modern, European-influenced diet was not designed with the Irish climate in mind.

But the figures make powerful reading and raise an incentive which even if partially adopted could mean quite a lot. If these small local businesses increased their share of the national food grocery and food-service markets, this could

really make a difference; if the market share went up from its current 3 per cent to 6 per cent, this would generate €855 million which, with the multiplier effect, would round out at just over €2 billion.

We have become much more price-conscious than before. But if you factor in local community support and put a value on that, multi-national food retailing might not seem like quite such good value after all. Sometimes old-fashioned ways really are the best. At least some of the time