The term "local food" evades easy definition. In part, it is a geographical concept referring to the distance between food producers and consumers. Phrases like local food, local food system and relocalization are used almost interchangeably to refer to the concept of increasing reliance on foods consumed near their point of production.

ADVANTAGES OF LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION

Population growth, climate change, rising energy prices and biofuel production have all recently entered the world's food equation and been implicated in the recent rise in food prices. These forces are likely to continue to influence food production over the long term.

Other factors also contribute to the evidence supporting the benefits of growing and eating local food, including:

- Physical proximity of producers and consumers, which allows consumers to receive answers to their questions about the source of their food.
- Shorter supply chains and relationships forged between producers and consumers, which can improve the economic visibility of local farms, farmers and their communities.
- A reduced amount of energy used in the transport of foods and the associated greenhouse gas emissions.
- Better tasting and more nutritious foods than those bred for their ability to endure long-distance shipping.
- Improved environmental stewardship by producers and decreased food safety risks.
- Increased public awareness of issues related to the food system and greater public control over the food system.

Together, these benefits suggest that localizing food production is a vital component of a transition to a more sustainable food system. However, it is important to note that these are purported, rather than proven, advantages of local food systems.[1]

A recent study, "Mapping potential foodsheds in New York state by food group: An approach for prioritizing which foods grow locally," looked to answer the question: "If land is limited, which foods should be grown locally?"[2] The study allocated the available agricultural land of New York state to meet in-state food needs for six distinct food groups — grains, vegetables, fruits, dairy, meat and eggs — across the state's eight largest population centers.

LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION IN NEW YORK STATE

According to the theory of highest and best use, land tends to be used for the purpose that generates the greatest return given the available market. The New York state (NYS) study mentioned above used a model to map potential for supplying local food if farmers maximized their returns on land. Researchers found that the area of agricultural land allocated to meet the food needs of New York state increased as the population's willingness to eat a local food diet, a theoretical measure of the maximum amount of food people would willingly eat locally, increased.[3]

Since land tends to be devoted to the most valuable use possible, local and regional foodsheds tend to specialize in production of certain foods. The NYS study was able to show that the state could provide food for most people within the state from only four of the six food groups studied — dairy, eggs, fruit and vegetables — all items that New York state already specializes in. Since these items can be produced in a relatively large volume on a relatively small amount of land, a continued focus on these four groups could enable the state to provide a large share of total food needs. Grains tended to be pushed out of most diets, since demand for other food groups was higher and land availability is limited. Similarly, meat rarely made it into the diet because it generally had negative returns, using more land than most food groups and returning less food for consumption. Thus, New York would remain a net food importer, getting most of its food from other states and regions, in order to meet all food needs within the state.

[1] Peters, C. J., Bills, N. L., Wilkins, J. L., & Fick, G. W. (2009). Foodshed analysis and its relevance to sustainability. *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems, 24*(1), 1–7.
[2] Peters, C. J., Bills, N. L., Lembo, A. J., Wilkins, J. L., & Fick, G.W. (2009). Mapping potential foodsheds in New York State: A spatial model for evaluating the capacity to localize food production. *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems, 24*(1), 72–84.
[3] Ibid.