

# Fast food is anything but green

**T**HERE ARE MANY ways that we can eat more sustainably. One of these ways is to simply resist the urge to grab that fast-food burger or bucket of chicken on the way home. Americans are spending an increasing amount each year on fast food — from \$6 billion annually in 1970 to \$140 billion in 2007. Surprisingly, saving money is one of the top reasons people give to support this fast-food habit.

These claims are often driven by advertising. If you watch any television these days, you might have seen a recent KFC commercial about the \$10 family meal challenge. The absurd claim is that you can't cook a healthful family meal for less than \$10.

Like many chefs, I knew this was a hoax, but didn't bother to test the claims specifically. Not so for chef Kurt Friese, author of the new book "A Cook's Journey, Slow Food in the Heartland" (Ice Cube Press). He accepted the challenge and took it head-on, posting his findings at Grist.com.

## Transition to green

Using recipes from "The Joy of Cooking," he re-created the meal with chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, and homemade biscuits. The bottom line? The KFC meal including tax was \$10.58. Friese writes, "I made the same meal for \$7.94 — and I got three extra pieces of chicken and a carcass to use for soup. I want to point out that Friese lives in Iowa, so perhaps your local market prices might be a little higher. But he does note that his shopping was done at a "higher-end place."

This is just one more example of the mythology present in modern consumer culture. We think we are being efficient consumers with these "budget" fast-food meals. But



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we are not only spending more money, we also are taking part in a system that is based on cheap oil and excessive energy use. This system is "doomed to failure," Friese says, and we need to start looking for alternatives. "You're going to save a lot of fuel by eating at home," Friese continues, noting that you can easily shop for the entire week with one trip to the grocery store, but a trip to the fast-food restaurant typically results in a single meal.

This reality highlights one of the problems of defining sustainable eating. Indeed, on one level, making a KFC meal at home isn't entirely sustainable, especially when you make that meal with conventionally raised meats and nonorganic ingredients. In contrast to the KFC alternative, however, it is much more energy-efficient, much less wasteful of packaging, and offers more food for less money.

This is one of the ironies of the word "sustainable," a word found on everything from car advertisements to magazine covers. You might think that a word that is so frequently used might have a solid definition, but sadly, sustainable does not.

Typical definitions include a phrase that goes something like this: "Sustainable is being able to meet the needs of current generations without

sacrificing the ability of future generations to meet theirs." This sounds nice, but quickly falls short when you try to put it into practice. What are the needs of current generations? How do current actions affect the future? How far into the future do we need to look?

To try to shed light on some of this confusion, I looked to the USDA's National Agricultural Library to find some clarification. Unfortunately, it offered little help, beginning its discussion like this: "Some terms defy definition. 'Sustainable agriculture' has become one of them. In such a quickly changing world, can anything be sustainable?"

## Looking for balance

The USDA might not be able to give us clear answers, but classic ecology can. Ecologists use the word equilibrium to describe a sustainable system. A cycle is in equilibrium if the forces of inputs and outputs are balanced. What this tells us is that we have to measure how green we are in relative terms.

A move towards sustainable eating for a family eating that KFC meal once or twice a week is simply to start eating at home. For another family, it might be increasing the amount of food purchased at farmers markets, or integrating a composting routine into their daily lives. All of these possibilities are equally important.

The bottom line is: Do what you can to cut out the fast food, and you'll be doing your pocketbook, your health and the environment a world of good.

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