

Does your breakfast need a passport?

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“None of the ingredients are from China!” assures the voice on the other end of the phone.

“That’s proprietary information.”

“Ninety percent of the ingredients are from Eastern Canada. The remaining 10% come from Asia, Europe and South America.”

These are just three of the numerous responses I’ve received to the question “Where is this product grown and processed?” I, along with a team of intrepid volunteers, have been attempting to find out the origins of the 66 food items that form the National Nutritious Food Basket (NNFB), a tool developed by Health Canada, used to study the cost of food. This list of food items represents a basic nutritious diet and reflects Canadians’ eating patterns.

Finding out the origin of food items is the first step in calculating food miles. Once the travel distance for a given food item is known, as well as the mode of transportation, we can calculate the greenhouse gas emissions associated with transport. By choosing foods

that have been grown closer to home, we can help reduce transport emissions, as well as support local farmers, rural economies, and tasty food choices!

My quest for information started at the grocery store. I visited both of the major chains – The Atlantic Superstore (Loblaws) and Sobeys. What could I find out by reading labels and signs? As it turns out, not much.

Produce: Very few specifics. For most items only the country of origin is marked on the sign. Pre-packaged fruit and vegetables have the name of the wholesaler, where it was packaged, and a website and/or telephone number – but not necessarily the province or state in which it was grown.

Meat: There is little, if any, information on where the meat was from. We were told that the beef mainly comes from Alberta, with some from Quebec. (To get local beef, check out the Co-op stores.) Nova Scotian pork is available now, but the supply is dwindling quickly as farmers go out of business. The chicken is a product of Canada, with no further details given.

Dairy: Fluid milk is mostly from Nova Scotia. Some brands of butter, cheddar cheese, and mozzarella cheese are also clearly marked as Nova Scotian or Maritime products. When we called Kraft Canada to ask which province the milk in their cheese was from and where it was processed, Kraft said that the information was proprietary. They assured us that if it says “Product of Canada” on the label, then it’s from Canada. If it’s from another country, it will be noted on the package. I went back to the grocery store to examine the packaging. There was no “Product of” information to be found. After several frustrating calls to Kraft about a variety of products, we have been unsuccessful in getting any information regarding product origin. Kraft gets the award for shifty labeling.

Packaged goods: This is where we had to become true food detectives. We called and/or emailed a long list of food processors. Some customer service representatives did research for us, calling us back the following day with locations for all of the ingredients used in their products. (Did you know that 80% of the world’s supply of citric acid comes from China? Who knew?) Others couldn’t tell us where the food was from, or could only assure us that it wasn’t from China. And, as in the case of Kraft above, we did encounter those who simply wouldn’t, for proprietary reasons, tell us the origins of our food. This I find deeply concerning. Why should the origins of our food be something that companies can keep secret?

Now let’s go from the grocery store to your kitchen. Picture an average breakfast: cornflakes with milk and a banana, toast with peanut butter, and a glass of orange juice. How far have each of these items traveled between the farm and your kitchen table?

Cornflakes: According to the folks at Kellogg’s, the corn is grown and processed in the United States and the cereal itself is made in London, Ontario. We will have to make some assumptions here. Most of the corn grown in the US is from the Midwestern

United States. If we pick a point near the middle of the corn belt and calculate the distance to London, Ontario, we find that it's about 900km. London to Halifax is another 1970 km.

Next the milk and the banana. The most common brands of milk in the grocery store are from Nova Scotia. So, the milk hasn't traveled too far (maybe an average of 500 km from farm to processor to store). The Costa Rican banana (assuming a cruise on the ocean) traveled approximately 4400km.

On to the toast. As the vast majority of Canada's wheat comes from the prairies, we'll calculate the distance from the middle of Saskatchewan – approximately 4,500 km. We'll assume that the bread is baked in Halifax.

Two peanut butter manufacturers (Skippy & Barbours) were able to tell me where the peanuts were from: Alabama and Texas for the former and Georgia and Virginia for the latter. Calculating the distance from Alabama, it's about 3200 km to Halifax.

And finally organic juice. Old South and Minute Maid get their oranges from Brazil, Florida and Costa Rica. The former is processed in Ontario and New Brunswick, while the latter in numerous North American locations. The distance from Brazil to Halifax by ship is approximately 6300 km.

Grand total for breakfast: 21,770 km. Average distance traveled per item: 3628 km.

Yikes! That's a lot of traveling before 9 am. Now consider the alternative: Maritime grown and processed oatmeal, bread made from a local heritage wheat, locally produced milk, yogurt, eggs, apple cider, maple syrup, honey, blueberries, bacon on the weekend... and the list goes on. Most of these products are available within 200 km of your doorstep. (The oatmeal and the heritage wheat travel a little bit further – they are ground in Speerville, NB. They travel approximately 550 to 800 km before reaching your kitchen.) Visit your local farmers' market. Ask for local at the grocery store. Your belly and our environment will be much happier.

Our food miles quest doesn't end here. Next step: determining the modes of transportation and then the greenhouse gas emissions. Stay tuned...