

The (slight) Chipotle difference

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Several weeks ago, [Chipotle founder Steve Ells published a column](#) headlined "Conventional vs. Grass-fed Beef." As you've probably heard, Chipotle prefers the latter—the fast-casual burrito chain has [a lot to say](#) about agricultural reform, ethical food, etc. But here the subject is more complicated than the title suggests: Ells was defending Chipotle's decision to stop buying exclusively domestic beef in favor of importing some of it from Australia, where the grass-fed supply is better.

It's a classic food-ethics conundrum: should you go with the higher production standard, or the food produced closer to home? Chipotle chose the former, a perfectly defensible choice if you just have the two. While the company has [sometimes come off as trying too hard](#) in promoting its commitment to sustainability issues, there's no question that a degree of commitment exists. Chipotle deserves some credit for being a different kind of company.

But really, only a little different. Last week, Chipotle communications head Chris Arnold [talked to AgWeb](#) about the Australian-beef decision, which has caused some controversy with American ranchers. "It would be our preference," said Arnold, "to have all of our beef coming from the United States." He means they'd like for U.S. supply to be able to meet both Chipotle's standards and its ever-growing demand.

Of course, the other way to make sure you get enough American beef to meet your needs would be to *need less of it*. Last time Chipotle's beef-supply issues were in the news, I [suggested three menu changes](#) to reduce the chain's beef usage—changes that would do a lot more for both the environment and customers' health than [serving organic cilantro](#) or whatever. I still think these are good ideas. (Another good idea: Chipotle's newish tofu option, introduced after I wrote that post.)

But I never expected to see the changes I suggested, and not just because Chipotle doesn't care what some blogger thinks. Because whatever else Chipotle is doing, it's working within the constraints of corporate chain restaurants.

Chains don't change their menus often. If they did, Chipotle could serve more beef when supply is up and less when it's down. They could serve local produce all year long—by changing the menu to take advantage of seasonal vegetables, by tweaking recipes to use fresh stuff in the summer and frozen in the winter.

Chains don't typically serve significantly different food in different locations. If they did, Chipotle could serve fresh bell peppers all year in Florida but not do this in Minnesota. It could do seafood and avocado salsa in California, freshwater fish and fruit salsa in Michigan, bison and corn salsa in South Dakota.

Chains almost always want to grow, and everything they do has to scale. If this wasn't the case, Chipotle could treat its ethical sourcing standards as actual rules rather than as ideals. That is: they could buy whatever beef, etc. they can that meets the standard, and then stop—instead of supplementing with other stuff that doesn't.

To be sure, Chipotle's scale gives it rare power to actually move the needle in those ethical-food areas it decides to prioritize. But that scale is the very thing that prevents the company from even trying in others. I'm convinced Chipotle deserves its (carefully [Cultivated](#)) reputation as the most foodie-ethical of quick-service restaurant chains. But that's ultimately a pretty minor achievement. Local restaurants can do much more, and many do.

Yes, some of these restaurants are expensive and more than a little precious, as some of Chipotle's [ads](#) [imply](#). But not all of them. And those of us who live near local places serving affordable, down-to-earth food with a conscience could encourage this by patronizing them more and Chipotle and other chains less.

"Buy local," after all, was a thing long before "locavorism" was cool. [It was never just about food sourcing](#), and it still isn't. It's about local economies, communities, and people. There are some consumer purchases for which there is no viable local option, where the only non-corporate thing to do is to buy nothing (not always the worst thing, but that's another post). Restaurants aren't one of them—at least not everywhere, not yet.