



How travel costs affect food prices

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From farm to family, food travels great distances to feed us these days.

In the case of an ordinary cheeseburger, thousands of miles are logged before taming your hunger.

To illustrate the point, we teamed up with Tampa's Square One Burgers. With the help of the restaurant's management and suppliers, we traced an all-American burger's main ingredients back to their far-flung sources.

The ingredients are literally all over the map: Angus beef from Montana, lettuce grown California, cheese cultured Wisconsin, and onions shipped from Texas. Only a slice of fire-engine red tomato is local, grown in Ruskin.

"We will not serve a tomato that's been refrigerated," said Square One owner Joanie Corneil. Corneil said a high quality sandwich is worth the cross-country haul.

"If it's not good, we're not going to put it on a burger," she said of the toppings and beef.

The total distance traveled is a whopping 8,212 miles, according to our estimate.

Corneil later bragged about her Buffalo Bill burger, which centers on Montana Bison -- which she said she can't get anywhere else. The meat alone must cross more than 2,600 miles before hitting the grill.

"It's worth the trip," Corneil said. She then quickly cracked a joke. "I'm sure the buffalo would be very happy to know that they made it to Florida."

Corneil said shipping costs have increased, which, in turn, can dent the company's margins. But she reiterated that high quality justifies a long jaunt.

According to the Grocery Manufacturing Association, the 2010 cost of shipping a truckload of food was \$2.05 per mile and rising. An updated index pegs the current price closer to \$2.50 per mile -- a 21.9 percent jump due to increased oil prices.

Costly freight expenses figure into the price of virtually all food, including Corneil's 8,000 mile burger. It's a long way for a classic meal, which, to most diners, only appears to travel from kitchen to table.

"It's about five feet," Corneil said of the trip inside Square One.

Square One's entrees could soon be logging even more mileage. Among the items in the kitchen cooler is a pack of Kangaroo meat -- with at least 10,000 miles in the rear-view mirror, it is perhaps the only import that could make the Montana beef seem downright neighborly.

