STALKING GOOD FOOD:

Rhubarb is everything a vegetable should be. It's zesty, easy to grow, uses only solar energy, seldom requires irrigation and can be socially meaningful. Celery sold in groceries, on the other hand, is bland, environmentally destructive, exploitative of farm labor and spiritually bland.

The other night, I attended a potluck supper. A friend of mine brought a strawberry-rhubarb pie. The slice I ate was pretty good, but nothing to write home (or a column) about. But the talk of the town that evening was about the pungent red rhubarb. The tepid celery in the chicken salad just couldn't compete.

For starters, the rhubarb was home-grown. Its proud grower described his patch as if it were the family dog, a reliable old friend with a history. My favorite rhubarb plant is deceased, having been overwhelmed by brush when my kids were small. So, instead I talked about my grandmother's patch and about her culinary genius with the genus Rheum. Others also had meaningful rhubarb stories to share about neighborhood gardens, the arrival of spring and family recipes.

That's when I thought about my celery. My last encounter with this plant was feeling sorry for it, lying in the crisper of my refrigerator, beneath the stale lettuce. It resembled a cadaver I once saw at a funeral home: cold, ashen-green and lifeless. That celery came home with me from the store in a plastic bag. I had plucked it from the produce shelf. The greengrocer had put it there after taking it from a cardboard box that had been offloaded from a truck that had arrived from the warehouse of the distributor. He probably watched it arrive from some facility in California or some other distant sunny place with organic soils and plenty of water.

I'm sure the celery had traveled from some food factory where it had been washed, inspected, wrapped in plastic and chilled. Before that I suspect it had been picked from an endless row of identical plants by a farm laborer, probably one of those "guest" workers our government claims we need to pick our food.

The water that had made that celery grow almost certainly came from some irrigation pipe or canal that, under other circumstances, may have found a better use. Large, unblemished stalks such as mine must have been sprayed with pesticides and herbicides, and probably grew from organic soils of a marsh drained for production.

With celery, it's the same story over and over. Practically everyone's celery tastes alike. Practically every stalk required fossil fuel energy to till, plant, irrigate, cultivate, spray, pick, process, ship and carry home.

With rhubarb, you get a different story almost every time. This is as it should be, the way it was before corporate agribusinesses in distant states replaced local truck gardens, using the economy of scale and federal subsidies to drain marshes or import water. The political strength of the agribusiness lobby in this country draws its strength from our historic attachment to farming, formed during an earlier era, rather than to our food in the modern corporate epoch.

I am not a romantic. Farming is hard work. But with the possible exception of the ethanol rush, the local foods movement is the fastest-growing segment of the agricultural economy. People are happier not only when they eat their vegetables, but when they know where they come from, how they were grown and who shared in their production. It also helps to know that obtaining food didn't require degrading a soil, draining a wetland, diverting a river or tainting an aquifer.
I grew celery once. The stalks on my plant went out, rather than up. My celery, though woody, was lip-smackingly delicious. This memory of my best piece of celery ever makes me wish for a world where food is appreciated as coming from nature, where community agriculture matters and where celery isn't stacked like cordwood.

Garrison Keillor often sings a paean to rhubarb on his Prairie Home Companion radio show: "Be-Bop-A-Re-Bop Rhubarb Pie." He is definitely on to something. This vegetable has a long and fascinating history, and I hope a wonderful future. Let backyard rhubarb remind us that the best food is locally grown.