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# Americans over the last 100 years cut back on beef and milk, beef up on cheese and chicken

## In Chicago, data show hot spots for soft drinks, sweets, meat and produce

By Monica Eng, Tribune reporter

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In the six-county Chicago area, Cook has the lowest adult obesity rate as well as the most full-service groceries per person and the most farmers markets. DuPage County, which one study recently judged the healthiest in the state, boasts the most fast-food restaurants and full-service restaurants per person.

These curiosities emerge in a recent data report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture looking at food trends and statistics across the country. The interactive report, called [Your Food Environment Atlas](#), draws from data that often get right down to the county level.

The USDA also released data on food availability and per-capita purchases over the last [100 years](#). This report revealed, among other tidbits, that Americans are cutting back on beef and milk but have beefed up on cheese, soft drinks and chicken.



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The data show the Chicago area is among the hottest spots on the U.S. map for consumption of meat, poultry, produce, prepared foods and packaged sweet snacks.

"I think because it is a distribution hub for many foods, and when you're in the middle of a distribution network, you can get better and more diverse foods into the hands of people in that area," said Harry Balzer, chief industry analyst for the NPD consumer research group based in Port Washington, N.Y.

And why should Cook County have more farmers markets than any area of Illinois, especially its rural counterparts?

Balzer notes that most farms around Illinois don't produce ready-to-eat fruits and vegetables but rather soy and corn that are often used for feed, biofuels and other processed products. So it wouldn't necessarily follow that rural counties would have more farmers markets, which sell locally grown food for human consumption.

Urbanites and suburbanites, however, have increasingly embraced the local, seasonal food movement, "and the markets go where the demand is," Balzer said.

The USDA's national consumption maps show that areas around Chicago and northwest Indiana; Atlanta; San Antonio; Austin, Texas; New York; Baltimore; New Jersey; Philadelphia; and Washington had the highest levels of in-home fruit and vegetable consumption. These areas also had some of the highest in-home meat consumption.

Packaged sweets, though popular around Chicago and the New York area, also found some of their biggest consumers in upstate New York, Utah and parts of Idaho, Nevada and Nebraska. Chicago scored near the middle in soft-drink consumption, which is highest in parts of Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee and Kentucky. Three of those states also have the highest adult obesity rates in the nation.

One of the more startling national food trends over the last century is the soaring popularity of poultry. Richard Lobb, spokesman for the National Chicken Council, attributes this to growing health awareness and the chicken industry's ability to produce a bigger, more efficient product.

In addition, "until the 1920s chickens were mostly raised to be (egg) layers," Lobb said. "They didn't really start marketing broilers until about the 1920s."

Balzer, who has been watching American eating trends for nearly 30 years, believes the shift mostly comes down to money. "Chicken is one of the least expensive sources of meat and protein," Balzer said, noting that beef hit its peak when Americans were doing relatively well in the mid-'70s.

"Also, chicken has become a branded product over the century. I bet you can't name a single beef brand but you can probably think of at least one chicken brand," he said. "And one of the biggest restaurant trends in the last 30 years has been the introduction of the chicken sandwich. Everyone has to have one."

Price also has driven the rise of soft drinks and the fall of milk, Balzer said. While milk has become pricier over the decades, the relative price of soft drinks has fallen. "Ounce for ounce, sweet carbonated beverages are cheaper than milk, and that seals the deal," he said.

And cheese? "The No. 1 meal we eat today in America is the sandwich, and whether it is turkey or roast beef, it can come with cheese," he said. Meanwhile, "in the last part of the century, pizza became huge in America."

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