

Why Shop Locally?

Where shops are concerned, is bigger better? Victoria Sandison decided to investigate.

So, whose side are you on? As the battle between the chain stores and independent shops rages on, saying that you are in favour of the bigger stores can make you something of a social pariah. This being the case, you would think that the corridors of Starbucks and Sainsbury's would be empty – the only sound being the

echoing of the assistant's pricing gun.

But they're not empty, are they? So who is it that's going to them? Oh, yes, it's... them... me.

I admit it, whilst in theory I rally for the little guy as much as anyone else, I frequently except those 'felicitations' under the proverbial carpet for the same reasons that we all do: it's quicker, it's easier, it's cheaper.

Or is it?

Myth 1: Supermarkets have more choice

This was my biggest bugbear, and in the context of a single shop it is of course self-evidently true. But not if you consider how short a walking distance there is between local independent shops, say in Balham or around Northcote Road. We are lucky enough to live in an area abundant with stores that stock all the exotic spices, herbs, chutneys and fresh breads available in the supermarket, plus much, much more, including vegetables of which I'm neither sure of the name nor what to do with. Unlike in supermarkets, however, I can find out by asking the shopkeeper, who will be more than happy to explain the best way of cooking yams, and more often than not go on to describe in mouth-watering detail how to make Jamaican banana chicken!

Unusual, fresh (and often organic) produce and free recipe advice? I'll take that over mass-produced items any day. British, French, Italian, Polish, Indian, Asian, West Indian... you name it, the independent shops have got it.

Myth 2: Chain stores are always cheaper

Research has shown that despite the best efforts of supermarkets trying to convince us otherwise, beyond a number of core commodity products many items are not in fact cheaper in larger stores.

Check out my shopping list below and let the results speak for themselves.

Myth 3: Bigger stores provide better quality

For those who argue that the quality of the food mentioned in the above table must be poorer to be cheaper, let me state something for the record: piff!

From my shopping trip, the fruit and veg proved to be fresh, firm, juicy and full of flavour, and the meat was tender, with no sinewy fat in sight.

Admittedly, the fresh produce didn't last as long as its chemically treated supermarket brethren, but that was quite reassuring (it's something about grapes that survive for three weeks in your fridge? And there are health issues at stake too: research published in the British Journal of Nutrition in 2000 showed that the chemical processing involved in preserving the sort of lugged salads you find in supermarkets could

be destroying much of its nutritional value.

Myth 4: Supermarkets are easier and speedier

I used to tell myself that it was the 'ease' and 'speed' of the

supermarket that drew me in. Whilst this is almost certainly true for many of the folk who live further out of London, for us Wandsworth and Lambethites, where independent shops in close proximity offer every imaginable product, this is far less true.

Consider the distance you travel through the aisles in a supermarket and compare that to the distance

	SUPERMARKET	INDEPENDENT/MARKET
Garlic (Ball of)	45p	20p
Groceries (Bag)	£2.49	99p
Ambergier	99p	30p
Casseroles Beef (steering steak)	£4.95 kilo	£2.49 kilo

And it's not only food items. I recently bought a silly perfume in a local store for £4, an item that could have slipped off the mainstream at many a high-street store for five times the price.

The point is that even if your primary aim is to keep your spending down, don't assume that the bigger stores will achieve this for you. Unsurprisingly they have their own priorities.

