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## FEATURE-Fight to be 'local' heats up in British food

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LUDLOW, England, June 4 (Reuters) - Even before it had opened, supermarket Ludlow Food Centre saw a flurry of letters in local newspapers from readers calling for a boycott of a new rival Tesco outlet in the local store's favour.

Its spacious wooden shelves with piles of loose fruits and vegetables -- and a policy of selling local produce -- appealed to a fast-growing minority of British shoppers wanting to ditch convenience and revive the eating habits of the past.

"We have forgotten about the joy of waiting for the first English strawberries in summer, and expect asparagus even at Christmas," Managing Director Sandy Boyd told Reuters.

"Thanks to supermarkets that simply airfreight everything all the time, we have no concept of seasonality now -- which when you think about it, was also more environmentally friendly," said Boyd, 51, who had earlier developed a farm retail shop at Chatsworth, in Derbyshire, for the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire.

'Local' is the new battleground of the world's most advanced retail market as food stores of all sizes rush to cater to shoppers' concerns about climate change and food provenance. Whole Foods Market, the world's biggest organic and natural foods chain, arrives in London on June 6.

Competition is so intense in the 125 million pound (\$250 million) grocery sector supermarkets are slugging it out with six-figure advertising campaigns aimed at proving their local credentials to claim a slice of the premium market.

At Tesco, where a third of British shoppers buy groceries, people can buy "localchoice" milk from a nearby dairy -- for around 6 pence extra per litre. Waitrose, a smaller supermarket group owned by its employees, boasts that it brings its local produce from no more than 30 miles (50 km) away.

Yet with criticism of supermarket might still mounting, hundreds of independent farm stores are springing up, seeking to provide an alternative and cash in on shoppers' desire to be closer to the land.

"The prices of locally sourced products tend to be slightly higher than imported products, but being able to tell the provenance of food is important to consumers today," said Andrew Richards, senior policy advisor at the National Farmers' Union.

"And when you twin that with the need to combat climate change, then you have a case for a local food store that cuts food miles and supports local farmers."

### BOTTLED JAMS

The Ludlow Food Centre, which opened in April at a cost of 2.5 million pounds, resembles a barn on the outside and has skylights and show-kitchens running the length of the store, so shoppers can see jams being bottled and

pies being stuffed.

The store, initially conceived as a market for the tenant farmers on the estate of the Earl of Plymouth, set out to reflect its roots in the farming community at Ludlow, home to the British headquarters of the Slow Food movement.

Boyd and his wife went as far as to build it around two ancient oak trees on the land, rather than uproot them.

By sourcing 80 percent of its food grown, produced or processed in the four neighbouring counties of Shropshire, Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Powys, it also promotes the idea of eating seasonal produce.

"Supermarkets have removed consumers so far from the food production process we have forgotten about the tastes, smells and texture of foods," said Boyd, who has worked in food and retail for 30 years, starting as a 17-year old mopping floors at a hotel in Stratford-upon-Avon.

Air freight of food has the highest environmental impact per tonne of any mode of transport, according to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Food transport by air grew more rapidly than any other mode from 1992 to 2004, with vehicle distances more than trebling, it said in a report.

#### LOCAL EXOTICS

Yet Boyd is among the first to admit it will take more than guilt about food miles to wean Britons off kiwis at Christmas and mangoes all year round.

With that in mind, some producers are working to bridge the gap by growing those exotic foods at home.

Chinese pak choi cabbage, South American chillies, Feta cheese and wine are now grown on British soil, and demand for them is increasing.

When Cherry Farms, Britain's largest pak choi farm, opened four years ago, all output went to Chinese consumers. Now 40 percent goes to English customers and that figure is growing, Hong Kong native and farm-owner David Lam told Reuters.

For hot-chilli producer Genovese in Bedfordshire, which supplies the main supermarkets with 10 tonnes of South American and Middle Eastern chillies a week, the green customer is vital.

"I definitely know my buyers are very keen on being green and if they can get chillies at the same price in the UK as abroad they definitely do it," said owner Salvatorio Genovese.

These new ventures are not without their own critics -- some environmentalists and supermarket executives argue the extra heat needed to grow tropical fruits in temperate Britain is as bad for the climate as air miles. Others say the trend could devastate growers in developing countries.

Boyd acknowledges there are drawbacks but insists Ludlow Food Centre is still onto a good thing -- for everybody.

"I'm not saying this is the perfect way of doing it, but it is a more sustainable way to do it," he said.

(Additional reporting by Rachel Sanderson in London)

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