Consumers' Views on Local Food

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This focus-group study investigated shoppers' beliefs and behaviors regarding local foods. Two of the four focus groups consisted of organic food shoppers. They were more committed to purchasing local foods and identified a much wider array of such foods than did the conventional shoppers. One group of conventional shoppers consisted of African-Americans, who tended to define "local" as a much larger geographic area than did the group of Caucasian conventional shoppers. The African-Americans were also less interested in local-food labels per se, despite being interested in the qualities associated with local foods: freshness, supporting local farmers, and developing personal relationships with food producers.

"Has anyone ever bought [farmer's name] cheese? [Several participants say, 'Yes.'] Did you notice what the ingredient is on there? Love. [Many participants laugh.] He puts love on his ingredient list! And I mean you taste that stuff and yes! . . . [Another farmer's name], his honey? That guy's a gas! I mean I just think of him lots of times when I put a spoonful of honey in my tea." Focus Group Participant AG2-3

Demand for alternative foods, such as organic and local products, is increasing dramatically in the US. Organic sales grew nine-fold between 1990 and 2001 (Organic Trade Association 2003), while outlets for local food have risen sharply. In 2002 there were 3,100 farmers' markets in the country, up from 1,755 in 1994 (Agricultural Marketing Service 2003). Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has also gained momentum, expanding from two such initiatives in the U.S. in the mid-1980s to more than 1,000 in 1999 (Lass et al. 2003). Further, 'local' or 'locally produced' labels are being used by natural food cooperatives, health food stores and some grocery stores to promote products, and state campaigns such as "Jersey Fresh" and "Arizona Grown" are growing in popularity (Adelaja, Brumfield, and Lininger 1990; Jekanowski, Williams, and Schiek 2000). Shaffer (2002) found that 86 percent of consumers supported mandatory state labels while Wilkins, Bowdish, and Sobel (1996) found similar high support (91 percent) for local food. Finally, there is growing interest in the European Union, where regulations protect the authenticity of foods based on its origin and use of traditional production techniques (University of Kentucky 2004).

Most research on alternative foods has focussed on organics. This includes establishing demographic profiles of consumers who purchase organic food (for example, Byrne et al. 1991) and predicting their willingness to pay (for example, Govindasamy and Italia 1999; Underhill and Figueroa 1996). But less research exists on consumer interest in local food, despite the increasing availability and demand for these products. Notwithstanding consumer interest and the efforts of some states to promote food grown or processed within their jurisdictions, standards for local foods do not exist in the U.S. With this context in mind, the purpose of this paper is to investigate consumers' interests, attitudes and motivations for buying local food. The findings indicate fruitful directions for future research on demand for such products and point to the importance of developing standards and labeling requirements for local food. The findings also contribute to the development of better marketing strategies to promote local food to various target groups, including conventional shoppers, organic shoppers, and African-Americans.

Background

Local food means many things to many people: the two most popular definitions are food grown within a county, followed by food grown within a

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state (Wilkins, Bowdish, and Sobel 1996). Harris et al. (2000) found participants defined the term as within or near one's county or state or even neighboring states, while in the United Kingdom, Tregear, Kuznesof, and Moxey (1999) found that consumers associated the term with geographical areas, customs, or foods eaten by people from certain socio-economic backgrounds.

Farmers' markets, CSAs, and direct buying are generally accepted as venues for local food. Most farmers' markets have specific requirements limiting what can be sold to consumers. Payne (2002) found that 88 percent of vendors lived within 50 miles of the market and two-thirds of customers live within ten miles. Payne also found that in 2000 nearly 2.8 million broadly representative customers (74 percent Caucasian, 14 percent African American, and 6 percent Hispanic) shopped weekly at farmers' markets, generating about $888 million in sales. Lockeretz (1986) found that the shopping experience was the primary motivation; shoppers enjoyed buying directly from farmers and they enjoyed the market atmosphere. However, not all consumers patronize farmers' markets; the most common reasons given are distance from the consumer's home and inconvenience of the location (Eastwood, Brooker, and Gray 1999).

Less is known about CSAs and direct buying. The top reasons for joining CSAs are access to fresh and organic food, support of local farmers, and direct contact with the food producer (Kolodinsky and Pelch 1997). The likelihood of joining a CSA increased among consumers who purchased organic food *and* who were socially or politically aware (Kolodinsky and Pelch 1997). Brown (2003) found that farm background and membership in environmental groups were associated with preference for and willingness to pay for local produce. Some research indicates that a typical local-food shopper is female, college educated, and with an above-average income (Brown 2003; Eastwood, Brooker, and Gray 1999; Govindasamy, Italia, and Adelaja 2002; Kezis et al. 1998). Brooker and Eastwood (1989) found that those over 35 years and those in larger households were more positive toward state-product labels but that willingness to pay was low. However, Kolodinsky and Pelch (1997) found income unrelated to local food demand, while Jekanowski, Williams, and Schiek (2000) found that education was negatively related. Demographics alone cannot predict local-food purchases; rather, it is a combination of motivations: access to fresh, quality food; support of local farmers; and direct contact with farmers (Brown 2003; Eastwood, Brooker, and Gray 1999; Govindasamy, Italia, and Adelaja 2002; Kezis et al. 1998; Kolodinsky and Pelch 1997).

Methods

A focus-group study is an appropriate method to elicit qualitative responses about individual's beliefs and perceptions (Kreuger 1994). For this study, four focus groups were conducted in Madison, Wisconsin in November 2002 and January 2003 with primary food shoppers. Two groups consisted of shoppers who frequently purchased organic foods while participants in the other two groups were not regular organic shoppers. The first two groups are referred to as alternative food shoppers and the latter two groups as conventional shoppers. Each session was taped and transcribed to ensure accuracy.

Participants were recruited through existing organizations and events. Alternative food shoppers were recruited through a food-cooperative newsletter, a listserve of a Slow Food convivium, and a local food festival. They were screened to ensure they were regular organic food shoppers. One conventional group was recruited from a home-economics alumni association and the second was recruited from a bible-study group.

All the alternative food shoppers were Caucasian. Alternative Group 1 included three males and seven females ranging in age from 26 to 76 years. Alternative Group 2 ranged in age from 22 to 47 years and included nine females and three males. Both conventional groups were all female. The first included 11 Caucasians ranging in age from 21 to 79, and the second included 10 African-Americans ranging in age from 26 to 60.

Results

Each participant was asked to define local food. Given that there are no standards nor any widely accepted definition of local food, the participants gave a wide range of responses. Alternative Group 2 (AG2) mostly gave responses using driving time to measure distance. Six to seven hours was the most frequently cited limit of local food. Two participants indicated shorter driving distances (two and four-and-a-half hours). Only a quarter of the participants used political definitions. Two participants indicated that the distance was relative, meaning that local food was whatever was the closest, while one person used mode of transportation (having to use a car versus an airplane) to define local food. Only one person mentioned seasonality: *"To eat local means to eat in the season" (AG2-3).* Another characteristic mentioned was that local food was produced on smaller farms.

Alternative Group 1 (AG1) took a much more qualitative approach to defining local food, and none of the participants measured distance in terms of driving time. While most of the respondents mentioned political boundaries, similar to Harris et al. (2000), there was a range of responses regarding what boundary was appropriate: within a county, within neighboring counties, within a state, and within neighboring states. The qualitative definitions are illustrated in the following participant comments:

"Locally produced will often trigger a thought in my head, 'this could be fresher and better than something not locally produced.' But I know from experience that this is not always true." AG1-12.

"While I would say that what [AG1-12] said is absolutely right, it may not be necessarily fresher but I would still buy local over some other part of the country because it involves less burning of fuel, less transportation costs to get here. . . . We grow apples right here. Why are we trucking them in from Washington?" AG1-3

"It means that I'm putting money into the local economy, which is very important to me, and helping Wisconsin farmers and Wisconsin people in general." AG1-1.

Conventional Group 1 (CG1) had responses similar to both AG1 and AG2. About half defined local food in terms of distance, mostly using driving time as a measure, with a day's drive being the most frequently cited response. One person (CG1-1) defined distance by saying *"If I wanted to go out and see this place, I could,"* and many others nodded in agreement. Another person said they preferred to know what state the food was from rather than seeing a label identifying a product as local. Other definitions of local food included products available at a farmers' market, local varieties or riper food, and products from smaller farms; one participant indicated that the definition was relative:

"I think in different contexts it can mean different things. When I'm home, it could mean that it's within the community. But when we are talking here about locally, locally may mean if it was [produced] in the Midwest. But I think also within a day's drive." CG1-4

Interestingly, the African American group, Conventional Group 2 (CG2), had a much more homogenous definition of local food which was for the most part much larger in scale than were the other groups'. Just under half of the group defined local food as being produced in one's state or surrounding states and just under half defined local food as being produced in the U.S. There was some indication that this viewpoint was tied to an active personal network that was geographically large; one of the participants was born outside the U.S. and two mentioned linkages with other states. However, three participants in CG2 also had much more personal definitions of local food than did the other groups: one defined local as food from a relative's garden and two defined local food as produced by someone one knew.

The second set of questions asked of the groups were whether they shopped at farmers' markets or farm stands, belonged to a CSA, or whether they looked for local labels when they shopped at the grocery store. Every participant in all four groups shopped at a farmers' market, though some only twice a year while others weekly. None of the conventional shoppers were members of a CSA and only a few of the alternative shoppers were members. Frequency of buying from farm stands or U-pick fell between farmers' markets and CSA membership.

Among alternative food shoppers, three-quarters looked for a 'local' label when shopping at a store. In contrast, while many conventional shoppers looked at labels for other reasons, such as diet, 'local' was not something any of the conventional shoppers looked for. This is consistent with findings of Wilkins, Bowdish, and Sobel (2002) who found that few consumers actively sought to purchase local or seasonal produce.

Among the reasons for shopping at farmers' markets, freshness and flavor were cited most frequently. Supporting local farmers was important to half of CG1. One elaborated that they bought from farmers' market because they understood the challenges of farming. Two participants in CG1 cited entertainment as a reason for shopping at farmers' markets. One member of CG1 living in a multigenerational household elaborated on sharing local food as an experience with one's family and friends.

". . . I enjoy fruit because of the memories, and because of all the meanings that come with it. And I think with local foods, you have much more of that richness, and it just gives you more. You're connected to it, more memories, more of that, and it just seems more meaningful when you're eating it. And you can share the experience with your children or your grandchildren or your neighbors, and I think that makes it more positive. Local gives it more of that background flavor." CG1-4.

Along with freshness, flavor, and longer lasting produce, personal relationships arose again in CG2:

"Do I shop at farmers' markets? Yes. Why? I feel like it's more personable, like they really appreciate your business, and I feel like I'm helping them out by purchasing directly from them versus purchasing in the store." CG2-9

"I shop at the farmers' market. Do I buy directly from the farmer [at a farm stand]? Sometimes, if my husband isn't in the car, [group laughs] then I stop. . . . I like buying at the farmers' market for the same reason that [CG2-9] had, just to encourage the farmers. They actually feel a sense of pride about the produce that they actually planted. . . ." CG2-2

Alternative shoppers bought at farmers' markets, CSAs, and farm stands, or purchased local food at their grocery store to support local farmers, local communities, and sustainable land use. Nearly half of AG2 also gardened. Two in AG2 were members of a CSA and two were former members. The latter chose not to continue with a CSA due to lack of choice, wasted food, and the inconvenience of picking up the box at a fixed time each week. The following comments illustrate some of the motivations for buying local foods:

"I do shop at farmers' market in the summer. I like the experience—it's sort of primitive, you pay in cash, you go to the town square, I just like that. [Several participants laugh.] I don't belong to a CSA because I want to have the freedom to pick and choose when I shop." AG2-?

"I really appreciate it when I can go to a place, like this place [a food cooperative], and see where the produce comes from. . . . But what I want to know [is], is this [farmer's name] carrots? It means a lot to me and I wish . . . I wish [large local grocery chain] would say, 'this is from farmer so and so.' I would like that." AG2-3

"So if that option's there, I would take locally grown. And why? One, the transportation, and two, just to support the local farm community and what that means for the region and its economy and the land. [Also,] being able to develop a relationship with farmers and go out to the farms and be a part [of them]." AG2-7

"Well, if I see 'Chile' [on the produce label] it often scares me because in some of these places they still use DDT and heavy duty things." AG2-8

When asked about what foods people bought locally, the alternative shoppers gave a much wider range of foods than did the conventional shoppers. All groups mentioned produce, particularly corn, tomatoes, and melons. However, it is notable that in the Dairy State, none of the alternative shoppers and only one conventional shopper mentioned fluid milk. Among the alternative food shoppers the range of specific produce items was larger, including items such as spinach, herbs, and mushrooms. Beef, pork, chicken, eggs, honey, syrup, ice cream, baked goods, cheese, beer, and wine were also mentioned among the alternative groups. In addition, hunting, fishing, and foraging were mentioned as local food sources.

Consistent with Govindasamy, Italia, and Adelaja (2002) and Kezis et al. (1998), the conventional food shoppers tended to mention a narrow range of produce items: sweet corn, tomatoes, melons, and apples. In addition, CG1 mentioned berries, eggs, rhubarb, baked goods, squash, meat, and asparagus, and, when asked, did confirm that they bought local cheese. CG2 mentioned ice cream, cheese, green beans, and cucumbers in addition to other common produce items.

Implications

This research revealed some important qualitative differences in how food shoppers define local food. In this focus-group study, most conventional Caucasian shoppers and alternative food shoppers in AG2 viewed the landscape through the windshield of their car, judging distance in driving time, while shoppers in AG1 defined local food in terms of political boundaries and qualitative characteristics such as helping farmers or conserving resources. The African American shoppers defined local food in terms of much larger political boundaries than did the Caucasians, but also in terms of personal relationships.

While we found only positive attitudes toward local foods, with participants associating it with enhancing the local economy and benefiting the environment, there were differences in how that translated into buying behavior. Among alternative food shoppers, there was greater interest in looking for and buying food labeled as locally produced. This corresponded to their perceptions that buying local products had direct benefits to the environment, to the local community, to farmers, and to their personal health. The wide range of local foods mentioned further reflects a strong orientation among alternative food shoppers to buy local products, though budget was mentioned as a limiting factor.

Conventional shoppers were equally enthusiastic about the concept of local production, and while they looked at food labels, 'locally produced' was not a label they searched for at the grocery store. They perceived local food as helping the local economy but did not mention anything specific, nor did they mention environmental or health benefits. Thus the fact that they were unable to identify specific direct benefits of buying food labeled as local is consistent with their not buying it despite supporting it in principle.

Conventional food shoppers did seek out local food at farmers' markets and at farm stands, though to varying degrees. These venues seem to be more effective than labels as a means of promoting local products among conventional food shoppers. All of the reasons given for shopping at farmers' markets indicate direct benefits to the shopper. While freshness and quality of products (which are tangible reinforcements of consumer behavior) were the primary reasons, there were some differences in other motivations; some Caucasian shoppers viewed farmers' markets as a form of entertainment and some African-American shoppers emphasized that they valued the personal interaction with farmers. The positive orientation of the African-American focus group toward fresh foods and farmers' markets suggests potential for building deeper relationships between farmers and African-American food shoppers.

In terms of sources of local food, none of the conventional shoppers had ever belonged to a CSA and only a few alternative shoppers were currently members. What limited participation was primarily a lack of choice in mix and amount of produce provided, particularly the inclusion of unfamiliar or what were seen as undesirable vegetables. Transportation and inconvenience in pick-up place or time was also an issue. This is of particular concern for African-American households because they have 40 percent fewer vehicles than do Caucasian households (U.S. Department of Labor 2002). And if entertainment and personal interaction are motivations to buy local food, a CSA with an unattended pick-up point will not fulfill this need.

Overall, this research reveals enthusiastic support for local food production, though there is no consensus on what local means. However, consumer behavior is not consistent with this enthusiasm unless consumers perceive direct benefits from buying local food. Because alternative food shoppers tend to view local food as providing direct environmental, economic, community, and health benefits they are more predisposed to look for and to use labels indicating locally produced items than are conventional food shoppers.

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