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Using Internet Bulletin Board Focus Group Sessions to Elicit Consumer Preferences for Ethnic Greens and Herbs

Ramu Govindasamy, Kathleen Kelley, and Venkata Puduri

In the Eastern United States, stakeholders agree that there is an urgent need to make farming more profitable to reduce the decline in the number of farmers and farmland acreage. New Jersey's vegetable marketing structure was recently reviewed by a team of national experts who concluded that the economic decline of the state's vegetable industry is imminent without a significant change in marketing strategies. Many state departments of agriculture and extension programs are trying to create or enhance networks between their farmers and niche-market distributors to create opportunities to thwart this decline. This paper primarily focuses on elucidating the market opportunities for ethnic greens and herbs. Furthermore, it explores ethnic consumers' preferences for local produce and their demographic characteristics. The ultimate goals of this project are to assist small and medium farmers to better understand consumer perceptions and factors that drive the ethnic greens and herbs market.

To best achieve the goals of the overall project and develop a meaningful survey instrument that can be used with a larger sample of four ethnic groups (Asian Indian, Chinese, Mexican and Puerto Rican) during Phase II of the project, four separate Internet bulletin board focus-group sessions were conducted to better understand consumer use of ethnic greens and herbs and perceived quality, price, and availability. Panelists participated if they met the screener criteria: belonged to one of the ethnic groups of interest, were the primary grocery shopper, lived within the East Coast region of the U.S., and were at least 18 years of age.

Focus-group results indicate that availability of ethnic greens and herbs depended on panelists'

location. Panelists residing in more metropolitan areas expressed that they had access to ethnic greens and herbs through at least one outlet. A minority of panelist reported traveling distances up to 40 miles from their residence to purchase such ingredients. Responses were mixed as to whether panelists chose to purchase from conventional grocery stores, from ethnic markets, or from both. Availability of ethnic markets, product quality and freshness, and price influenced their purchasing decisions. Those who were able to compare conventional grocery stores with ethnic markets noted that greens and herbs tended to be of higher quality at ethnic markets and, since respondents believed stock rotated more frequently, were fresher and priced lower. While a few panelists provided prices for items sold at ethnic markets compared to conventional grocery stores, most of the panelist either believed prices or expected prices to be lower at ethnic markets.

Responses will be used to construct a telephone survey of ethnic consumers matching the criteria stated above. Data from both studies will provide growers and retailers with information vital for meeting demand and exceeding the needs of ethnic consumers they serve. This market intelligence can assist growers in tailoring their products and promotional activities to better meet the needs of the ethnic greens and herbs purchaser. Consumers will be able to purchase their familiar home-country produce from local farms, which will enable them to satisfy their social as well as community needs. Moreover, promotion of locally grown produce reduces food miles, resulting in environmental benefits to the community.

Govindasamy is Associate Professor and Associate Director of Food Policy Institute, Department of Agricultural, Food and Resource Economics, and Puduri is Research Associate, Department of Agricultural, Food and Resource Economics, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ. Kelley is Associate Professor of Horticultural Marketing and Business Management, Pennsylvania State University, University Park.