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Journal of Food Distribution Research
Volume 44 Issue 1

Consumer Choices for Organic and Local Food Products in North Carolina

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Abstract

Consumer preferences for local and organic food in North Carolina have been steadily growing over the past decade. In order to measure the attitudes and preferences associated with the decision to select organic over local or vice versa, we first use qualitative methods to gain more knowledge in potential factors that affect consumers who patronize farmers' markets, the most utilized sales outlet by North Carolina organic and local farmers. We begin this process through the use of focus groups. These focus groups are selected from five locations throughout the state from three regions – Coastal (Wilmington), Piedmont (Charlotte, Greensboro, and Raleigh), and Mountain (Asheville). Therefore, the objective of the study is to evaluate the perceptions of consumers' choices for organic and locally grown available at farmers market produce.

This update focuses primarily on the Piedmont Triad region, which is located in the North-central region of the state including three major cities, which include Greensboro, High Point and Winston-Salem. The availability of locally and organically produced foods includes several regional supermarkets, specialty grocery stores, consumer cooperatives, farmers markets, and community supported agriculture initiatives. Ten to twelve target participants for the focus groups are representative of consumers of organic food products as indicated by the Organic Trade Association - 74 percent Caucasian, 13 percent African American, eight percent Hispanic, 2.7 percent Asian and other make up 1.6 percent of all organic consumers.

Preliminary findings revealed that the only distinction consumers make between locally produced and organically produced foods is labeling. Participants did provide their definition of "local," which included "within the county, state or couple of hundred mile radius." However, participants had limited knowledge regarding organic certification. Although the majority of participants purchase more local foods versus organic foods, they were willing to pay as much as 100% more for organic food with some participants "willing to find ways to make it affordable." Although farmers markets, consumer cooperatives, and community supported agriculture provided outlets for purchasing locally and organically produced foods. Participants also made purchases at available regional and specialty grocery stores. The primary implications of the preliminary findings in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina are as follow: (1) consumers appear indifferent to locally produced foods and organically produced foods and (2) consumers are "willing to pay" for food products that are perceived to have healthy, affordable, quality (taste/color) and local economy attributes.