Food Distribution Research Society

Journal of Food Distribution Research
Volume 45 Issue 1

Consumer Preferences for Local Food Products in North Carolina

Kenrett Y. Jefferson-Moore[Φa], Richard D. Robbins[b], Daniel Johnson[c], and Jackie Bradford[d]

[a]*Associate Professor, North Carolina A&T State University, 154-A Carver Hall, 1601 E. Market Street Greensboro, North Carolina, 27411, USA. Phone: 336-285-4829, Email: jykenret@ncat.edu*

[b]*Professor, North Carolina A&T State University, C.H. Moore Agricultural Research Station, Greensboro, North Carolina, 27411, USA.*

[c]*Former Graduate Research Assistant, North Carolina A&T State University 145 Carver Hall, 1601 E. Market Street, Greensboro, North Carolina, 27411, USA*

[d]*Undergraduate Research Assistant, North Carolina A&T State University 145 Carver Hall, 1601 E. Market Street, Greensboro, North Carolina, 27411, USA*

Abstract

With growing interests and concerns about nutrition and health, it has become increasingly important to understand what is preferred – extending consumer expenditure dollars towards organic or towards local food products. We address this issue by evaluating the perceptions of North Carolina consumer choices for organic, local and/or other ‘labeled’ food products. We investigate these preferences by conducting consumer focus groups in five locations throughout the state from three regions - Coastal, Piedmont, and Mountain. Forty-five participants were asked to participate in a 30 to 60 minute focus group assessing their attitudes about and perceptions of organic and/or local food products. Consistent patterns in all groups revealed that although females served as primary food purchasers, several households shared responsibilities based on their household preferences for local foods. Most individuals made the distinction between organic and local through labeling and held a stronger preference for local foods versus organic foods.

Keywords: organic, local, focus groups

[Φ]Corresponding author

Introduction

The movement for organic and/or local food products is continuing to grow in the state of North Carolina. Although farmers markets serve as the most utilized sales outlet by North Carolina organic farmers, little market research has been conducted on consumer preferences for organic and/or local food products. Organic food sales have been identified as the largest growth segment in U.S. agriculture with sales increasing from $3.6 billion in 1997 to $26.7 billion in 2010. At least 78% of U.S. consumers have purchased organic foods occasionally and 40% buy more organic food than they did one year ago (Organic Trade Association 2011). Areas where increased organic production may be beneficial are grain crops due to the need of organic feed for organic livestock producers. Although interest and consumption are increasing, organic producers and manufacturers have had to deal with a weaker U.S. economy and high costs while organic imports are on the rise due to domestic shortages. All of which may provide incentives for farmers seeking viable alternative enterprises. There is, however, a concern of the ‘locally grown’ label on food products. Due to explicit and implicit costs associated with organic certification, farmers may find that providing local food products more beneficial than organic production adoption.

In this study, we utilize focus groups as an appropriate method for gaining a better understanding of whether North Carolina consumers prefer organic to local food products (Chang and Zepeda 2004; Zepeda et al. 2006). As noted by Zepeda et al. (2006), focus groups are useful in investigating consumer attitudes and knowledge about food products and should provide information to support further research. Ultimately, our findings are expected to provide insight on opportunities that might exist for local small-to-medium scale producers within the state.

Description of the Focus Groups

This study encompassed five focus groups involving a total of 45 participants conducted in five key cities in the mountain, piedmont, and coastal regions of North Carolina from September 2012 through August 2013. Participants who frequent five premier farmers markets in the three regions - Asheville (mountain region), Greensboro, Charlotte, and Raleigh-Durham (piedmont region), and Wilmington (coastal region) – were asked to participate in a 30 to 60 minute session to address questions regarding their attitudes about and perceptions of North Carolina organic and/or local food products. Asheville, a city of over 80,000 people located in western North Carolina, has a growing interest or movement towards local products in general according to the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (2007). Buncombe County, where Asheville and other surrounding cities are located, has over 89.06% Caucasian/White population, followed by 7.48% Black and 2.78% Hispanic or Latino of any ethnic group (U.S. Census Bureau 2013).

The piedmont region is the most densely populated region in the state of North Carolina. Greensboro, High Point and Winston-Salem, also known collectively as the Piedmont Triad, have a metropolitan population of over 1.6 million people and located in the north central section of the piedmont. Greensboro is the primary city with approximately 270 thousand people. In terms of demographic characteristics of Guilford County (includes Greensboro and High Point) in 2010, 64.53% of the population was Caucasian, 29.27% Black, 2.44% Asian, and 3.8% Hispanic and Latin American of any race (U.S. Census Bureau 2013). Charlotte, located in the south central section of the piedmont, has over 775 thousand people with several surrounding counties contributing to the overall metropolitan population of approximately 2.3 million people. Charlotte's demographic characteristics are more diverse than the Piedmont Triad region with 64.02% White, 27.87% Black, 3.15% Asian and 13.1% Hispanic and Latino of any race in Mecklenburg County (includes Charlotte and surrounding cities) (U.S. Census Bureau 2013). The Research Triangle of the piedmont refers to the Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill metropolitan area, where almost 2 million people reside. The Research Triangle region is unique because it houses the world's largest research park, Research Triangle Park. The majority of the park rests in Durham County with other portions in Wake County. Therefore, the focus group for this segment of the region took place in Durham County. In 2000 the county was 50.91% Caucasian, 39.46% Black or African American, and 7.63% Hispanic or Latin American of any ethnic group.

Wilmington is the primary city of the coastal region located in the southeastern segment. The Wilmington metropolitan area includes New Hanover, Brunswick and Pender Counties and in 2012 had a combined population of over 260 thousand people. New Hanover County (includes Wilmington and surrounding cities) has a population of 76.8% Caucasian, 14.5% Black or African American, and 1.2% Asian, 2.04% Hispanic or Latino of any ethnic group (U.S. Census Bureau 2013).

The study consisted of five groups of shoppers who frequent five premier farmers markets in the three regions identified previously. All 45 participants were recruited from pre-existing events as recommended by Kruger (1994) and utilized by Zepeda, et al. (2006). Study participants were recruited from the premier farmers markets on "high traffic days" as identified by the farmers' market managers throughout the data collection period. Participants were then asked to meet at a local Cooperative Extension office. Each cooperating participant was asked a series of questions regarding their attitudes about and perceptions of organic and/or local food products and awarded a souvenir and a $25 gift card for participation.

Greensboro included four women and three men, ranging in age from 42 to 58 years. All of the female participants were primary shoppers with one male as a primary shopper and one sharing responsibilities. Six of the participants were Caucasian with one African American. Participant incomes ranged from $52,000 to $165,000 per year with the highest education levels ranging from associates degrees to doctoral degrees or professional degrees. Charlotte included four men and 3 women, ages 35-61 years. All participants were primary shoppers with income ranging from $71,000 to $125,000 annually. Three participants were African American, one American Indian, and three Caucasian with the highest level of education obtained ranging from attending college without completion to bachelor's degrees. Wilmington included six women and three men, ranging in age from 39 to 66 years. Seven participants were Caucasian and two African American. All participants were primary shoppers with income ranging from $20,000 to $110,000 per year with highest education level ranging from bachelors to masters degrees. Raleigh-Durham included eight women and five men, ages 18-84 years. Eight participants were primary purchasers, one participant shared the responsibility, and the remaining participants were not primary shoppers or refrained from addressing the question. Seven participants were African American, four Caucasian, one White/American Indian, and one participant identified other as their ethnic group. Incomes of participants ranged from $300 to $100,000 annually.

Asheville included six women and two men, ranging in age from 22-75 years. Seven participants were Caucasian and one White Hispanic or Latin American with incomes ranging from $0 to $40,000 per year. Six participants were primary shoppers and two did not identify themselves as primary shoppers. The highest education level obtained by participants ranged from high school to doctoral or professional degrees.

Findings

Focus groups were asked a series of structured, open-ended questions concerning their attitudes about and perceptions of organic and/or local food products. The group was able to talk individually or to respond to each other with no limits place on the time. In addition to evaluating the perceptions of consumer choices for organic and locally grown products in their market, we noted the differences among consumers in the three regions identified in the state. It appears as if there were slight differences in feedback among all groups in the Piedmont region (Greensboro, Charlotte, and Raleigh-Durham), which was expected due to similar demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. The greatest difference was found between the coastal (Wilmington) and western (Asheville) regions of the state.

Differences, Similarities and Definitions

Participants were asked to distinguish between organic and local foods and whether or not they believe they were essentially the same. Greensboro, Charlotte, Raleigh-Durham, and Asheville primarily made distinctions through labeling (i.e., organic certification, local farmer grown, and other advertisements). Wilmington primarily made the contrast through price. The groups were also asked to provide their definition of local and responses ranged from products produced within a 50- to 200-mile radius. Major differences were found between Charlotte, Wilmington and Asheville, where they identified local as products grown, specifically, in North Carolina plus 50- to 100-mile radius. Further discussion revealed that there were out-of-state markets such as Tennessee, Georgia, and South Carolina closer than food products produced in the eastern regions of the state. The coastal region also served out-of-state and agritourism markets such as Myrtle Beach, Hilton Head, Charleston, and other coastal beaches in South Carolina. However, some farmers markets may hold standards of only supplying foods produced in North Carolina or specifically labeled as out of state to protect North Carolina agriculture. The groups felt that locally grown and organic had similar benefits. Many in the group purchased organic because it was pesticide free, but substituted locally grown often because of the price difference. One difficulty the shoppers have is that many of the farmers markets do not have a dedicated section for organic vegetables. The shoppers have to go to the individual stalls, some which are not marked as organic. This made it more difficult for the shopper who wanted to purchase organic.

Knowing the Farmer

In terms of knowing-your-farmer, all groups responded positively and expressed that knowing-your-farmer would help the customer become more knowledgeable of the product, establish trust through farmer integrity, realize whether safety standards have been met, and rely on a high quality product. They also felt that even if a farmer did not meet organic standards, the farmer did not use chemicals as heavy as did other farmers, making the produce safer.

Willingness-to-Pay, Factors, and Retail

All groups with the exception of Wilmington were willing to pay more for locally produced products considering knowing-your-farmer benefits and for certified organic food products. A few participants in Wilmington were somewhat uncertain due to the limited knowledge of USDA certification versus organic food products labeled by producers without certification. Many in the other regions also were unsure about certification.

Participants in all groups were also asked about factors leading to the decision to buy local food. Attributes were consistently presented as healthy, affordable, community-support, quality, taste, color, nutrition, price, and freshness. When asked about other trusted sources for local food and other products, participants presented similar responses – regional supermarkets (i.e., Harris Teeter, Food Lion, and Lowes Foods), specialty grocers (i.e., the Fresh Market, Whole Foods, Earth Fare, and Trader Joe's), producer and consumer cooperatives, and other regional, state, county, and/or city farmers markets.

Conclusion

There has been a large increase in demand for organic foods in the last decade. Many consumers have also increased the purchases at roadside and local farmers markets. This study was intended to look at consumer preferences for local versus organic foods in North Carolina. Focus group sessions were held in five regions throughout the state to determine that preference.

The consumers in this study list the benefits of local versus organic as almost the same, better nutrition, fresher, better quality, better taste and helps the local community. They note that organic vegetables have no artificial chemicals. The shoppers are willing to pay more for organic foods, but note the price difference. They tend to buy both local and organic, but purchase more local. Most tend to define local as grown in North Carolina or within 50 to 100 miles.

One issue identified is the lack of understanding the definition of organic certification, and what it takes to be organic. A program to educate the consumer is needed.

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