

Talking Local: Florida Consumer Definitions of Local Food¹

Caroline R. Warwick, Olivia K. Doyle, Valentina Castano, Meredith M. Oglesby, Lauri M. Baker, Joy N. Rumble, Yiqian Ma, and Tracy A. Irani²

Introduction

This EDIS publication focusing on consumer definitions of local food is the first of a six-part EDIS publication series about Florida consumers and their perceptions of local food. This series focuses on ways Extension agents can assist Florida farmers and ranchers in the labeling, sale, and promotion of locally produced products. The Talking Local series provides information about Florida consumers' perceptions of local food to Extension faculty who are interested in local-food programming or who work with local food clientele.

This publication introduces the local food climate in Florida by examining how consumers define "local." This series focuses on the local food movement and Florida residents' definitions of local food, reasons for purchasing local food, and *Fresh from Florida* perceptions.

Introduction to Local Food

Consumer demand for and interest in locally grown foods has significantly increased over the years (Martinez et al., 2010). As individuals and organizations continue to make decisions about how and why they purchase or eat particular foods (Coit, 2008), a need has developed to further expand localized consumer markets (Zepada & Li, 2009).

Local food plays a large role in Florida's economy, and contributes to an estimated 183,625 jobs and \$10.47 billion in gross domestic product (Feeding Florida. 2021).

In response to growing consumer interest in local foods and its impact on Florida agriculture, the UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education conducted a study to explore consumers' perceptions of local food. For a more comprehensive understanding of consumers' perceptions, a series of 10 focus groups was conducted in 2012, with two taking place in each of Florida's Extension Administrative Districts. A total of 93 participants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, occupations, and ages were involved in the study. Focus groups are not generalizable beyond those who participate in the study.

Definition of Local Food

Consumers participating in the focus groups were asked to define local food and discuss what they did/did not consider local food. When discussing the definition of local food, the consumers identified three broad categories: food produced within the immediate area, food produced within Florida, and food produced in the United States. Consumers then discussed what they would not consider as local food. They identified packaged/processed foods, foods from

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2. Caroline G. Roper, graduate assistant, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; Joy N. Rumble, assistant professor, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; Yiqian Ma, graduate assistant, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; and Tracy A. Irani, professor and department chair, Department of Family, Youth and Community Services; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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chain grocery stores and restaurants, and some meat and fish products as not local.

Within the Immediate Area

The most specific definition of local food discussed by consumers was food produced or raised within their immediate area, including their city and county. Consumers discussed their most ideal definition of local being close to home. One northeast Florida consumer stated, “I would rather have my fruits and vegetables grown in the United States. And I would prefer them to be grown local.” Consumers also discussed driving distance playing a part in the definition of local food and one south Florida consumer said, “Food grown or raised in, you know, an hour or two at most, away.”

Consumers discussed many benefits associated with purchasing food produced within their immediate area, including keeping their money in the community, supporting local businesses, and boosting the local economy. Consumers also discussed the high quality of food they could purchase locally. Food purchased locally was perceived as being fresher, more flavorful, and environmentally friendly.

Within Florida

The second and broader definition of local food discussed by consumers was food produced or raised within the state of Florida. Although some consumers discussed purchasing food from within their immediate area as ideal, many consumers also identified food produced or raised within the state as local. One northwest Florida consumer said, “If you bought fruits and vegetables and meats anywhere in the state of Florida [they] would really be considered local, or even a little bit into Georgia and Alabama.” Consumers discussed their preference for food grown or produced within Florida for various reasons including supporting the state economy, higher food quality, and preferences for regionally known commodities. One south Florida consumer said, “I usually think local is State of Florida because I want to get my strawberries from Plant City.”

Within the United States

The broadest definition of local food that was discussed by consumers was food grown in the United States. Although this definition does not specifically incorporate what most would define as local, consumers discussed their strong preference for purchasing food that was grown or raised within the United States. One central Florida consumer discussed their broad view of local and said, “I always

thought like local was from the United States.” Consumers also discussed their willingness to pay more for food from the United States when provided with foreign alternatives. One central Florida consumer said, “I try not to buy out of the country, for whatever reason. I don’t know, I feel like buying out of the country, some farmer in Idaho is going broke because I’m buying my grapes from Chile.” In addition, the consumers discussed concerns with food regulations and farming practices in other counties. A south-central Florida consumer said, “As long as it is in the country. Because I know down south of here, they are probably not regulated... the whole pesticide thing.”



Flexibility of Definitions

Consumers were willing to change their definitions of local for products that were not available locally but were still grown within the United States. When given a scenario about apples, a product that is not prominently grown in Florida, consumers were willing to expand their definition to include any apple from inside the United States. One central Florida consumer said, “I think for an apple, it’d be local for the United States.” Another northeast Florida consumer continued, “It’s too humid for Florida to grow apples, so if you want to define local, then you can only define it as supporting our country’s apple producers.”

When it comes to products that are not typically grown in the continental United States, such as coffee, consumers indicated that although the product may not be grown locally, local processing of these products would add local value to the products. Consumers also said they would be willing to accept coffee from as close as possible to be local. One south central Florida consumer said, “Maybe this hemisphere. Maybe this side of the globe.” When discussing

the added value of locally processed products, a central Florida consumer said, “If it will help jobs here locally, even if they weren’t grown here, it would be good for the economy and people, labor.”

Opportunities

The consumers in these focus groups provided valuable insight into their perceptions and definitions of local food, which is helpful in developing local food Extension programming and advising local food clientele. Based on the results, the following opportunities have been identified:

- **Labeling production location.** Extension faculty should encourage producers to label their production location on their products. Consumers discussed flexibility in their definition of local, and by labeling the production location on products, producers may be able to market their products to an audience that would not otherwise consider it local. This discussion should be incorporated into programming for producers focused on local food and/or marketing opportunities, as well as into resources such as brochures and online resources.
- **Do not define the term local.** Extension faculty, industry professionals, and producers can capitalize on consumers’ flexible definition of local by not defining local food. Rather than defining local food, efforts should be placed on informing consumers about local food so they are able to make informed decisions on local food topics, issues, and purchases.
- **Create awareness of local products.** Extension faculty should work with local area residents to create awareness of products that can and cannot be grown locally. Information about food produced locally could be incorporated into a variety of Extension programs, including food safety, gardening, nutrition, and canning programs.

Summary

Consumers indicated a strong preference for food products from their immediate area, but are willing to accept products from farther away if local products are not available. Although consumers indicated it might not be their ideal definition of local, products from the United States are high on their priority list, especially when compared to products that are imported. Extension faculty should encourage producers who are selling or marketing locally produced products to label the production location and not define the term “local” on their products. Extension faculty should also work with state agencies, local governments, and local

organizations to create awareness of local products and farms.

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Appendix: Articles in this Series

- Talking Local: Florida Consumer Definitions of Local Food
- Talking Local: Florida Consumers’ Local Food Purchasing Behaviors
- Talking Local: Florida Consumers’ Reasons for Purchasing Local Food
- Talking Local: Florida Consumers’ Food Buying Decisions when Given Local Food Information
- Talking Local: Florida Consumers’ Flexibility with the Term “Local”
- Talking Local: Florida Consumers’ *Fresh from Florida* Perceptions