

Talking Local: Florida Consumers' Local Food Purchasing Behaviors¹

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As the second publication in the six-part Talking Local EDIS series about Florida consumers and their perceptions of local food, this publication focuses on Florida consumers' local food purchasing behaviors. This series gives information related to local food for Extension agents and provides ways Extension agents can assist Florida farmers and ranchers in the labeling, sale, and promotion of locally-produced products. This publication examines consumers' local food purchasing behaviors, including where they purchase local food, what factors influence their decisions to purchase local food, what barriers prevent them from purchasing local food, and how important purchasing local food is to them.

Introduction to Local Food

Consumer demand for and interest in locally grown foods has significantly increased in recent years (Conneret et al., 2009). 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 and Li, 2009). Local food plays a large role in Florida agriculture, and from 2011–2012 the local food industry contributed \$8.3 billion to the state's economy (Hodges and Stevens, 2013).

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.

Local Food Purchasing Behaviors

Consumers participating in the focus groups were asked to discuss their local food purchasing behaviors, including where they did and did not purchase local food, what influenced their decisions to buy local food, barriers that prevented them from purchasing local food, and the importance of purchasing locally produced food.

Where Consumers Purchase Local Food

Consumers discussed that when shopping for local food they go to farmers markets, roadside stands or markets,

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non-chain grocery stores, and purchase directly from farms or from community supported agriculture programs (CSAs). Getting local food from their garden or a friend's garden was also mentioned. Although consumers primarily discussed purchasing locally produced food at these types of locations, some consumers also discussed purchasing local food at chain grocery stores or bulk retail stores.

Farmers Markets

Consumers discussed shopping at farmers markets when shopping for locally produced food. A central Florida consumer said, "If I can go into a farmers market on Saturday morning, and buy something, that to me is local." A northeast Florida consumer indicated their preference for shopping at farmers markets seasonally and said, "The farmers market, just seasonally, when I know the peak of the season for fruits and vegetables are out, and I'll visit those."

Roadside Stands and Markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs)

Consumers also discussed shopping at roadside stands or markets when shopping for locally produced food. A south Florida consumer said, "When you go out there they have all those people that pick it, you can get it off the side of the road, I have done it numerous times, and it is, it's grown right." A northeast Florida consumer discussed they like to purchase produce, "from private vendors because they grow their own things and they have their own land and then they will harvest the stuff and bring it to you."

Consumers discussed the benefits of social interactions with stand owners and the ability to sample products. A south Florida consumer said, "I shop at the produce stand that is down the road from my house, and I know the man gets his produce and stuff generally from the [county] and surrounding areas. He will tell you where it is from and he will let you try things."

Consumers discussed purchasing directly from local farms or having memberships in Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) organizations to access local food. Although consumers felt the food produced was local, they discussed variability in product and quantity as a challenge. A south Florida consumer said, "There are some local farmers where you can buy, like a box a month, or something. Or a box a week, and they bring it to your door. I have tried to do that, but you get all this stuff that they have. It's fresh and it's grown, but there are things that you don't really know what to do with."

Non-Chain Grocery Stores

Consumers discussed shopping at non-chain grocery stores, or local grocery stores, when shopping for locally produced food. Consumers discussed food purchased at non-chain grocery stores was more likely to be local than food purchased at chain grocery stores and was higher quality. A south central Florida consumer said, "Generally, the meat we get, when we get meat, would be from a local store as well.... [Local stores] have really good-quality meat with good prices."

Factors that Influence Local Food Purchasing Decisions

Consumers were also asked about factors that influence their local food purchasing decisions. Consumers discussed that their food purchasing decisions were influenced by sources of information, as well as their own needs, and the production location of the food.

Sources of Information

Information about the local food industry, primarily produced by the media, including health materials, marketing, packaging, and meal demonstrations, affected consumers local food purchasing decisions. A south central Florida consumer said, "What you read. It seems like every day, you pick up and they have come up with some new product that is like sprouts for your body. And you are like, 'Yeah, you know what, let's try it out.' And sometimes you like it and sometimes you don't." Marketing also had an influence on consumer purchasing behaviors. A northeast Florida consumer discussed purchasing new items that they normally wouldn't try after seeing creative or catchy commercials. The consumer added, "So I know, and I admit marketing works on me." Further research suggests marketing strategies should include the benefits of local food when creating messaging (Abrams & Soukup, 2017).

Production Location of the Food

Consumers discussed making food purchasing decisions based on the production location of the food. Consumers discussed a preference for food produced in a local location, while others discussed refusal to buy food grown in other countries. A northeast Florida consumer said, "I haven't bought grapes in like forever because I refuse to buy from Chile." The consumer continued, "I would rather have my fruits and vegetables grown in the United States. And I would prefer them to be grown local." While there is not a universal definition of local, several categories consumers

identified as being considered produced locally are outlined in the first publication in this series.

Barriers Preventing Consumers from Purchasing Local Food

Consumers were asked to discuss how they made decisions about buying local food and barriers that prevented them from purchasing local food. Lack of convenience, affordability, and availability were all discussed as barriers. Availability, price, convenience, exposure, attributes of the food, and personal preference were all discussed as impacting the participants' buying decisions. Feldmann and Hamm (2015) identified the lack of an official definition of local food is one of the challenges for consumers to purchase local foods and for local products to be labeled adequately.

Availability

Consumers indicated that in order to purchase local food, local food had to be available, which consumers often found challenging. They discussed that seasonality impacted the availability of local food and all food products were not available locally. A south Florida consumer said, "A lot of times we don't really have much say in buying local because we only have what's out there for us." Another south Florida consumer added, "We have to seek it out."

Price

Consumers discussed that price does impact their decision to purchase locally produced food. Consumers discussed that if local food is competitively priced then they will purchase the food, but if it is too expensive, they will not. A south-central Florida consumer said, "Like everything else, price can enter into it [the purchase of local food]." When speaking about the top factors that impact their buying decision, a northeast Florida consumer said, "Price point for me."

Consumers did discuss a preference for locally produced food if the quality and price were right. A central Florida consumer said, "If it's good quality and the price is right, and it comes from, you know, somewhere I'm not familiar with, versus locally, it will impact my buying decision."

Convenience

Consumers discussed that although they appreciate the idea of local food, sometimes purchasing local food can be an inconvenience. Having to stop at multiple stores or travel to the other side of town were barriers to purchasing local

food. A central Florida consumer said, "I'm not going to go all over the state to find the local food either, because it's gonna spend more money in gas nowadays to get to these local places."

Exposure

Consumers discussed that their decisions to purchase locally produced food were limited by their exposure to locally produced food. Consumers discussed that they were unaware of all the places to access local food and did not see advertisements for local food on a regular basis. A consumer who was not regularly exposed to local food discussed how the lack of exposure impacted purchasing. A northwest Florida consumer said, "If we stumble upon it [local food], we will be like... oh, yeah... but it's not part of our normal consciousness."

Importance

Several consumers discussed that purchasing locally produced food was important to them because they liked keeping their money local, supporting local businesses, knowing where their food came from, and they perceived a local product to be better quality than a non-local product. When referring to the importance of purchasing locally produced food, a central Florida consumer said, "Yeah, very important. It helps the local farmers and smaller local stores. It's gonna be fresher."

Consumers also discussed having the perception that purchasing locally produced food was important because it was safer than commercially produced food. A south Florida consumer said, "The other thought about not buying local is that most of the food outbreaks that we have had, both peanut butter and spinach and what not, they have all been traced back to giant food processing plants."

Opportunities

This insight is helpful in developing local food Extension programming and advising local food clientele. Based on the results, the following opportunities have been identified:

- **Encourage producers to sell local food at grocery stores.** In addition to the more common places to purchase local food such as farmers markets and roadside stands, some of the consumers also discussed purchasing local food at retail grocery stores. Additionally, the ability of consumers to purchase local food at a retail grocery store removes the barrier of inconvenience that the consumers identified as preventing their purchase of local food. Extension should encourage producers to explore

market opportunities, perhaps through co-ops and distribution channels that will get their product to retail grocery stores. Extension professionals could encourage producers to become a member of the Fresh from Florida Trademark program. This program allows members to use the Fresh from Florida label which could be included on its packaging to make it easy for consumers to select local products at the grocery store. More information on consumer's perceptions of Fresh from Florida are explored in the final publication of this EDIS series. Extension faculty could also assist Florida farmers and ranchers by developing regional local-food distribution guides, which could provide information about different local food sales channels in their area. All producers should be encouraged to embrace the "local" nature of their products, whether grown in the state, regionally grown, or even grown in the United States. There is a captive audience at the grocery store that values local food and convenience.

- **Promote local food information.** Consumers indicated that a lack of exposure was one of the main barriers to purchasing local food. In addition, they indicated that their purchasing decisions were often influenced by sources of information. Extension can help to promote local food by incorporating information about what local food is in season and where to buy local food into their communications. This information may be presented in the form of a "local food guide" or a "local food newsletter" highlighting area farmers and providing information about what they are producing, when they will harvest it, and where consumers can purchase their products. Traditional and digital communication channels should be used to promote this information in order to reach a broad clientele base. Inclusion of this information in appropriate programming as well as informative handouts, brochures, newsletters, press releases, websites, and social media may be beneficial.
- **Train producers to enhance their communication.** In addition to promoting local food through Extension communication, it is also important to work with producer clientele to help them enhance their communication and promotion of their local products. Extension programming should help producers develop marketing materials and launch promotional campaigns for their products. In addition, programming should also encourage producers to be transparent in their communication about production location, production practices, and operations. Communicating this information will allow consumers to identify where and how their food is produced and allows them to have social interactions with those who produce their food.

- **Encourage collaboration among producers.** One of the largest barriers consumers identified when discussing purchasing local food was convenience. Consumers discussed that although they had the desire to purchase local food, they often did not have the time to visit multiple stores, stands, or attend farmers markets. Extension should help producer clientele to identify opportunities to unite their efforts and sell a wide variety of local food in one location. Extension faculty could develop an Extension program focused on local food or establish an area farmers market. Collaborative selling could be done at farmers markets, through CSAs, and at local food stores. Collaboration will not only make buying local more convenient for the consumer but may offer an advantageous market for producers as well.
- **Increase awareness.** Extension faculty should work to increase the awareness of local food and the value it adds to the community through a promotional campaign. A campaign targeted at local opinion leaders, grocery shoppers, and community members could increase awareness of local food in the region. This can be accomplished through social media, Extension programming, or encouraging local farmers to unite in their efforts to sell products. By informing and educating consumers about the benefits of buying local food and supporting local producers, Extension faculty can encourage consumers to purchase more local products. This promotion could stand alone or be incorporated into existing programming such as food related, or financial programs targeted toward consumers.

Summary

Consumers discussed purchasing locally produced food at farmers markets and roadside stands or markets, although they discussed doing a majority of their grocery shopping at chain grocery stores. Consumers discussed that sources of information and personal needs were both factors that influenced their local food purchasing behavior. Consumers discussed purchasing locally produced food as important, although their actions did not always reflect this behavior. Limited availability, pricing, and lack of convenience were mentioned as barriers preventing consumers from purchasing locally produced food.

Extension faculty can assist Florida farmers and ranchers in the promotion of locally grown food by encouraging producers to partner with grocery stores, promoting local food information, training producers how to effectively communicate with the public, encouraging collaboration among producers, and increasing awareness about local food in the community.

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Articles in This Series

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- 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