

Talking Local: Florida Consumers' Reasons for Purchasing Local Food¹

Caroline R. Warwick, Valentina Castano, Meredith M. Oglesby, Olivia K. Doyle, Lauri M. Baker and Joy N. Rumble²

This EDIS publication focusing on understanding Florida consumers' reasons for purchasing local food is the third 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. This 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 provides information about why consumers purchase local food. 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 in recent years (Conner 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 & Li, 2009). Local food plays a large role in the US economy, with

the USDA estimating the value of this industry to be over \$6 billion (Tropp, 2016).

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, 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.

Reasons for Purchasing Local Food

Consumers participating in the focus groups were asked to identify specific reasons for purchasing local food. Consumers identified five major reasons: supporting the local economy and local businesses, the perception that local food is of higher quality, the social interaction which takes place when purchasing local food, the affordability of local food, and the environmental benefits of purchasing local food.

1. This document is AEC511, one of a series of the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date August 2014. Revised November 2017 and January 2022. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication. Funding for the research reported in this EDIS document was provided by a United States Department of Agriculture/Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services specialty crop block grant.

2. Caroline G. Roper, graduate assistant; and Joy N. Rumble, assistant professor, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

Supporting the Local Economy and Local Businesses

Consumers discussed supporting the local economy as a reason for purchasing local food. Consumers enjoyed helping members of the local community and supporting local businesses through their purchases of local food. When asked why they purchased locally produced food, a northwest Florida consumer said, “I would say it supports local business.”

Consumers perceived local food as having more of a personal touch, and they had the desire to support local business people rather than large corporations. A south-central Florida consumer said, “The desire to support local people rather than corporations that could be halfway across the country. There is more of a personal face on local.” Consumers also identified that by supporting the local economy, the money would go directly into the hands of the producer. A central Florida consumer said, “There’s a perception that you’re keeping your money locally, the person who is receiving the money is getting it directly rather than a bunch of middlemen or corporations.”

Consumers also discussed helping members of their local community through the purchase of local foods. A central Florida consumer said, “It helps the local farmers and smaller local stores.” Consumers continued to discuss the benefit to members of the local community and identified the importance of supporting local jobs. A central Florida consumer said, “I would think that you are keeping someone in a job locally.”

Consumers also identified with local businesses trying to be successful. When discussing the importance of supporting a local business, a south-central Florida consumer reflected upon his experience as a business owner and said, “For me, if I have to choose between two places, I would probably pick the local. Only just because I had a business at one time, and I know how important it is.”

Quality

Consumers discussed purchasing local food for the quality of the food. When discussing specific traits that make local food high quality, “Not frozen,” “[Not being] ripened along the way,” and “fresher” were mentioned by consumers. Consumers were also interested in the ripeness and the picking date of the product when discussing the quality of local food. A south Florida consumer said, “There is a difference between ripe and changing color. I mean a ripe tomato; grown right and waited on. You can’t find one in the store.” Consumers also believed a shorter time on

shelves made local food higher quality; a northeast Florida consumer said, “You know that things have been picked more recently.”

Consumers also discussed local food as having different production or processing practices, making locally produced food higher quality than food found at the grocery store. A central Florida consumer said, “And less preservatives than what you are getting at the grocery store.” A south-central Florida consumer said, “Quality is, I mean if they have what you are looking for, it’s better than what you are going to find at the grocery store. It’s much, much better.”

When asked about why local food was perceived as being high quality, consumers discussed the reputability of the producers as having an impact on the quality of the products. A south-central Florida consumer said, “I think it’s generally higher quality because the farmers, you know, are from the community and they’ve more of a reputation to uphold in the community.”

Social Interaction

Consumers discussed purchasing local food because they enjoyed the social interactions which often accompanied the local food purchasing experience. The consumers liked speaking to farmers and asking them questions about their growing practices. A northeast Florida consumer said, “Well, I find one other advantage, and this is me personally, I actually like the social interaction of speaking to the person I’m buying it from. You get a lot of really neat stories if you just stop and listen to people.”

Additionally, the consumers discussed the interaction with farmers at U-pick operations. A northwest Florida consumer said, “If you’re picking it yourself or gathering it close by the crop over there, you have a tendency to get to know your local farmer, plus know where it is coming from.”

Affordability

Consumers discussed affordability and low prices as an advantage to purchasing locally produced food. A south Florida consumer said, “When it comes down to it taste and price, local is usually a lot less expensive and it’s not packaged, so you can smell it and see it.” A northeast Florida consumer discussed the advantage of purchasing locally produced food in season and said, “I personally think if you buy within season, the price is better.” Price was also referred to as a disadvantage, or barrier, to purchasing local food.

Environmental Benefits

Consumers discussed environmental benefits as a reason for purchasing locally produced food. When discussing the specific environmental benefits of purchasing local food, a reduction in the distribution process and “lower carbon footprint” were both mentioned. A south Florida consumer said, “It’s nice to move to a smaller carbon footprint in the delivery chain, the distribution chain.” Consumers also discussed not contributing trash to local landfills as an environmental benefit. A south Florida consumer said, “You aren’t contributing to the landfill with the plastic containers and the binders and everything that some food comes in.”

Opportunities

Emphasize Local. Extension faculty should encourage producer clientele to emphasize and communicate the size and locality of their business, when applicable. Extension faculty could offer programming for producers focused on local foods which specifically focus on marketing products and communicating with the public about their farming operations. Since consumers identified supporting the local economy and supporting local businesses as a main reason for purchasing locally produced food, it is important to emphasize this point. Consumers are more likely to purchase a product that aligns with their values and/or needs.

Communicate the benefits. Extension faculty should encourage and help producer clientele to identify and communicate the benefits of their products. Extension programming for producers should highlight how to communicate these benefits through consumer contacts, labeling, and marketing strategies. Some suggestions include:

- Encouraging producers to detail when their product was picked, harvested, or produced. Consumers discussed quality, freshness, and food having spent less time “off the vine” as reasons for purchasing locally produced food.
- Encouraging producers to be transparent with their pricing. Extension faculty should encourage clientele to clearly price their products. In some cases, it may be appropriate to advise clientele to create a sign comparing their prices to average grocery store prices.
- Encouraging producers to emphasize the small carbon footprint of their products. Consumers identified low environmental impacts as a benefit to purchasing locally produced food. Emphasizing a reduced carbon footprint and using fewer packaging materials, low transportation

cost and distance, or reduced waste are all ways to inform consumers of positive environmental impacts.

Prepare producers for social interactions. Consumers identified social interactions between the consumer and the producer as a main reason for buying locally produced food. Extension faculty should encourage clientele to have an open and friendly attitude, engage with consumers, answer consumer questions, and listen to their buyers when selling locally produced foods. Extension faculty should consider programming for producer clientele that incorporates best practices for communicating with consumer audiences as well as media. The incorporation of role-play scenarios into this programming will allow producers to practice and develop confidence in their interactions with consumers.



Summary

Consumers discussed many reasons for purchasing locally produced foods; some of the main reasons were supporting the local economy and businesses, being able to interact with producers, and the quality of locally produced food. When marketing or selling locally produced products, it is recommended that the producer emphasize that they are from the local area and are a locally owned and operated business. They should discuss their involvement within the community and the quality of their products, and they should be willing to answer questions from consumers. Extension faculty have an opportunity to assist their clients in selling locally produced products by understanding consumer reasoning and attitudes toward locally produced products.

References

- Coit, M. (2008). "Jumping on the next bandwagon: An overview of the policy and legal aspects of the local food movement." *Journal of Food Law & Policy* 4: 45–70. Retrieved from <http://heinonline.org/>
- Conner, D., K. Colasanti, R. Ross, and S. Smalley. (2010). "Locally grown foods and farmers markets: Consumer attitudes and behaviors." *Sustainability* 2: 742–756. doi: 10.3390/su2030742
- Tropp, D. (2016). *Agriculture Marketing Service: Creating Opportunities for American Farmers and Businesses*. <https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/Why%20Local%20Food%20Matters.pdf>
- Zepada, L. and J. Li. (2006). "Who buys local food?" *Journal of Food Distribution Research* 37(3): 1–11. Retrieved from <https://ageconsearch.umn.edu/record/7064>

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