

What is Local Food and Who Wants What?

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Local food is in the marketplace now more than ever. Many articles on local food can be found in mass media. Books on the topic are also popular. For example, *The 100-Mile Diet: A Year of Local Eating* (Smith and MacKinnon, 2007) has encouraged many people to support local food and become “locavores” (Desrochers and Shimizu 2008).

Marketing campaigns that promote local food to consumers are not new. Country of origin labeling has been used for decades around the world to assist in regional food marketing efforts. Kona coffee and Champagne are often used as examples of efforts that have resulted in premium prices for food from a specific geographic region. Programs that involve “state grown” food in the United States started in the 1930s (Patterson 2006) and Darby et al. (2008) reported that 44 states have this type of promotional program. Research also shows that the price premiums associated with local food has been increasing since the 1980s (Hu et al. 2009).

Many countries have strict rules about how a food product may qualify for a regional label and how the labels should be presented to consumers. Currently, no labeling laws exist to regulate the term local food (Schmit 2008). Other new food characteristics such as organic, though, are often subject to specific government and industry guidelines.

The term “locavores” suggests that local food items should travel no more than 100 miles from the producer to the consumer. Darby et al. (2008) concluded that any fresh strawberries grown in the State of Ohio were considered by survey respondents to be local. The Hartman Group (2008) conducted a survey on this issue and found that half of the respondents felt local meant within 100 miles, while 37% felt within the State was local, and 4% felt anything produced in the USA was local. Adams and Adams (2008) found that 93% of survey participants in Florida felt that local food should come from no more than 100 miles away.

Farmers’ markets (Brown and Miller, 2008) and community-supported agriculture (Tropp 2008) have been accredited with the success of the local food. Less than half of food labeled as local is sold directly by farmers (Crossroads Resource Center 2009; Packaged Facts 2007).



Wal-Mart claims to be the nation's largest purchaser of local produce with 20% of its fresh produce being labeled as local. Local food to Wal-Mart is "both grown and available for purchase within a state's borders" (Wal-Mart 2008). This definition means that the food may be transported more than 100 miles to market. Seattle's PCC Natural Markets treat food items from Washington, Oregon, and Southern British Columbia as local (Schmit 2008).

The definition of local food varies depending on which producer or retailer is providing it. For a successful local food promotional campaign, however, the opinion of the consumer is the one that is important. In order for any business to receive a price premium for a local product, the business must pay careful attention to what exactly local means to their current and potential customers. The product must reflect the values of the consumer. If local means produced within 100 miles to the consumer then that is a local product. Or, if consumers think local products come from the State and like them because they are fresher, then freshness is really most important, not miles traveled. A confusing marketing strategy that does not pair the product with the appropriate promotion will not bring in a premium price.

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