



Feel-good Food

CONSUMERS' GROWING INTEREST IN LOCALLY SOURCED INGREDIENTS

by Sonya Bice

A recent Ohio State University study put a number on just how much more money ordinary consumers are willing to fork over for food grown locally or on small farms. The findings, published in May in an agricultural research journal, suggest that even in an economic downturn, demand remains high for locally produced food because it is perceived to be fresher, safer, and more environmentally conscious. Among the findings by the Ohio State study:

- Researchers gave shoppers the choice between buying produce from “Fred’s” and from “Berries, Inc.” and found that based on the name alone, grocery store shoppers would pay 17 cents more for a quart of berries, and farmers market shoppers would pay 42 cents more.
- When researchers asked consumers to choose between food tagged as “locally produced,” which they defined as within the state, the average shopper in the grocery store would pay 48 cents more for a quart of strawberries. Those who shopped at farm markets were willing to pay 92 cents more.
- If shoppers were promised fresh produce that was recently harvested, shoppers indicated they would pay 54 cents more, and farmers market shoppers were willing to pay 73 cents more for the berries.



Restaurants that post these logos, available via the Buy Local initiative’s web site, alert customers to their efforts to source products locally.

The study’s author said because consumers who seek out local products are motivated by a desire to support local businesses, tough economic times would only strengthen their resolve. (The results of the study are summarized at <http://researchnews.osu.edu/archive/locfood.htm>.)

Another recent poll, by GfK Roper Consulting, found that consumers who seek out locally produced or organic foods tend to have higher than average disposable income.

Another indication of the trend is that according to U.S. Department of Agriculture figures, the number of farmers markets has grown by more than 50 percent in the last eight years.

Restaurants creatively market local sourcing

Whether as a part of a business philosophy or in response to consumer demand, many restaurants have taken steps to change their sourcing and are actively marketing their efforts. New groups have recently mobilized and are working to increase connections between local food producers and restaurants.

Restaurants who have long sourced menu items from local brews and wines to fresh-from-the-farmers-market produce are highlighting that fact.

On the web site of Haymarket Grill in Eau Claire, the restaurant promotes a seasonal menu featuring farmers market produce and highlights its slogan: “Think Globally. Dine Locally.”

“I am always looking to increase the amount of local and regional products that we use,” said operating manager Doug Kruschke. “Right now my focus is to find local beers, wines and liquors. We also supplement our produce at the restaurant with products from the farmer’s market during the summertime.”

Some of the items available at Haymarket Cafe are 45th Parallel Vodka (from New Richmond), Rehorst Gin (from Milwaukee), Chateau St. Croix Wines (from St. Croix Falls), artisanal cheeses from Wisconsin, and a variety of local microbrews.

In Madison, Fresco, which is operated by Food Fight Inc., has instituted dinners introducing customers directly to the farmers who produced the food. At the dinners, held the third Monday of every month through October, diners chat with representatives from the nearby farms that have supplied the ingredients for the evening’s five-course meal. And at Restaurant Magnus, in Madison, the web site explains, “Our kitchen has established relationships with dozens of local, organic farmers. They supply the restaurant with fresh organic produce, meats, poultry, eggs and mushrooms.”

continued on page 22

At Coast Restaurant in Milwaukee, servers tout locally sourced ingredients such as fresh herbs, homegrown vegetables, Gilles frozen custard, and Door County cherries.

Restaurants' use of local products got a major national publicity boost when Denver-based chain Chipotle Mexican Grill pledged in June to use a set amount of local produce at each of its more than 730 restaurants around the country. The chain has two restaurants in Wisconsin. This summer, Chipotle is purchasing 25 percent of at least one produce item for each of its stores from small and mid-sized farms located within about 200 miles.

The Northeast Wisconsin Food Network, known as NEW Food, hosted the NEW Farm-Chef Connection on March 19 at UW-Fox Valley, where local producers and Appleton-area chefs and distributors met over a lunch with a menu described as "all local."

What's behind the trend

The new focus on locally sourced products is driven by several concerns. National outbreaks of foodborne illness traced to spinach and tomatoes have made consumers more aware of the fact that they often don't know where their food originated. Environmental concerns also play a role, as local products are perceived to be more eco-friendly. A desire to support small businesses and small farms is another factor, and improved freshness and taste are yet another.

An article in *Restaurants and Institutions* early this year describing food trends for 2008 identified two trends both related to food sourcing: an emphasis on locally produced

foods, and an emphasis on "feel-good foods such as cage-free eggs, fair-trade coffee and sustainable seafood, that are grown, raised and produced in an environmentally and socially responsible manner." There has also been a slew of popular books on the topic, the best-



Some independent restaurants have taken up the "buy local" theme and applied it to their own products. The Kansas City chapter of the Originals, which has chapters in Milwaukee and Madison, has adopted the slogan, "Local food served with local flavor" to play up both the source of the food and the source of the dining experience. Table tents at member restaurants encourage diners to patronize locally owned businesses.

known being Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, a memoir about a year of eating locally.

Define "local"

Of course, as with many labels, the "local" label can mean many things depending on who is using it. The definitions vary widely: a 100-mile radius (perhaps the most common, and the definition used for the Wisconsin "Eat Local Challenge" set for Sept. 5-14 this year), a 200-mile radius (as Chipotle defines it), within a seven-hour drive, farm-to-store (as the grocery chain Whole Foods defines it). As the Ohio State research showed, consumers are comfortable with the definition of "local" that stretches to include everything in the state.

Separating fact and fiction

While an increased consumer interest in buying local is beneficial for local businesses and economies, the benefits are sometimes inflated or misguided, especially when it comes to food safety. The Roper poll, for example, showed that people who said they buy organic foods and beverages are increasingly positive about the nutritional, safety, and environmental benefits of organic foods and beverages.

"Many people believe that buying local food, especially produce, is safer than buying food from conventional sources," said Susan Quam, executive director of the WRA Education

Foundation and an expert on foodborne illness and contamination issues. "This is not the case, since any produce grown outdoors can be exposed to potential contaminants, such as wild animals, raw manure, birds, contaminated water sources, and flooding. Other foods, like meat, are not as much of a food safety issue, since all meat (beef, pork, lamb, farm-raised game) must be processed in a state or federally inspected facility. State-inspected facilities must meet or exceed federal standards."

Poultry is a different issue, Quam said. Farmers who have fewer than 1000 birds do not have to process the birds in an inspected facility.

"There is also a perception that locally grown foods are more nutritious, because they are not grown in large fields and do not have to travel long distances. There is no credible scientific evidence to back these claims up," Quam said. "The same goes with the concept that locally grown foods leave a smaller 'carbon footprint' than food grown and trucked across the country or across the ocean. It all depends on what each side of the debate uses for their data, and there is no consensus in the scientific community that the environment is better off with locally grown foods."

For more information

The following sites are a good place to get started:

- <http://wisconsinlocalfood.wetpaint.com>
A directory of local food initiatives and projects statewide.
- www.reapfoodgroup.org/BFBL/
The web site of REAP, which doubles as the local affiliate of Buy Fresh Buy Local, a national organization.
- www.familyfarmed.org
A site that helps connect commercial buyers with Midwestern farms.
- www.foodsafety.ksu.edu/en/
This site has good fact sheets and blog discussions on scientific issues relating to food safety. It has very good information from a scientific perspective on locally grown and organic food.
- www.savorwisconsin.com
A searchable database of Wisconsin products, businesses, and farmers markets. **WR**