

Defining a strategy for local foods in Vermont

Results from the 2006 Vermonter Poll

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Introduction

Vermont's "Local Foods" movement has been gaining momentum in recent years. Communities, consumers, and producers are increasingly promoting the concept of local foods as a way to support family farms, create local food security, reduce environmental impacts, promote healthy eating habits, and foster social bonds (Wilkins, 2005). As reported in the Christian Science Monitor,

"While many see [the] explosion of choices at the grocery store as a good thing, others are concerned about this "global vending machine" ... " They worry about its impact on local economies, the environment, the distinctiveness of regional cuisines, the face-to-face connection between farmers and consumers, and especially, the flavor of food."

(Wolcott, 2003)

Many different strategies are used to promote local foods. Advertising campaigns, food labeling, and branding efforts work to highlight the benefits of eating locally. Coordinated efforts are working to make local food more accessible as well. For example, Vital Communities "Valley Food and Farm" project publishes a directory of farmers markets and food producers throughout the Upper Connecticut river valley (Vital Communities, 2006). In many communities, local supermarkets are designating "local food shelves" and labelling the origins of fresh produce. Several programs are also making locally grown food available in schools and work settings (Ross et al. 2000).

As the local food movement gains in popularity, policy makers need research to make informed decisions on local food strategies. The following questions have been raised: What is the public perception of the definition of local food? What are consumer food purchasing patterns and priorities, and how do these affect local food promotional strategies? What is the best market for advertising and consumer accessibility efforts? And lastly, what obstacles need to be addressed? This paper attempts to answer these questions.

Methods and Data

This study uses data taken from the 2006 Vermonter Poll, conducted by the University of Vermont's Center for Rural Studies. The Vermonter Poll is an annual phone survey of randomly selected Vermont households. The sample consisted of 656 Vermont residents who were 18 years of age or older. The average age of respondents was 53 years. The sample was 43 percent male. The median income and education categories were \$50,001-65,000 and associates/technical degree, respectively. The mean household size was 2.7 individuals, with 33% of the households including children. Results were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS), Version 12. Parameters and intra-variable relationships were considered significant at the 95% Confidence Level.

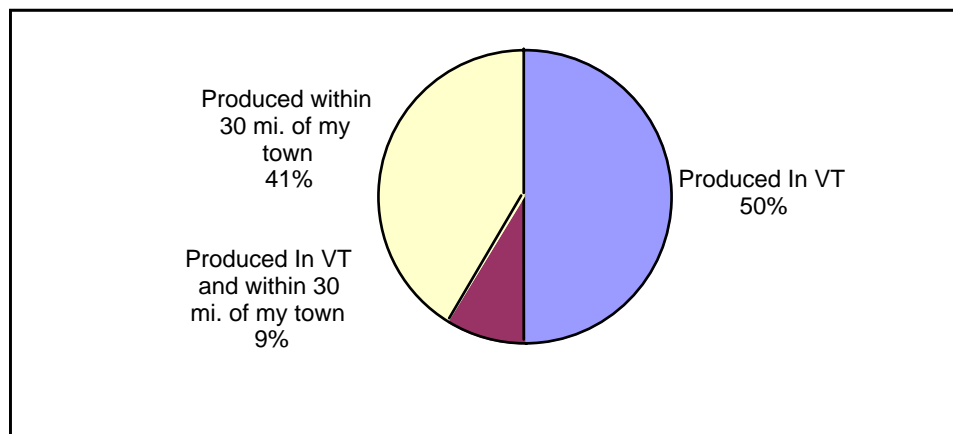
Averages and confidence interval were determined for key variables. Chi Square tests were completed to determine if there was a relationship between demographic variables and factors behind food purchasing decisions. ANOVA tests were used to analyze relationships between demographic variables and household expenditures on fruits and vegetables. Lambda and Pearson's coefficients were used to determine the strength of any significant relationship. Independent Sample T-Tests were utilized to determine if those basing their food purchasing on health and flavor rationales purchased more fruits and vegetables than consumers who prioritize convenience and cost, as well as the differences in fruit and vegetable spending among households with above and below median income, and respondents with and without a college education. An open ended question on local food strategies was quantified by clustering similar responses and determining cluster frequencies.

Analysis and Results

Public perception of focal food

Respondents were asked to choose a definition of local food. As reported in Figure 1, 50% defined it as food produced within Vermont. 41% defined as food produced within 30 miles of their town,. 9% defined it as food produced within Vermont and within 30 miles of their town.

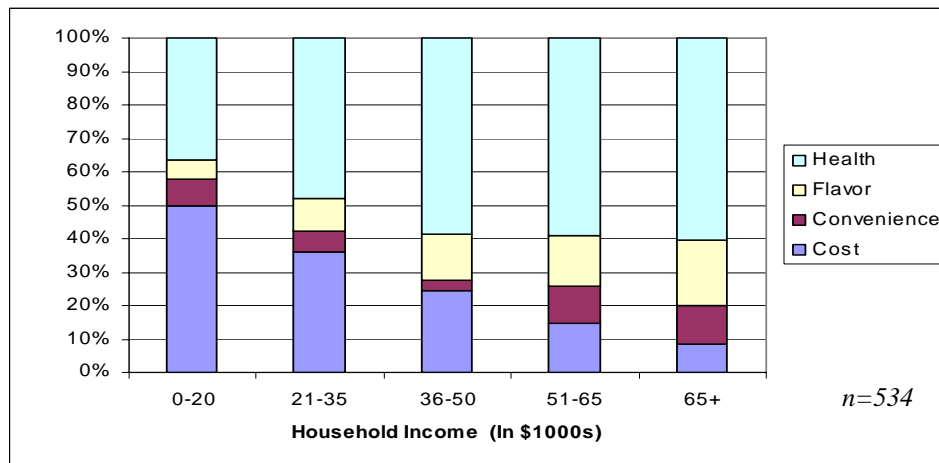
Figure 1. Respondents perceptions on the appropriate definition of local food (n= 601)



Factors behind consumer food purchasing decisions

Respondents were asked to choose the most important factor they consider when purchasing food for a meal. Figure 2 shows that 22% choose cost, 8% chose convenience, 14% chose flavor, and 55% chose health. Respondents choices were significantly related to income levels ($p < .001$), and education levels ($p < .001$) with higher income and higher educated households caring less about cost. No relationship was found between family size, gender of respondent, or geography and responses on food purchasing decisions.

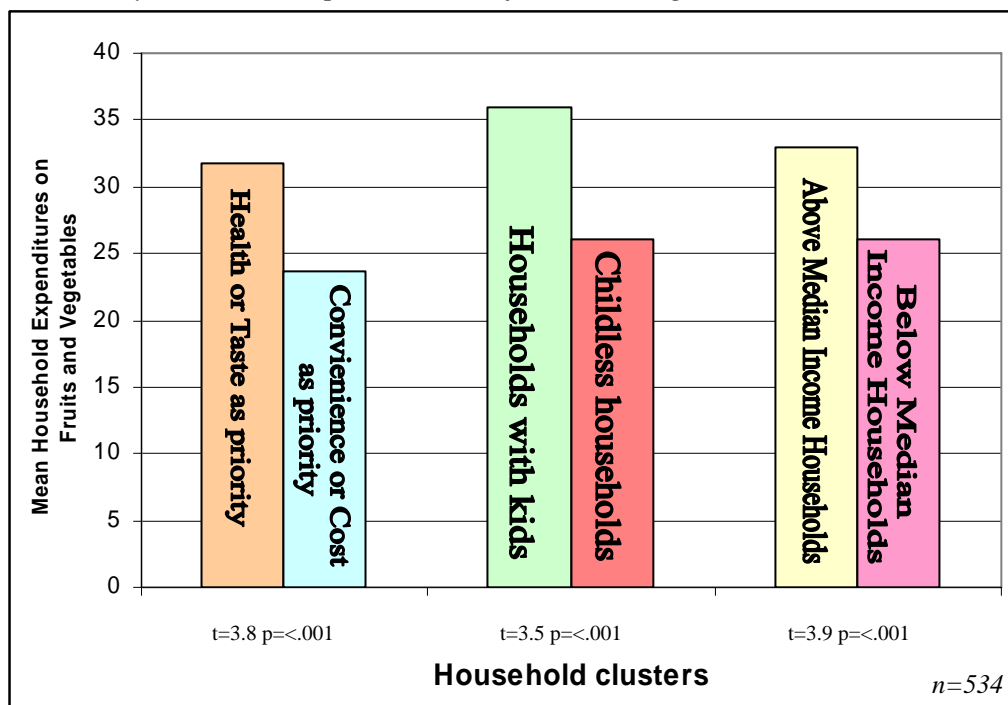
Figure 2. Factors behind food purchasing decisions across income categories



Household fruit and vegetable expenditures

Respondents were asked to estimate weekly household expenditures on fruits and vegetables. The results are depicted in Figure 3. The average household expenditures was \$29.4 (90% CI=27.61 to 30.8). Respondents with higher income, ($p < .001$, Pearsons =.2) higher levels of education ($p < .001$, Pearsons=.11), and families with children ($p < .001$, Pearsons=.21) were found to spend significantly more on fruits and vegetables. Households with above median income spent, on average, seven dollars more a week on fruits and vegetables ($p < .001$, 90% CI= 3.7-10.3). College educated respondents reported spending an average of \$4 more per week on fruits and vegetables. Households with kids reported spending an average \$10 more per week on fruits and vegetable ($p < .001$, 90% CI= 6.7-13.5). In addition, respondents who chose health or taste as the most important factor behind purchasing food for a meal spent \$8.2 more on fruits and vegetables per week ($p < .001$, 90% CI= 4.6-11.6). No significant relationship was found between family size, gender of respondent, or geography and responses and household fruit and vegetable expenditures.

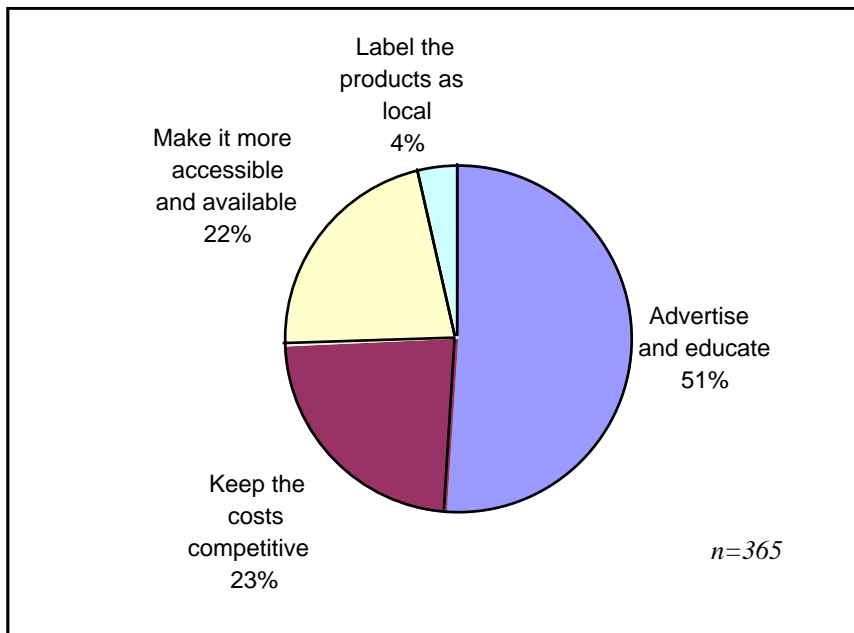
Figure 3. Relationship between food purchasing priorities, household demographics, and weekly household expenditures on fruits and vegetables



Perceptions of local food strategies

Respondents were asked what they believed was the best way to encourage people to buy local food. Responses were clustered into general categories of similar responses, presented in Figure 4. The vast majority of responses were clustered into four categories: “advertise and educate” (51%), “keep the costs competitive” (23%), “make local food more accessible”(22%), and “label local products” (4%).

Figure 4. Respondent recommended strategies for encouraging local food consumption



Discussion and Conclusions

Advertising and consumer education strategies

Strikingly, advertising and educational strategies were recommended by almost 50% of respondents as the best way to encourage people to buy local food. This would suggest that efforts such as the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets (VAAFM) ’s Buy Local program, which provides “Seal of Quality labels, and distributes bumper stickers and other promotional materials, should be continued and expanded. Research results also indicate that with over 50% of respondents basing food purchasing decisions on health concerns, advertisements and educational efforts should highlight the healthy aspects of eating locally. For example, fruits and vegetables produced for local markets are often grown with significantly less pesticides or chemical dyes to retain colors.

Clearly, there is no consensus on the definition of local food. While the Vermont Department of Agriculture defines local food as “*originating within 30 miles of the place where they are sold, measured directly, point to point* (VAAFM, 2006).” only 41% of respondents agreed with this definition. However, the VAAFM also allows sellers to use the term local “*in conjunction with a specific geographic location, such as "local to New England," as long as the specific geographic location appears as prominently as the term "local" and the representation of origin is accurate*

(VAAF, 2006).” Given the lack of consensus on the definition of local, this additional rule is clearly important. Labels describing the exact location the food was produced, would allow consumers to make informed decisions and identify their food with a specific place, fostering a sense of place.

Accessibility and marketing

The significant relationships found between demographic factors of income, levels of education, and number of kids in the family and variables related to food purchasing decisions and expenditures can help policy makers find the “low hanging fruit.” It appears that programs that seek to make local food **conveniently** available in professional settings, institutes of higher education would be most affective. In addition, as families with kids spend significantly more on fruits and vegetables, child friendly venues should consider selling local produce. Food cooperatives, which often attract higher income consumers, appear to be an effective area to market locally produced food as well.

Obstacles and policy changes

The relatively high price of locally produced food appears to be a significant obstacle to expanding markets. Over one fifth of respondents consider cost a high priority when making food purchasing decisions, and 20% of respondents felt that the high cost of locally produced food needs to be addressed. Indeed, as the average Vermonter appears to spend only \$13 per capita, per week on fruits and vegetables, it will be difficult to transition to a local diet without increasing the amount residents spends on food. Coordinated efforts are clearly needed to streamline the costs of producing and transporting local foods. Transportation products to local markets can one of the most challenging and expensive aspects of food production. Cooperative ventures and networks can reduce these costs. Strict health code requirements, such as pasteurization of cheeses and fruit juices, also significantly drives up the cost of food production, and favors larger producers who are less inclined to sell locally. Policies are needed to balance legitimate health and safety concerns with the clear need to minimize overhead and start up costs for local producers. These are challenging and important issues to resolve, but are nonetheless essential components of an integrated local food development strategy.

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