

rural new york minute

ISSUE NUMBER 4/APRIL 2007

New York State Consumers Express Strong Interest in Local Food

By **Duncan Hilchey & Joe Francis**, Cornell University

The March 2, 2007 cover of TIME magazine boldly proclaimed “Forget Organic. Buy Local,” suggesting that after weighing the issues of freshness, taste, pesticides used, and the distance produce travels, the balance may tip for some consumers in favor of seasonally-available *local* fruits and vegetables (both organic and conventional) over organics produced on an industrial scale in far away places.

All this attention to local food is music to the ears of farmers in New York State and beyond who hope to tap this new wave of enthusiasm for local, fresh farm products. In addition, this may prove to be a significant local economic development opportunity.

Are New Yorkers interested in buying local food? Yes, according to over three quarters of the respondents of the 2004 Empire State Poll, an annual opinion survey of NYS residents. Researchers at Cornell University, working with the New York State Farmers’ Direct Marketing Association, included questions on local food buying habits and preferences on the poll. They found that over three-quarters of respondents expressed a preference for local food, with a little over a third reporting that they will go out of their way to buy local food. Only about a fifth of respondents stated that local food was not important to them (see Figure 1).

When respondents were asked what factors would increase their purchases of local food, more than one in four responded

Table 1: What Would Encourage Your Purchase of Locally Produced Food?

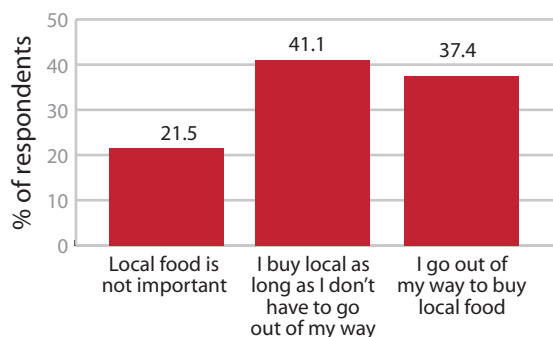
Response	#	%
Greater Convenience/Availability/Accessibility	214	28%
Competitive Pricing/Affordable	124	16%
Combination of Factors	103	13%
Good Quality/Freshness/Taste	82	11%
Knowing I’m Helping Economy/Community/Farmer	71	9%
Unknown/Don’t Know/Nothing/ Doesn’t Matter	49	6%
Knowing It Is Organic	42	5%
Marketing/Labeling	30	4%
Health-related Factors	23	3%
Motivated Already	20	3%
Selection	12	2%
Total	770	100%

Source: Hilchey & Francis, Empire State Poll, Cornell University, 2004.

that greater convenience, availability, and accessibility were key factors. Less important, but still influential, were price, quality, and contributing to the local economy/supporting a local producer (see Table 1).

Based on these findings, New Yorkers *are* interested in local food and would buy more if it were available in places they already shop. Several supermarket chains in New York State have been promoting “homegrown” fruits and vegetables in the produce section for a number of years. If consumer interest in local foods continues to grow, these supermarkets could be further encouraged to increase wholesale purchases from larger scaled farmers (producer-shippers) in NYS. Paradoxically, this might negatively affect smaller local roadside stands, pick-your-own operators and farmers’ market vendors who find themselves in the trade area of a large supermarket offering “homegrown” produce. However, the 37.4% of New Yorkers who go out of their way for local food are likely to continue to buy directly from farmers (including organic and conventionally produced fruits and vegetables, dairy products, meats, wines and cheeses). Farmers’ markets continue to grow and thrive around NYS. The larger, middle group of consumers — who like local food but want it to be more convenient to purchase — will benefit from local products offered through major retailers. ♦

Figure 1: NY Residents’ Propensity to Buy Local Food



Source: Hilchey & Francis, Empire State Poll, Cornell University, 2004.

