NC STATE UNIVERSITY
The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues (FFCI)
The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues (FFCI)
Carolyn L. Bird, Ph.D., AFC - Editor In Chief
TheForumJournal.org | ISSN 1540-5273 | info@theforumjournal.org

Exploring Consumer Perspectives on Florida Farmers Market Purchases and Shopping Habits

Martie Gillen
University of Florida

Caroline Dunn
University of South Carolina

Abstract

According to data from the USDA's National Farmers Market Directory, there are 8,489 certified farmers' markets in the United States, an increase from 1,755 in 1994. Currently, 251 of these markets are registered in Florida. Consumer demand for organic and local foods is well known and documented. However, less is understood about consumer support for markets themselves and how this support impacts local food systems, and local economies. The purpose of this research is to describe and to better understand the Florida customers' motivators and barriers to shopping at farmers markets, to describe their reported purchase patterns, and to provide suggestions for how farmers' market organizers and growers can better meet the needs of current and potential customers.

Keywords

Farmers market, consumers, local foods

Introduction

In recent years, local food systems have grown dramatically alongside the increasing consumer demand for local goods in traditional grocery stores, community supported agriculture (CSAs), and in particular at local farmers markets. According to data from the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Farmers Market Directory, there are 8,489 certified farmers markets in the United States, an increase from 1,755 in 1994 (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA] 2015). Currently, 251 of these markets are registered in Florida (USDA 2015). Consumer demand for organic and local foods is well known and documented (Adams and Salois 2010; Darby et al. 2008). However, less is understood about consumer support for markets themselves and how this support impacts local food systems, and local economies.

While local and organic fruits and vegetables are in high demand at farmers markets, vendors have begun to diversify goods to include meats and fish; eggs; dairy products such as milk and cheese; prepared foods including baked goods, jams, jellies, and full meals; and non-food items such as crafts and artwork (Adams and Salois 2010; Darby et al. 2008). With growing markets and diversifying goods, it is important for market organizers, vendors, suppliers, and researchers to better understand consumer motivations and purchasing patterns as they pertain to local goods.

Information and materials are available to guide consumers to local markets, but little empirical research has been conducted to understand Florida consumers' motivators and barriers to shopping at local farmers markets (Byker et al. 2012). Prior research conducted in Canada found that quality of products offered and the ability to support the local community were the most important motivators given for frequenting farmers markets (Dodds et al. 2013). However, little research has examined what steps market organizers and vendors can take to increase traffic and purchases at markets. To date, no research has surveyed both those who shop at farmers markets and those who do not shop at farmers markets. This research will help fill in these gaps in the literature by providing data in the form of consumer reported shopping behaviors and reasons for shopping or not shopping at farmers markets as well as demographic characteristics. Specifically, the purpose of this research is to describe and to better understand Florida customers' motivators and barriers to shopping at farmers markets, to describe their reported purchase patterns, and to provide suggestions for how farmers market organizers and growers can better meet the needs of current and potential customers.

Methods

In spring 2015, Florida residents (n=498) responded to an online invitation from the University of Florida Survey Research Center to determine Florida consumer perception of farmers markets and to help determine decision-making regarding purchases, including knowledge on safety of food sold at farmers markets. Survey questions were developed by a team of researchers specializing in consumer affairs and food safety, and were distributed by the Bureau of Economic and Business Research (BEBR) Survey Research Center at the University of Florida. Surveys were delivered via email to individuals who had previously signed up for email information from the BEBR. Questions in addition to those focusing on farmers market purchasing behaviors included demographic and health-related questions. Data were analyzed using SPSS to determine preliminary trends in purchase patterns and responses from residents who reported having shopped at a farmers market in the previous calendar year, and data were analyzed separately for individuals who reported that they had not shopped at a market in the past calendar year. Funding for this study was provided by the BERB, and the survey instrument was subject to review and approval by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Florida.

Results

Demographic characteristics of the sample are detailed in Table 1. Of the 281 (56 percent) respondents who reported shopping at a farmers market in the last calendar year, 55 percent were male, 49 percent were married, 76 percent were white, 60 percent had excellent or very good health, more than 50 percent had incomes greater than $50,000, 68 percent were employed and of those employed, 81 percent were employed full-time, with a mean age of 47 years. Of the 217 (44 percent) respondents who reported not shopping at a farmers market in the last calendar year, 60 percent were male, 39 percent were married, 73 percent were white, 52 percent had excellent or very good health, 32 percent had incomes greater than $50,000, 59 percent were employed and of those employed, 83 percent were employed full-time, and the mean age was 47 years.

Of the 498 respondents, 281 (56 percent) reported shopping at a farmers market in the last calendar year. These individuals reported seeking numerous types of goods at local markets (see Figure 1). In addition to fruits and vegetables, which 97 percent of respondents reported generally purchasing at the farmers market, half of respondents purchased food products including honeys, jams, and prepared food items other than baked goods. Other less frequent food purchases included eggs (26 percent), cheese (22 percent), baked goods including bread (21 percent), meat/fish (21 percent), and milk (12 percent).

Although food items were the most popular purchases at the farmers markets, residents also frequently shopped for plants (35 percent) and other miscellaneous goods including locally made craft items such as soaps, jewelry, and clothes (14 percent).

The demand for local farmers markets isn't simply confined to the purchase of goods. To better understand consumer's motivations for visiting local farmers markets, researchers asked them to provide the number one reason they shopped at the market (see Figure 2). While 40 percent of respondents reported frequenting farmers markets because of the freshness and taste of products, 22 percent said that the most important reason for them was to support local agriculture. Regardless of shopping frequency, the most frequently reported motivation was freshness and taste for those shopping every week (37 percent), twice a month (37 percent), once a month (38 percent), and infrequently (41 percent). For those shopping three times a month, the most frequently reported motivation was price (35 percent). Of individuals citing "other reasons" for making frequent purchases at farmers markets (6 percent) over half cited concerns over conventionally grown non-organic produce and GMOs. Of those who reported shopping at farmers markets, 61 percent were concerned about the safety of food products.

However, with little over half (55 percent) of individuals initially surveyed reporting that they had shopped at a farmers market in the last year, it is equally as important for growers, organizers, and sellers to understand what drives consumers *away* from market purchases (see

Figure 3). The major responses selected representing reasons for not shopping at farmers markets were as follows: too far from home (56 percent), prefer supermarket produce (44 percent), and the desire to purchase all food at the same time (45 percent). These responses suggest that the desires for convenience in food purchasing are the leading detractors of shopping at farmers markets. Additionally, 28 percent cited inconvenient times and about 10 percent reported not shopping at farmers markets due to concerns about food product safety.

Discussion

While fruits and vegetables may still be the "bread and butter" of farmers markets, there are strong demands for additional agricultural goods and other items at markets in Florida. Information provided from this survey can help growers and market organizers grow markets and better serve current customers by providing more of the goods and services that entice attendance. This information may also help farmers markets improve public perception of their food safety practices as well as develop more effective marketing strategy toward consumers and increase their sales.

While individuals who already shop at farmers markets seem satisfied with the variety and quality of goods that they purchase, improvements can be made to increase access and attendance. Because it appears that convenience, or lack thereof, plays a major role in a consumer's decision to shop at local markets, organizers can work with community members including Extension to develop strategies for enhancing the convenience of markets while still providing high-quality local goods to consumers. Extension educators can assist in this effort through multiple avenues. For example, market attendees may be attracted to information that Extension can provide such as nutrition education, food safety information, and other services such as cooking demonstrations. These efforts represent an opportunity for Extension agents to work with 4-H youth, Master Gardeners, and other community groups to create evidence-based publications for consumers. Opportunities for Extension involvement also include enhancing growers and market organizers' understanding of consumer perceptions and marketing efforts.

References

Adams, D., and M. Salois. (2010). "Local versus organic: The turn in consumer preferences and willingness to pay." *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems* 25: 331-41.

Byker, C., J. Shanks, S. Misyak, and E. Serrano. 2012. "Characterizing farmers' market shoppers: A literature review." *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition* 7(1): 38-52.

Darby, K., M. Batte, S. Ernst, and B. Roe. 2008. "Decomposing local: A conjoint analysis of locally produced foods." *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 90: 476-86.

Dodds, R., M. Holmes, V. Arunsopha, M. Chin, T. Le, S. Maung, and M. Shum. 2014. "Consumer choice and farmers' markets." *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*27(3): 397-416.

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). 2015. "Local Food Directories: National Farmers Market Directory." http://www.ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/farmersmarkets

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample by farmers market shopping or not (N=498)

[Table 1 Summary: Demographic characteristics of the sample by farmers market shopping or not.]

Shop at Farmers Market			
Variables		Yes (n=281)	No (n=217)
		%	%
Gender	Male	54.8	59.9
	Female	45.2	40.1
Marital Status	Married	49.1	38.8
	Widowed	5.1	8.4
	Divorced/separated	20.6	20.1
	Never married	25.2	32.7
Race	White	75.5	72.7
	Black	12.6	16.2
	Other	11.9	11.1
Health Status	Excellent	31	24.1
	Very good	28.9	28.2
	Good	24.5	23.6
	Fair	11.6	19.1
	Poor	4	5
Income	Less than $10,000	7.3	9
	$10,000 - $29,999	22.4	32.2

	$30,000 - $49,999	17.2	20.9
	Over $50,000	53.1	32.2
Retirement income	Yes	19.3	21.9
	No	80.7	78.1
Employed	No	31.3	41.5
	Yes	68.7	58.5
	Part-time	21	16.7
	Full-time	79	83.3
Age M (SD)		46.5 (16.7)	46.8(17.9)

Figure 1. Goods most frequently purchased at farmers markets

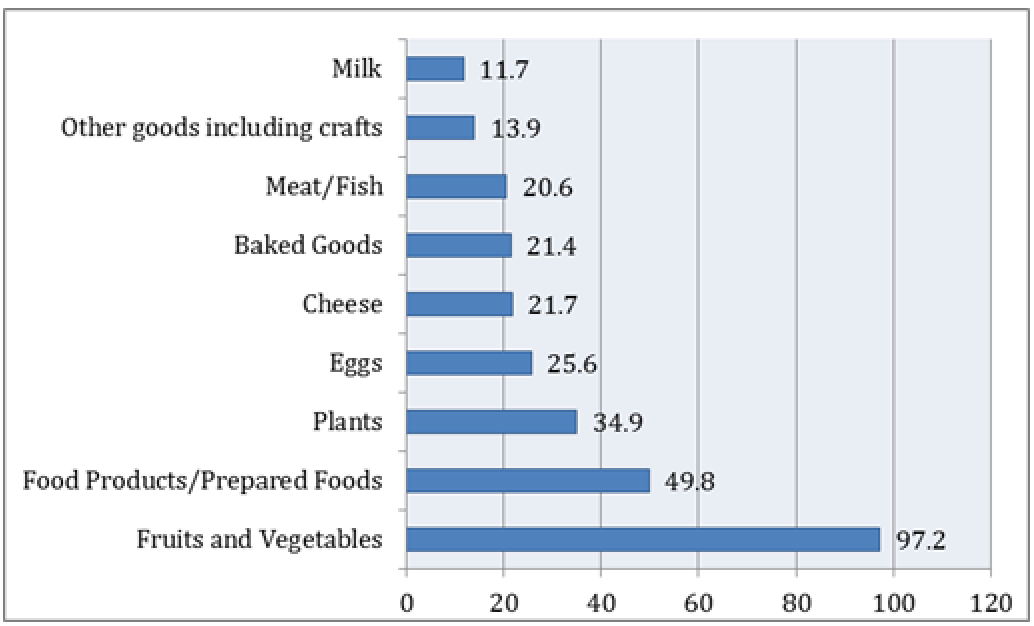

Figure 2. Respondents' reasons for shopping at local farmers markets

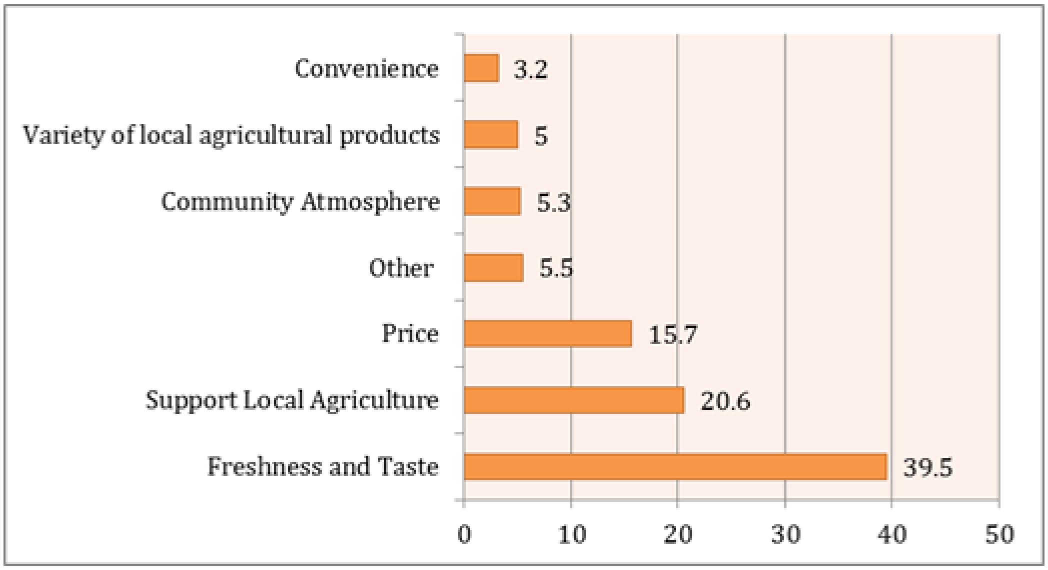

Figure 3. Respondents' reasons for not shopping at farmers markets