

Are Local Foods More Expensive?

Interest in local foods is increasing exponentially. Just a few years ago, there were only a handful of local foods available through farmers markets, CSA's or local grocery stores. Today, many communities have a variety of options for locally produced food, especially the common staples.

The reasons for the shift away from industrialized foods are many but typically come down to issues surrounding quality. Food quality is king in local food systems; indeed, flavor, safety and nutrition are paramount when producing food for neighbors and friends. Not only is local food fresher and more flavorful, but tends to be safer and more nutritious.

Then there's the human connection. Increasingly, consumers want to know who's producing the food they feed to their children. Next, they want to know how the food was raised. Finally, they want to support local producers, not distant corporations producing food in a factory. Indeed, there's security in a farmer that you know and trust.

Purchasing local food is also a way to support your community. A food dollar spent locally generates twice as much income for the local economy. When businesses are not owned locally, money leaves the community at every transaction. This does not mean you need to bypass your local grocer; many locally owned stores are avid supporters of local producers.

There is, however, the perception that local food is more expensive since it typically is of greater quality. Last year, there was a study completed in rural Iowa that showed this to be untrue. Now, another study confirms this fact. Locally produced food is not necessarily more expensive and can fit anyone's budget. All it takes is a willingness and awareness with your food purchases.

In the new study, an analysis of farmers markets in 19 communities across 6 states in the Southeast US found the vast majority to be price competitive with supermarkets on an array of food items. The study, conducted by the consulting firm, SCALE, Inc of Abingdon, Virginia looked at pricing of "every day foods", including such things as potatoes, squash, bell peppers, cucumbers, tomatoes, eggs, chicken, ground beef and similar items. Data was gathered at 24 farmers markets in towns with populations ranging from 8,000 to nearly 450,000. Here's what the study found:

- Farmers markets were the same or less expensive overall than supermarkets 74% of the time on the range of items chosen.
- Produce was less expensive at farmers markets three-fourths of the time, by an average of 22%;

- Organic produce, where available, was less expensive at farmers markets 88% of the time, by an average of 16%;
- Meats were somewhat more expensive at farmers markets in every case where available, by an average of 10%, when comparing comparably produced meats, by 47% when comparing grass-finished/free range items with conventionally raised items. More expensive perhaps, but you can be sure this meat was not “pumped” with water, phosphates, MSG and sodium.
- The trend of affordability was strong in communities of all sizes, though stronger in smaller towns.

Farmers markets have dramatically increased in number across all regions of the United States, from about 1,750 in the mid-nineties to over 7000 in 2011, this according to USDA. As their popularity has grown, criticism has also arisen as to their affordability for low to moderate income and working people. According to study author, Anthony Flaccavento, “While this analysis only looked at one region of the country, it was encouraging to find that the notion that ‘local food is only for the well-to-do’ simply isn’t true. Quite the contrary, we found local food to be widely and broadly cost competitive with mainstream supermarkets, in fact generally a bit less expensive.”

Many of our communities have local food options, but if you would like to find foods close to you, there’s help. The University of Minnesota Northwest Minnesota Regional Sustainable Development Partnership has made it easy for you. They have created a website called Local Foods Partnership (localfoods.umn.edu) to have everyone become connected. The website lists producers, processors, and farmer’s markets near you. You can search the website to find a grower near you or you can search for a specific product to see who produces it. Of course, you can always ask your local grocer, in my experience, most will try their best to accommodate your wishes.

For more information, contact me at 800-450-2465 or stordahl@umn.edu. Source: Anthony Flaccavento, SCALE Inc of Abingdon, Virginia.