

## **Building Capacity for Local and Organic Foods in Ohio**

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Restaurants, food retailers and individual consumers impact each other by influencing product selection based on taste, aesthetics, growing methods and place of origin. Understanding these regional market influences can reveal new market opportunities for local farmers. The aim of this study was to assess the opportunities and barriers for increasing local and organic foods in Ohio. Based on regional representation and population five cities were selected for this study: Akron, Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati and Toledo, covering the northeast, north central, southwest and northwest sections of the state. A snowball sampling method was used to ensure a range of respondents with varying levels of exposure to local and organic foods. A total of 100 face-to-face interviews were conducted with restaurants (n = 71), retail food outlets (n = 29). Only the data collected from restaurant respondents is presented in this paper.

A series of interview questions were structured to uncover the perceived availability of local and organic foods and the way in which purchasing patterns are moderated by network associations. Respondents were asked to approximate the percentage of produce, meat and dairy inventory that was locally grown for each of the four seasons, winter, spring, summer and autumn. These raw percentages were added together across the year and then divided by four to create three levels of local foods users. No to Low volume reported 1 percent or less of their total inventory to consist of local foods, Medium users reported between 1 to 8.25 percent of their total inventory consisting of local foods, and High users reported greater than 8.25 percent of total inventory as comprised of local foods. These categories served as our dependent variables against which we ran a series of chi-square and one way ANOVA tests.

Surveys among Ohio restaurants revealed a genuine interest in purchasing local foods produced organically or sustainably with minimal inputs. Access to information and products has prohibited significant market growth. Efforts to create a local food system in Ohio servicing restaurants has been limited due to the lack of infrastructure and lack of formal grower networks able to effectively communicate with buyers and consumers, produce sufficient volume to meet demand, and reliably market and distribute their products. Although taste is a primary motivation for purchasing foods, respondents indicated actual behavior is moderated by convenience and price, demonstrating that multiple motivations influence purchasing patterns.

Network linkages within a local food system can impact the ability of restaurants to source and purchase local foods. Respondents clearly had greater associations with business and professional associations with few links to production organizations at the state level. As a network organization, Chambers of Commerce have a potentially vital role in facilitating local and organic food production in an economic development framework.

All categories of food buyers expressed inconsistent definitions of local and organic. However, the majority of respondents expressed a preference for foods grown by a

farmer they knew using minimal inputs, but felt constraints of time, labor, access to supply information and distributors inhibited them from purchasing. Responses also demonstrate that consumer tastes and preferences moderate their interest in purchasing local and organic foods. Regardless of the volume of local foods actually procured, respondents purchase primarily by taste. However, price and convenience had a bigger impact on the purchasing decisions among the *no to low* volume buyers compared to the *medium* and *high* users. Overall buyers reported a high level of trust in farmers to produce quality products. The majority of respondents claimed to be interested in creating a relationship with a farmer but clearly preferred to purchase through a regional distributor. The preference for local foods is mitigated by their availability and by the real price and time restrictions local businesses must balance to ensure their own viability.

Restaurants convey information to customers through menus and staff interactions. Due to its' fluctuating availability, restaurants strategically reserve local foods for featured specials. All respondents indicated it was easier to communicate the advantages of local (regardless if organic or not) because of the difference in taste and quality of fresh in-season foods. Respondents also believed customer preferences constrained their ability to purchase local and organic foods. However, some restaurants are increasingly using the concepts of fresh, local, and organic to draw in customers. Results of this study indicate restaurants can potentially have a vibrant role in a local food system and foster economic development by creating business and employment opportunities for local farmers, suppliers, processors, distributors, retailers and food service providers.

An unintended consequence of this research was a preliminary examination of the role ethnic markets could have in a local food system. This sample was too small to make any conclusive generalizations. However, as ethnic grocery stores and restaurants in Ohio are generally small scale, independently owned enterprises they face different distribution challenges compared to mainstream groceries. Some respondents indicated they would like to purchase locally grown organic foods but farmers are not growing the varieties of vegetables and herbs they prefer. Many of the insights offered highlight opportunities in previously unexplored markets.

An outgrowth of this research was the formation of The Central Ohio Chef-Grower Network, a grass roots network founded in 2003 to increase the flow of local foods into the regional culinary community and as a means to develop relationships between chefs and farmers. In addition to partnering with OSU the Network has a formal connection with the national Chefs Collaborative organization. As a research institution OSU has been able to survey Network participants to uncover operational processes within the network and to further explore the issues brought out in the research previously discussed.

### **Publications Resulting From This Work**

Inwood, Shoshanah, Stinner, Deb and Laura Ann Bergman. 2003. *Building Capacity for Local and Organic Ohio Proud Foods for Restaurant and Retail Food Distribution*. Final Report.

Inwood, Shoshanah, Stinner, Deb, Moore, Richard and Jeff Sharp. "Building a Local Food System: Farmer and Chef Networking Strategies." In Progress.