Consumers’ evolving definition and expectations for local foods

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Abstract

Purpose – Although locally sourced and produced foods are a growing trend in food marketing, they are not yet clearly understood nor consistently defined. There is no lack of definitions currently offered, however, based on expanding, evolving, and sometimes conflicting, dimensions. The purpose of this paper is to investigate various emerging definitional elements of local foods to determine which elements may be as important to food shoppers today as the prevailing food miles definition.

Design/methodology/approach – A shopper survey is fielded and repeated measures ANOVA conducted to measure the relative importance of various definitional elements, assess where shoppers expect to acquire local foods, the price premium they are willing to pay, and differences that may exist across customer groups.

Findings – The study finds that consumers do consider other definitional elements as important as distance in their definition of local foods and they expect to find them in secondary outlets beyond farmers markets and the produce department. Consumers are willing to pay a price premium and there are differences across light, medium, and heavy users.

Practical implications – This study provides researchers with an expanded and clearer definition of local foods for future research and practitioners with guidance on what shoppers expect and value today and how to better source, merchandise, and promote local foods.

Originality/value – By combining definitional elements from across industry, government, and academia and analyzing them together, this study offers a more comprehensive definition of local foods and consumer expectations.

Keywords Buyer behaviour, Local food, Credence attributes, Food marketing, Locavores

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

There is a growing demand for alternatives to what consumers perceive as industrialized food in the developed markets around the world (Zepeda and Leviten-Reid, 2004). For example, consumers have opted for healthy diets, environmental sustainability, organic foods, natural foods, and raw foods. The value of these foods is often based on credence attributes they offer. Credence attributes, however, are often not easily verifiable by consumers (Rainbolt et al., 2012; Stanton et al., 2012). One must distinguish between the seller’s credence claim and the buyers’ beliefs that the credence attribute is actually in place. Locally sourced and produced foods are a more recent and developing alternative food source (Clifford, 2010; Megicks et al., 2012; Wolverson, 2012). To date, definitions of local food have been limited and in some cases, conflicting (Darby et al., 2008). Unlike organic food, which is a well-defined food category and standard, local foods lack an unambiguous definition with consumers perceiving some products to be more or less local based on a number of criteria (Dentoni et al., 2009; Tregear, 2011). These definitional ambiguities have attracted the attention of academics and food practitioners including food retailers and manufacturers.

Although there is no clear, consistent definition, there is no lack of definitions of local food, which presents a problem for both consumers and food companies. Without a consistent definition of local food, consumers can become confused when buying...
local foods and suppliers lack a guide to offer effective local programs to consumers. Initial definitions from the US government were focused on distance transported or geography (e.g. miles, state, or region) (Hartman, 2008; United States Department of Agriculture, 2008). Broader understanding and definition are emerging, however, from business, consumer organizations, advocacy groups, and researchers. The literature review will demonstrate that the collection of these definitions is quite varied comprising some established primary elements and several emerging secondary elements. These developments lead to the need for a more detailed and comprehensive definition of local foods (Durham et al., 2009; Khan and Prior, 2010; Megicks et al., 2012). To work toward a more comprehensive definition, this paper will examine the broader set of dimensions that consumers consider when they define locally sourced and produced foods, where they expect to obtain them, and how these vary by user level.

This research will provide marketers and retailers with a broader and current understanding of the local foods category and what their customers expect and value. The findings will provide a framework for future study into the definition and demand for local foods, industry to develop and promote local food offerings and programs, and government policy background and priorities.

The authors conducted a survey of adult shoppers in the USA to test five hypotheses. Analysis was conducted to examine a broader definition of local foods and to understand consumer expectations including where to obtain them and what they are willing to pay for them. Results indicate that there are important definitional elements of local foods that add to the prevailing distance and geography elements. They also show that shoppers expect to find local foods in outlets beyond farmers markets and natural food stores and in categories beyond produce. Findings also reveal that the definition of and expectations for local foods vary by customer group in some important aspects.

**Literature review**

The “going local” trend started in the last decade when consumers (and then industry) began to pay more attention to healthy diets, the environment, and local economies (Stanton et al., 2012; Zepeda and Leviten-Reid, 2004). Consumers are no longer satisfied with having a variety of food to eat; they also want to eat healthily and sustainably. Many of them want to know where their food comes from and how it has been grown and processed (Megicks et al., 2012; Wolverson, 2012; Mintel, 2013). Are there any chemicals or pesticides added during the process? Will the production process harm the environment? These concerns lead people to spend more time learning about their food sources, which motivates them to consider local foods.

As previously mentioned, there are many varied definitions of local foods and the definitions vary from organization to organization. For the US government, the definition of local foods is “(I) the locality or region in which the final product is marketed, so that the total distance that the product is transported is less than 400 miles from the origin of the product;” or “(II) the State in which the product is produced.” (USDA, 2008). These are, of course, arbitrary definitions as 400 miles has no theoretical basis and produced within the state is a political boundary. Consumers who live near the borders of another state may, in fact, be closer to local providers than sources at the other end of their state or province. The issue of “no consistent definition” means it would be hard for a retailer or distributor to deliver product that meets consumers’ expectation for local if they do not fully understand what consumers’ expectations for local are, and/or if different types of consumers have different expectation. This is a huge problem for marketers.
As the largest grocer in the world, Wal-Mart also defines local produce as that grown and sold in the same state (Clifford, 2010). Whole foods, the largest retailer of natural and organic foods, considers local as anything produced within seven hours of one of its stores (Schmitt, 2008). The Hartman Group (2008) reports that 50 percent of survey respondents selected “made or produced within 100 miles” as the statement best defining local product. Finally, according to Zepeda and Li (2006), local food has a fairly narrow definition; they define local as food or produce bought directly from farmers in one’s county or neighboring counties.

Therefore, primary definitional elements of locally sourced and produced foods based on geography and distance standards include aspects such as the following (Zepeda and Leviten-Reid, 2004; Durham et al., 2009):

1. near or close to where the customer lives or shops;
2. travel distance or time;
3. state or other political boundaries; and
4. proximate community.

Recently, researchers and industry leaders have proposed new dimensions to define local including physical and cultural factors (Hartman, 2008; Durham et al., 2009; Megicks et al., 2012; Mintel, 2013). In addition to these, background research reveals several other emerging definitional elements of local foods that could be broadly classified as producer and product characteristics and benefits to local areas (see Table I) (Hartman, 2008; Durham and Roheim, 2009; Megicks et al., 2012). These have been examined in other research, but not tested directly against distance or each other to determine relative importance.

**Objectives and hypotheses**

There is an opportunity to further examine locally sourced and produced foods from a consumer perspective and through an integrated measurement of the various definitional elements and attributes pulled from government, business, academia, and organizational sources. Assessing primary and secondary dimensions relative to each other would allow us to prioritize them and develop a clearer and more comprehensive definition and understanding of what drives demand for local foods. To accomplish this task, the current study will examine four research questions:

**RQ1.** Beyond distance, what is the broader set of dimensions that consumers consider when defining locally sourced and produced foods?

**RQ2.** Where do consumers expect to obtain local foods?

### Table I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Producer characteristics</th>
<th>Businesses that are part of your community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smaller independent growers or manufacturers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-industrial non-corporate growers or manufacturers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family owned and operated growers or manufacturers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product characteristics</td>
<td>Produced with craft or artisan methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialty, unique, or heirloom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional foods or recipes from your region</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique to your region or what your region is known for</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RQ3. What are consumers willing to pay for local foods?

RQ4. How do attitudes vary by usage level or experience?

The following hypothesis will be tested to determine whether there are dimensions that consumers value beyond distance. The analysis will rank all dimensions relative to the distance factor:

H1. There are characteristics of locally sourced and produced foods that consumers consider as important as distance.

There are at least two important dimensions regarding where consumers expect to obtain locally sourced and produced foods: which retailers should carry local foods and within any given retailer, which categories or departments should have local foods (Mintel, 2013). Farmers’ markets, natural food stores, and produce departments have previously been most described as where consumers expect to find local products (Zepeda and Li, 2006; Mintel, 2013). But as consumer experience and knowledge of local foods have evolved, which other retailers and categories may now be expected to also carry these products? The list of alternative retailers who may be expected to carry local products has expanded to specialty food stores including whole foods and Trader Joe’s and to more traditional supermarkets including chains and independents and mass merchandisers and clubs (Campbell and Fairhurst, 2012; Megicks et al., 2012; Rushing, 2013). As extensions of supermarkets, there is also the potential that online grocers may be expected to sell local foods. The following hypothesis will be tested to determine if and how expectations for the availability of local foods have changed:

H2. The expectation for the availability of locally sourced and produced foods has expanded beyond farmers markets and natural food stores.

When the industry first conceptualized the local foods issue, it was largely focussed on the impact that food miles related to produce items have on the environment. As more consumers develop more awareness and understanding of local foods, they very likely have evolved to expect the same characteristics and benefits from foods in other categories. Within the typical food store this could be represented by other fresh food departments (e.g. bakery, deli, meat) and grocery food departments selling processed foods in the center of the store (e.g. frozen, dry goods, beverages). For example, Diamond (2012) states, “Locavores want to shop across as many categories as possible. You can now find local produce, local meat, local cheese, local beer, local ice cream, and local cold cuts, just to name a few categories.” The following hypothesis will be tested to determine if and how expectations for departments providing local foods may have changed:

H3. The expectation for the availability of locally sourced and produced foods has expanded beyond the produce department.

Past studies have investigated whether consumers are willing to pay extra for locally sourced and produced foods (Dentoni et al., 2009; McCluskey et al., 2009; Rainbolt et al., 2012). As there is relatively more labor in the local food production process (among other added costs such as lower crop yields), the prices of local foods are typically higher than prices of centralized, industrial food production (Bernard et al., 2010). In order to replicate
this finding and provide another point of measurement, this study will also test the hypothesis that consumers are willing to pay a premium for local foods:

\[ H4. \text{ Consumers are willing to pay a premium for locally sourced and produced foods.} \]

Past studies have established, with varied results, that attitudes toward locally sourced and produced products can vary by customer type (Durham \textit{et al.}, 2009; Campbell and Fairhurst, 2012; Megicks \textit{et al.}, 2012). The analysis will add to that body of knowledge by testing the following hypothesis regarding whether and how definitions and expectations vary by customer group:

\[ H5. \text{The definitional elements, expectations for availability, and willingness to pay a premium for locally sourced and produced foods vary by customer group.} \]

**Methodology and results**

**Participants**

This research study is based on a sample of respondents drawn from a national commercial shopper panel. As a convenience sample, it does not purport to be nationally representative of all shoppers. Convenience sampling is one of the most common sampling methods in academic as well as practicing marketing research. Johnson \textit{et al.} (2009) compare the results of internet convenience sampling vs respondent sampling. And Suen \textit{et al.} (2014) compare and discuss the advantages of convenience vs purposive sampling. A total of 500 people were contacted initially and given a link to a 36 question online Qualtrics survey. Survey participants were screened initially on their usage of locally sourced or produced foods (i.e. how often do you intentionally purchase food products that are locally sourced or produced?). If the respondent answered “Not at all” they were considered a non-user, and not included in the remainder of the survey. Approximately 55.4 percent of respondents indicated some level of usage. After screening for usage and an inspection for outliers (Box Jenkins technique), 277 participants remained in the final sample and analysis. Of the local users who completed the survey, 42 percent indicate that their annual gross income is $75,000 or more. Some 64 percent of respondents are female and 92 percent are Caucasian. In total, 43 percent live with a spouse or significant partner and have no children. Most local users are educated with 53 percent having a four year college or graduate degree.

The topic of “local foods” is not just a US issue. Research conducted in Europe indicates that the topic and the issues are similar albeit not identical in Europe. For example beside the aforementioned EU references Weatherell \textit{et al.} (2003), Tregear and Mitchell (2005) show that the “local” phenomenon is not restricted to US consumers.

**Results**

**Consumer definition of locally sourced and produced foods**

\[ H1 \] proposes that there are characteristics of locally sourced and produced foods that consumers consider as important as distance. To test this hypothesis, analysis was performed on two types of questions: first, a rating of agreement of various definitional elements with personal definitions of local foods (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) and second, a ranking of the most important definitional elements when deciding to purchase local foods (see Tables II and III). For the rating question, a repeated measures ANOVA and \textit{post hoc} comparison of means was performed with mean agreement as the dependent variable and the list of definitional elements as the
independent variables. The ANOVA, with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction, indicates that consumers' opinions toward how to define local foods differs significantly across definitional elements \((F = 92.62, \ p = 0.00)\).

As presented in Table II, the \textit{post hoc} comparison of means indicates that there are three definitional elements equal to distance (as miles): smaller independent growers or manufactures \((p\text{-value} = 1.00)\); Family owned and operated growers or manufactures \((p\text{-value} = 1.00)\); and \textit{unique to your region or what your region is known for} \((p\text{-value} = 0.55)\). This supports \(H1\), there are emerging or secondary definitional elements of local foods as important as the prevailing distance based definition. Table II ranks the means for the remaining definitional elements and places boxes around other significant differences. It is interesting to note the industry based definition of distance as time (whole foods) is the least agreed with dimension; 57.1 percent of the participants agree with defining local food by traveling miles while only 11.7 percent agree with traveling time. As a second test of \(H1\), a similar repeated measures ANOVA and \textit{post hoc} comparison of means was completed for the ranking question. A definitional element was assigned a value of one if a respondent ranked it their top three most important criteria and zero if not. From the mean comparisons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definitional elements</th>
<th>Mean agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transport miles from source to store</td>
<td>4.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family owned and operated growers or manufactures</td>
<td>4.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller independent growers or manufactures</td>
<td>4.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique to your region or what your region is known for</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business that is part of your community</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional foods or recipes from your region</td>
<td>3.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-industrial/non-corporate growers or manufactures</td>
<td>3.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialty, unique, or heirloom</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produced with craft or artisan methods</td>
<td>3.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport Time from source to store</td>
<td>2.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textbf{Notes:} These results are based on the question: How much do the following statements agree with your personal definition of locally sourced or produced food products? \((1 = \text{strongly disagree,} \ 5 = \text{strongly agree})\). Boxes around mean scores indicate statistically equal values in \textit{post hoc} comparison.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definitional elements</th>
<th>Proportion selected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family owned and operated growers or manufacturers</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near or close to where I live or shop</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller independent growers or manufacturers</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business that are part of your community</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique to your region or what your region is known for</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-industrial/non-corporate growers or manufacturers</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional foods or recipes from your region</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialty, unique, or heirloom</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produced with craft or artisan methods</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textbf{Notes:} These results are based on the question: which are the three most important characteristics for you when deciding to purchase locally sourced or produced products? Boxes around proportions indicate statistically equal values in \textit{post hoc} comparison.
summarized in Table III, family owned and operated growers or manufacturers and near or close to where I live or shop are equally important which further supports \( H1 \). Table III also places boxes around other significant differences.

To provide context to these findings, two other distance/geography questions were analyzed. Respondents were asked to indicate what distance, in miles from where they live and shop, would they consider as local foods. The mean distance is 117 miles, which is very close to a value often stated in industry as within 100 miles (e.g. Hartman, 2008). Respondents were also asked a geography question in terms of their community, their state, their region, USA, and North America. According to this measure, there is overwhelming agreement with my community as the local geography defining local foods (selected by 64 percent); agreement drops significantly for geography beyond my state (selected by 28 percent) with essentially zero agreement with other US regions and North America.

**Consumers’ expectations of where to obtain local foods**

\( H2 \) and \( H3 \) propose that expectations for the availability of locally sourced and produced foods have expanded beyond farmers markets, natural food stores, and the produce department. To test these hypotheses, analysis was performed on two questions: a rating of expectation that food retailers provide a good selection of locally sourced or produced products (1 = low expectation, 5 = high expectation) and a ranking of seven product categories in terms of the expectation they provide locally sourced or produced products. For the rating of retailers, a repeated measures ANOVA and post hoc comparison of means was performed with mean expectation as the dependent variable and the list of food retailers as the independent variables. The ANOVA, with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction, indicates that consumers’ expectations for providing local foods differs significantly across retailers \( (F = 292.16, \ p = 0.00) \).

As presented on Table IV, the post hoc comparison of means indicates that there are pronounced differences in expectations for which retailers should provide local foods. From Table IV, **farmer/green markets** has the highest mean score that is also significantly different from the other options. This rejects \( H2(a) \), however, expectations for natural food stores and **local independently owned supermarkets** are equal \( (p = 0.45) \) supporting \( H2(b) \). Table IV also ranks the scores for the remaining types of retailers and places boxes around significant differences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retail outlets</th>
<th>Mean rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farmer/green markets</td>
<td>4.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural food stores</td>
<td>4.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local independently owned supermarkets</td>
<td>4.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialty food stores</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole foods</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trader Joe’s</td>
<td>3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large chain supermarkets</td>
<td>3.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supercenters (Wal-Mart/target)</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warehouse clubs (Costco/Sam's)</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online grocers</td>
<td>2.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table IV.**

Mean rating of local foods expectation for retailers

**Notes:** These results are based on the question: Rate the following retailers in terms of your expectation that they provide a good selection of locally sourced or produced products? (1 = low expectation, 5 = high expectation). Boxes around proportions indicate statistically equal values in post hoc comparison.
For the ranking of product categories, a Friedman nonparametric test was performed which indicates a statistically significant difference in expectations for which categories should carry locally sourced and produced foods ($\chi^2 = 74.92, \ p = 0.00$). A post hoc analysis with Wilcoxon signed-rank tests and a Bonferroni correction was used to test $H3$ and determine different levels of expectations for departments.

From the post hoc comparisons summarized in Table V, produce is the highest ranked category (as lowest mean ranking) that is also statistically significant different from all other options. This rejects $H3$, indicating that expectations for the availability of local foods has not expanded significantly beyond primarily the produce department. Table V also presents rankings for the remaining product categories and places boxes around significant differences. These indicate which categories have a secondary expectation to carry local foods. It is interesting to see that Dairy is the next department most expected to carry locally sourced and produced foods.

**Consumers are willing to pay for local foods**

One factor of success for a local product-marketing program assumes that consumers will be willing to pay a higher price for local foods (Darby et al., 2008; Rainbolt et al., 2012). $H4$ is tested through asking respondents how much they would be willing to pay for a $3.00 item if they knew it was locally sourced or produced. A single tailed $t$-test between the mean price of $3.70$ (SD = 0.60) and the null of $3.00$ indicates that consumers are willing to pay a $\ (23\,\text{percent})$ higher price for local foods if they knew they are local according to their definition ($p = 0.00$).

**Difference across customer groups**

Based on purchase frequencies for local products of one item or less per month, 2-4 items per month, and multiple items per week, the 277 respondents were divided into light, medium, and heavy users, respectively. Groups were then compared for differences in definitional elements, expectations for availability, and willingness to pay a premium for locally sourced and produced foods. Using a similar routine of repeated measures ANOVA and post hoc comparison across the three groups, a few interesting group differences were discovered. First, across the three groups, the top four local definitional elements are largely the same. An interesting difference, however, is that the heavy user has a larger set of top ranked equal attributes. Their top set also includes: business that is part of your community, traditional foods or recipes from your region, and non-industrial/non-corporate growers or manufactures. Second,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product category</th>
<th>Mean ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Produce</td>
<td>3.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dairy</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat and seafood</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural and organic</td>
<td>4.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bakery and deli</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grocery</td>
<td>4.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-foods</td>
<td>4.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** These results are based on the question: please indicate which product categories you most expect to find locally sourced or produced. Lower mean rankings are closer to a rank of 1.0 as the highest ranking. Boxes around mean rankings indicate statistically equal values in post hoc comparison.
expectations for where customers expect to find local foods also vary by usage level. Farmer/green markets remains the top provider for heavy and medium level users, however, for light users, the set of expected secondary retailers is larger including specialty food stores and whole foods. Third, in a similar fashion, expectations for which categories should carry local foods are also narrower with higher levels of experience and consumption of local foods. All three groups have produce as the primary and dairy as the secondary categories. In addition, medium users consider natural and organic and light users consider bakery and deli and meat and seafood as expected secondary categories expected to carry local foods. These findings support \( H5(a) \) and \( H5(b) \). Based on a one-way ANOVA, the mean price consumers are willing to pay does not vary significantly across groups \( (F = 1.45, \ p = 0.24) \), rejecting \( H5(c) \). In a similar calculation, mean distance in miles considered as local also did not vary significantly across groups \( (F = 1.58, \ p = 0.21) \).

Discussion

This study examines the inconsistencies in the conceptualization of “local foods” in a convenience sample of US respondents. The inconsistencies appear across dimensions of not only distance and geography, but also by whom and how foods are produced. This study verifies findings of past research regarding the use of food traveling distance and geographical boundaries to define local foods (Hartman, 2008; USDA, 2008; Zepeda and Leviten-Reid, 2004). Consumers in this study indicate that the acceptable food traveling distance ranges from 98.3 miles to 118 miles. It is interesting to find how consistent this quantitative estimate is with not only academic findings, but also with measures used by industry to define local (Hartman, 2008).

In terms of geographical and political boundaries, consumers consider local to be first from their community, and then from their state, but not from further away than their state. This conflicts, however, with products from a bordering state which may be within 100 miles, indicating that definitions are still being imperfectly conceptualized by consumers.

This study finds that there are definitional characteristics of locally sourced and produced foods that consumers consider as important as distance and geography providing an important contribution toward a more complete and thorough definition and understanding of local foods. For example, consumers prioritize smaller, family owned business and products unique to their region as equally as important to distance in their definition. This finding builds on Gracia’s et al. (2012) proposition that social dimensions of buying local foods are equally as important as distance in supporting willingness to pay. This is particularly interesting as the family ownership dimension is not considered by government and industry and suggests a completely different value consumers may place on local foods. This may be a major incentive for resurgence of the small-scale farmer that is not necessarily an organic farmer. The major reason for the loss of small-scale farm was the lack of efficiency, but with a willingness to pay more for local foods, producer profit margin improvements may make it possible again.

Consistent with past research, consumers most expect to obtain local foods from farmer/green markets and natural food stores (Zepeda and Li, 2006; Mintel, 2013). Local independently owned supermarkets, however, are the next most expected provider. This reveals the credibility and potential of local independently owned supermarkets to break into the grouping of retailers expected to provide local foods. This local foods expectation presents a significant strategic opportunity for local
independently owned supermarkets to differentiate themselves from their larger national or regional competitors. The traditional, mass, and online food retailers have the lowest expectation to carry local foods. This is in spite of large retailers, such as Wal-Mart, having invested heavily in buying more local produce compared to ten years ago (National Public Radio, 2008; Clifford, 2010). This exposes an interesting gap between customers’ expectations and traditional retailers’ marketing efforts. To narrow this gap, it may be important for supermarkets and supercenters to better promote their local efforts and products to build a stronger local image. When shoppers talk about Wal-Mart, for example, what comes to mind is “low price” but not “local”. How to get people to connect local foods with traditional retailers is a problem still to be solved. There are similar marketing opportunities for food manufacturers. For example, producers that are not traditionally known as local can promote where their raw materials come from. Frito Lay, a national large producer of salty snacks, uses local billboards to promote that their potatoes are locally sourced in Pennsylvania.

Also consistent with past research, consumers expect to obtain local foods first from the produce department (Burros, 2008). This study provides interesting learning about which categories have a secondary expectation to carry local foods (dairy, meat and seafood, natural and organic, and bakery and deli) and where there may have additional be returns on investment in local product sourcing, merchandising, and promotion. This is particularly relevant if a retailer is interested in enlarging their local product selections or displays. From these results, consumers will expect to first find more produce and dairy before expecting more local products in the center of the store. It could also give credence to the logic of putting all local products together in one place in the store to get more visibility for the local foods that the consumer might not expect to find in a traditional grocery. As has been found in other studies on this topic, this analysis replicates that consumers are willing to pay a higher price for products they believe to be local (Dentoni et al., 2009; McCluskey et al., 2009; Rainbolt et al., 2012).

How consumers define local and where they expect to find local products varies by their level of use and experience with local foods. Heavy users’ local definition is broader and more multidimensional than medium and light users. This may signal where the definition will mature to in the future. Heavy users also have a stricter consideration set of stores and categories to obtain these products; therefore, considerations sets appear to narrow as experience and consumption of local foods increases. These findings are consistent with other credence categories and the issue of credibility (Stanton et al., 2012). Natural and organic foods, for example, have pronounced group differences between light, medium, and heavy users with heavy users exhibiting stricter standards than light users.

It is important to take away from this research that the local foods trend is more than just produce food miles to consumers and may be part of an evolving and expanding redefinition of food quality. Consumers may be displaying a new desire to have a more personal connection and understanding regarding where and who their food comes from. This understanding expands the opportunities for food marketers to develop and present relevant local food offerings to their customers.

**Contributions and implications**

This paper offers several contributions to the academic study of local foods and implications for managers in the food industry. In terms of theory, this research introduces characteristics of locally sourced and produced foods that consumers
consider as important as distance, expanding the definition of local foods. It also shows that the definitional elements, expectations for availability, and willingness to pay a premium for locally sourced and produced foods vary by customer group.

Consumers’ broader definition of local food and their expectation to find them in more stores and departments offers retail managers and producers of local food wider opportunities to merchandise and promote these products. For example, instead of their local food program being restricted to marketing produce products shipped from within a certain distance, food marketers can promote dairy products produced by smaller scale, family owned operations within their state as part.

For government agencies, the finding that consumers consider local to be primarily from their community or state is positive for the various state local promotions which advocate the benefit of “produced within the state.” Millions of dollars are being spent in corresponding promotion programs and this gives credibility to the potential impact they may have.”

Limitations and future research
There are a number of areas that future research could build on from this study. More research is needed on the issue raised regarding state borders and the definition of local. That is, do consumers value produce grown in their own state over produce that may be much closer in distance but in an adjacent state? This would have an impact on how to best define and execute state local marketing programs.

Future research should focus on interactions of the various dimensions of local and how consumers would trade off attributes and benefits. For example, if the product was grown on a small farm by a family but was 200 miles from the respondent’s retailer, would that product be preferred over an industrial scale farm only 30 miles away?

Additionally, there should be additional analysis on the degree of respondents’ urbanization and proximity in terms of whether they are rural, suburban or urban consumers. Rural consumers may have a totally different definition of local than consumers who live in a city. Is it possible that rural consumers are more demanding of local whereas metro dwellers are less demanding? This issue is not addressed in the current study.

References
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**Further reading**


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