



ONTARIO AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE

Department of Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics

Results from the Guelph Food Panel

Local Food Products: Who Buys Them and Why?

The International Food Economy Research Group (InFERG) based in the Department of Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics (FARE) at the University of Guelph has established a panel of 2000 consumers that is representative of the city of Guelph. Guelph is routinely used by market researchers as being broadly representative of the Canadian population as a whole. The panel is used to track changes in consumer perceptions and attitudes towards a broad range of food issues. A recent panel survey focused on what consumers understand by the concept of 'local food', who buys food labelled as local and why?

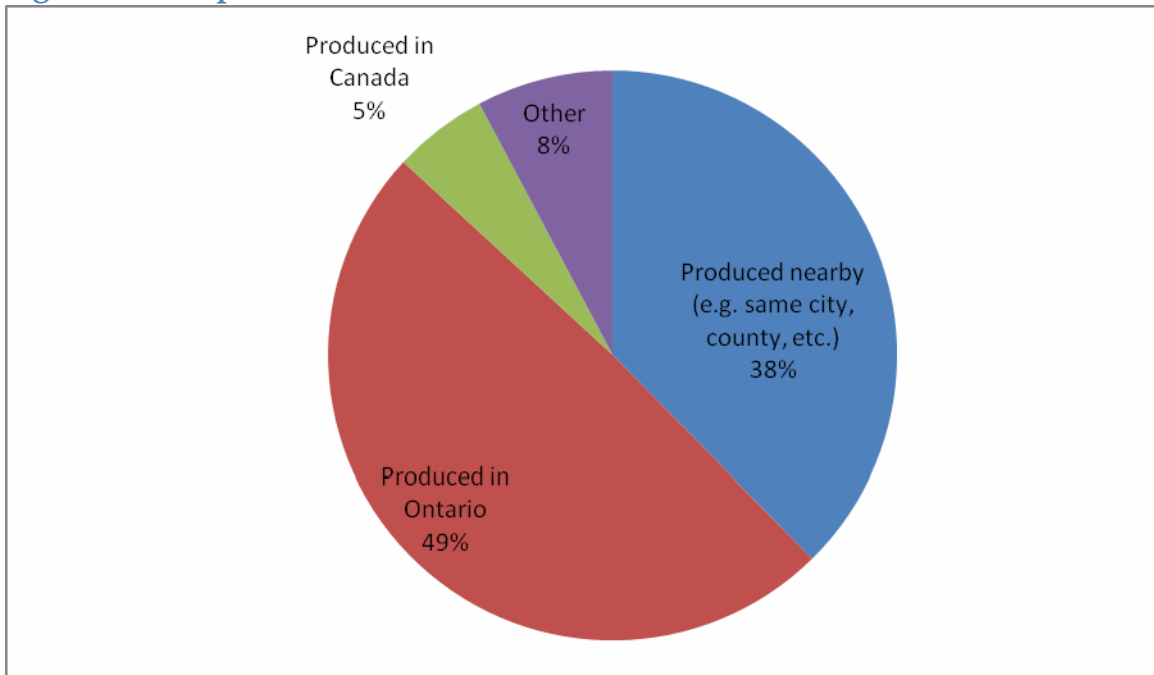
The increasing globalisation of the food supply chain and the concentration and consolidation of food manufacturing and retailing have raised concerns among certain consumers about the safety and quality of the food they buy and the wider social and environmental impacts of the food supply chain. Such trends are reflected in, and have been further pronounced by books such as "Ten Reasons to Buy Local Food" and "The 100-mile diet" that promote a range of benefits from buying locally. Thus, we have seen the growth of 'alternative' food systems, many of which emphasise local sourcing. Examples include farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSA) schemes and organic agricultural production. More generally, most provinces in Canada are making efforts to promote food products produced locally, for example "Foodland Ontario", often aimed at more mainstream food retail outlets, such as supermarkets.

Considering the growing importance of the concept of local food, the Guelph Food Panel was surveyed to assess understanding of the concept of 'local', the factors that motivate consumers to purchase locally-produced foods and perceptions of the associated benefits. Some of the key results are summarised below.

For many consumers local means grown in their home province

Respondents were asked what first came to mind when thinking of the term 'local' in the context of food. Around 49 percent perceived local food to be produced in Ontario, while a further 38 percent considered local to refer to the more immediate area around where they lived, for example the same city or county (Figure 1). A small proportion (around 8%) of respondents considered local foods to be better for the environment, fresher and/or higher quality, without making any specific reference to the geographical area in which they had been produced.

Figure 1. Perceptions of 'local' in the context of food choices:

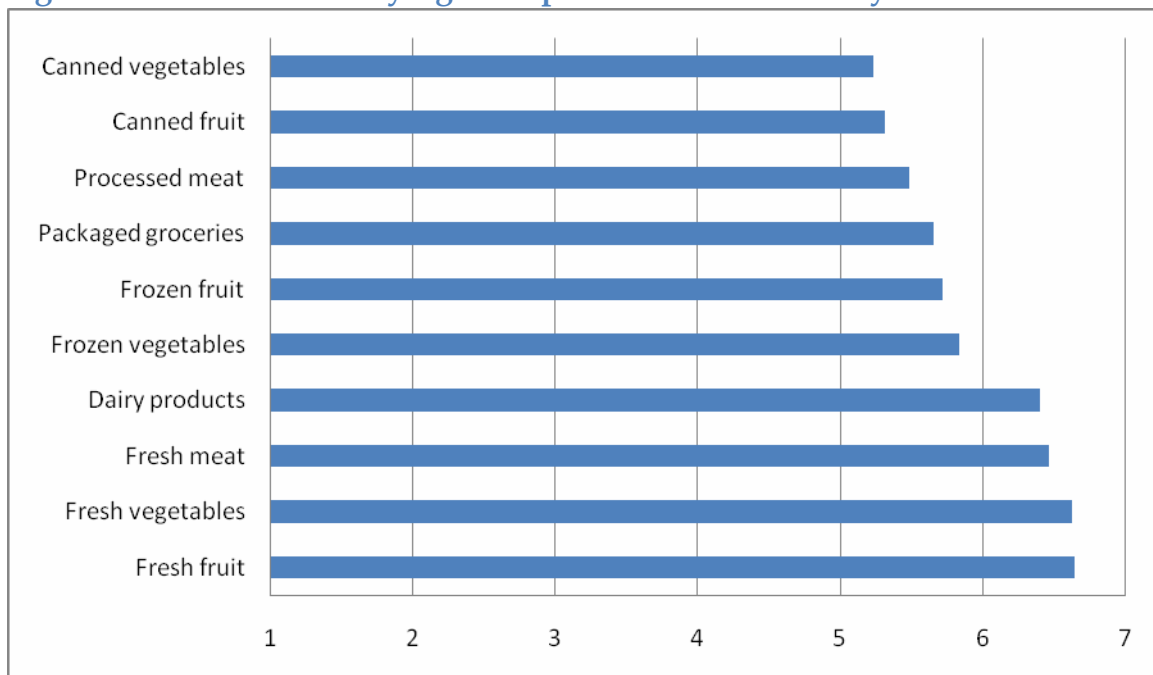


Consumers are more likely to buy locally-produced fresh foods than locally-produced processed foods

Respondents were asked how likely they would be to buy a variety of fresh and processed locally-produced foods in the next year if these were available conveniently and at the right price. The aim here was to gauge

how desirable consumers consider the purchase of local food is, putting aside issues such as availability and cost. Broadly speaking members of the panel indicated they would be more likely to buy locally-produced fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, meat and dairy products (Figure 2). And while the likelihood of buying locally-produced canned fruit and vegetables and processed meats was lower in comparison to their fresh equivalents, respondents still indicated some likelihood of purchasing local products in the next year if they were easily available and there was no price penalty.

Figure 2. Likelihood of buying local-produced foods in the year to come:



Note: Scale from 1 = 'very unlikely' to 7 = 'very likely'

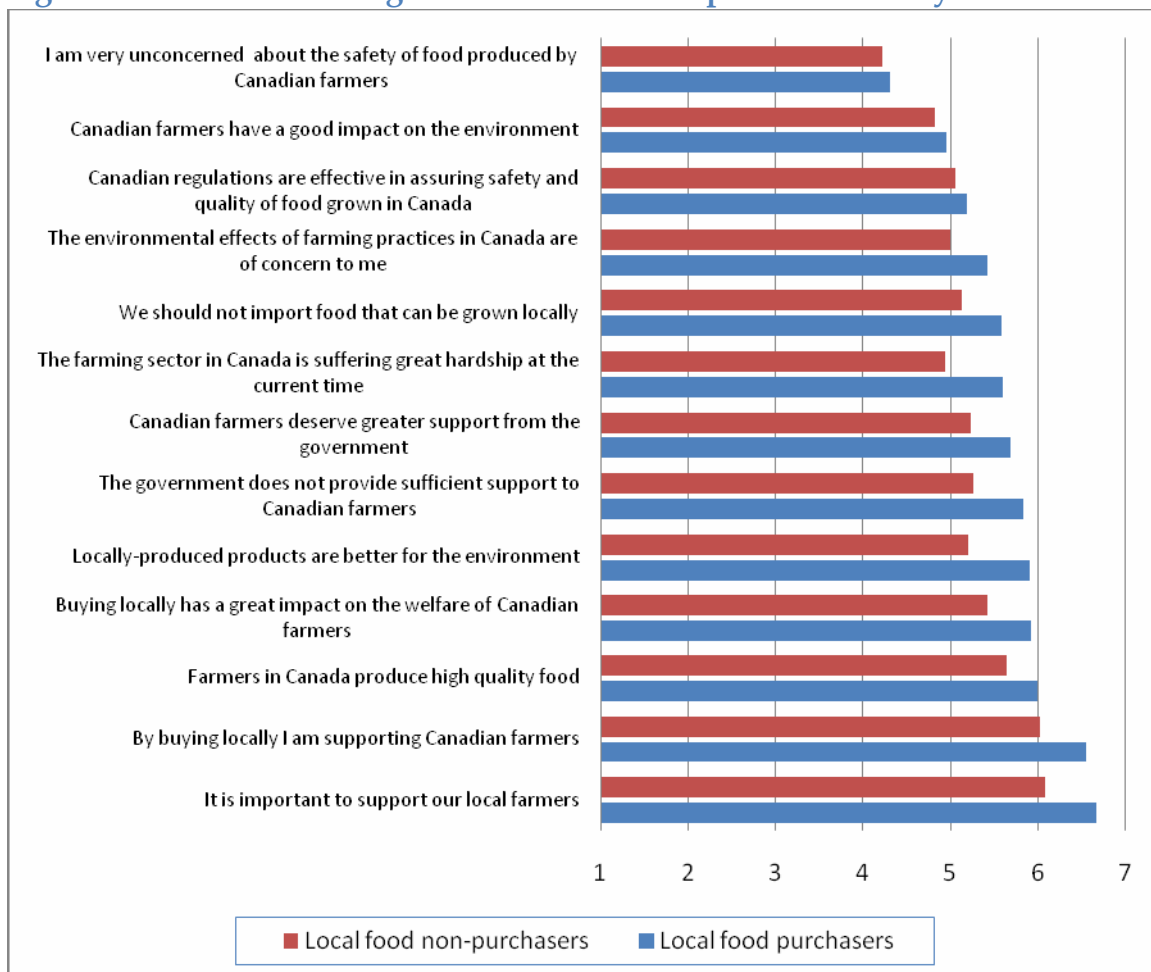
Buying local food as a means to support farmers

Underlying consumer purchases of local-produced food are their broader attitudes towards farming in Canada and the potential benefits of food produced locally. To judge how members of the Guelph Food Panel feel about these issues, they were presented with a series of statements and asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each (Figure 3). The responses suggest that consumers have a very positive view of farming in Canada and, perhaps more importantly, consider that buying local foods supports local farmers and that this is an important thing to do. Thus, 88 percent indicated that they agreed with the statement "it is important to support our local farmers", while 85 percent agreed that "by buying locally I am supporting Canadian

farmers". The responses also suggest that food produced in Canada and/or locally is perceived to be good quality, better for the environment and does not raise great food safety concerns.

What is particularly interesting is that consumer perceptions about farmers in Canada and the benefits of local food differ according to their likelihood of purchasing locally-produced food in the next year (Figure 3). Purchasers of local food have stronger beliefs in the importance of supporting local farmers and in the notion that by purchasing local food they are providing such support. Likewise, purchasers of local food are more likely to agree that locally-produced food is of greater quality than imported foods and is more beneficial for the environment. While there are differences in the demographic characteristics of purchasers and non-purchasers of local food (see below), the distinction in attitudes towards food in general, and local food in particular, are more important distinguishing factors.

Figure 3. Views on farming in Canada and food produced locally

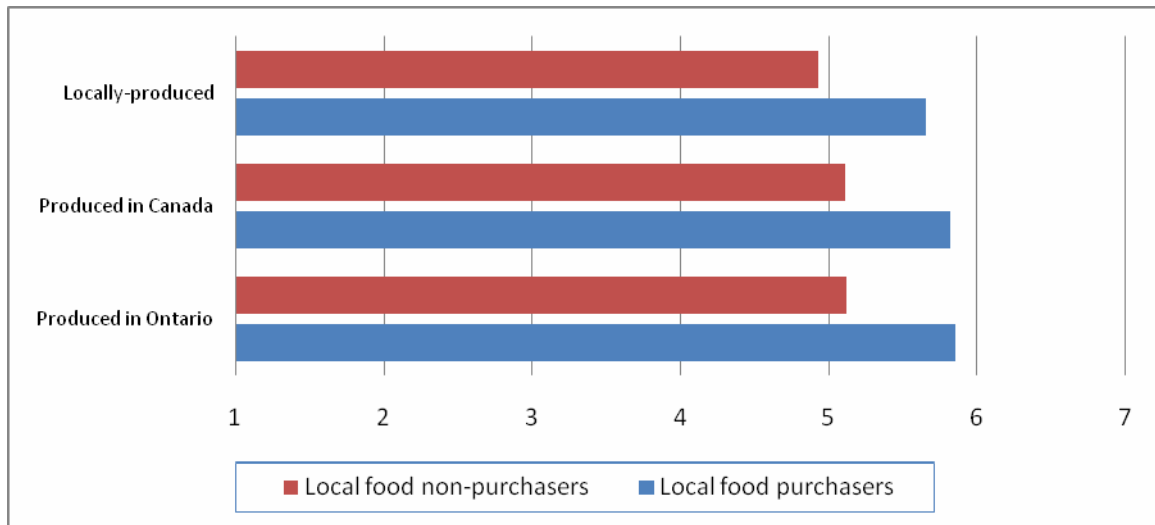


Note: Scale from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 7 = 'strongly agree'

Origin of production is important when some consumer choose what foods to buy

Members of the Guelph Food Panel were asked about the importance of a wide range of factors when choosing which foods to buy. Here we focus on the importance given to where foods are produced and differences across buyers and non-buyers of local food. The overall finding is that buyers of local food put much greater importance on food being locally-produced and/or produced in Ontario/Canada than non-purchasers (Figure 4). Thus, 69 percent of buyers of local food considered that produced in Ontario was important, while 61 percent considered that produced in Canada was important, when choosing which food to buy. This compared with 45 percent and 38 percent of non-purchasers of local food, which considered that produced in Ontario and produced in Canada was important when choosing which foods to buy, respectively.

Figure 4. Importance of origin when deciding what foods to buy



Note: Scale from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 7 = 'strongly agree'

Who buys local foods?

On the basis of the results of the survey it is possible to build up a profile of consumers that are most likely to purchase locally-produced foods (Table 1). It is not surprising that those individuals that see benefits from buying local foods are most likely to buy them. However, what is striking is that the chief motivators are support for local farmers and beliefs that locally-produced foods are better quality and/or safer. Those most likely to buy local food put greater emphasis on where food is from than those that are less likely to purchase local food, and are also more likely to have their own garden. Women and consumers aged 30 to 49 years show the greatest interest in buying local food. Interestingly, there is no significant difference in the likelihood of buying locally-produced food in the next year between higher and lower-income consumers.

Conclusions:

These latest results from the Guelph Food Panel highlight that there is a widespread belief among Canadian consumers that buying locally-produced foods is a 'good thing', while most consumers consider where a food is produced to be an important factor in choosing which food to buy. At the same time, concerns about the welfare of Canadian farmers and the benefits of local food for local farmers and the environment are much stronger among those consumers with the greatest propensity to purchase. Likewise, purchasers of local food typically have much stronger

beliefs that food produced locally is of greater quality and put greater importance on that fact that a food is produced locally and/or in Ontario/Canada when choosing which food to buy. It is interesting to note, however, that what counts as 'local' differs significantly, with some consumers considering products of Ontario (and even Canada) to count as local, while others accord more with the concept of the 'hundred mile diet'.

Table 1. Profile of consumers that are most likely buy locally-produced foods:

- Perceive benefits from buying local foods
- Consider that buying local supports local farmers
- Perceive local foods to be safer and better quality
- Give importance to the origin of food products
- Grow foods at home
- Prepare a larger proportion of meals from scratch
- Are women
- Aged 30 to 49 years

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