

Talking Local: Florida Consumers' Flexibility with the Term "Local"¹

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Consumer's Views on Local Foods

This EDIS publication focuses on Florida consumer flexibility with the term "local." Previous research has focused on the increased demand for and interest in locally grown foods (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015; Conner et al., 2010). Although, as there is no regulation on the definition of the term "local," perceptions surrounding the term "local food" vary (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015). A study by Feldmann and Hamm (2015) found definitions of local to range from distance and political boundaries to emotional and/or ethical dimensions.

In response to growing consumer interest in local foods and their impact on Florida agriculture, the [UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education](#) conducted a study to explore consumers' perceptions of local food. In order to understand Florida consumers' perceptions of local food, a series of 10 focus groups was conducted, with two taking place in each of Florida's Extension Administrative Districts. A total of 93 participants were involved in the study, which included participants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, occupations, and ages. Focus groups are not generalizable beyond those who participate in the study.

"Local Choice" Scenarios

In the focus group, consumers were presented with three "local choice" scenarios, which were scripts presented by the facilitator discussing growing locations of three commodities: tomatoes, apples, and coffee. The scenarios were read aloud to consumers while concurrently projected onto a screen. After introducing each scenario, the presenter asked consumers how they would define *local* when applied to that commodity and whether or not that impacted their purchasing decisions surrounding the commodity.

Tomatoes

The first scenario presented to consumers was about tomatoes. The script read as follows:

Florida is the nation's largest producer of fresh tomatoes. In fact, Florida produces about ½ of the domestic supply. From October–June, south Florida produces almost all of the fresh tomatoes available in the United States. Aside from Florida, Mexico and Canada also make up large portions of the US tomato market. What do you consider to be a local tomato?

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DEFINITION OF LOCAL TOMATOES

After being presented with information about the seasonality (October–June) and growing locations of tomatoes (Florida, Mexico, and Canada), consumers were asked how the information impacted their definition of a local tomato. A south-central Florida consumer considered a local tomato to be from “neighboring counties.” A northwest Florida consumer considered tomatoes from the grocery store as local and said, “Whatever is at the grocery store is local to me.”

Consumers also discussed having a broader definition of the term “local” when applied to tomatoes. A northeast Florida consumer said, “I think I consider local more like a fifty-mile radius. But then, in comparison to another country, Florida is more local than another country, so I think I’d kind of layer my ideas on what local is.”

NON-FLORIDA LOCAL TOMATOES

Consumers also discussed what they would consider a local tomato when Florida tomatoes were out of season. During the off-season, consumers did not consider local tomatoes available for purchase. A south Florida consumer said, “I would say that there just aren’t local tomatoes during that time. Unless you’ve got something locally grown.”

Consumers also discussed accepting a broader definition of local tomatoes during the off-season. Consumers discussed accepting tomatoes from the southeastern United States as local and a northeast Florida consumer said, “Florida, Georgia, and the Southeast. For me, that’s still local.” Consumers also discussed accepting any American-produced tomato as local; a south Florida consumer said, “Something grown in the United States as opposed to overseas.”

Apples

The second scenario presented to consumers was about apples. The script read as follows:

In the United States, most apples are produced in the Northeast and on the West Coast. The top five apple producing states are Washington, New York, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and California. However, apple production is limited in the southeastern United States. Aside from the United States, China, the European Union, Turkey, and India produce most of the world’s supply. What do you consider to be a local apple?

DEFINITION OF LOCAL APPLES

In order to define a local apple, consumers broadened their definition to apples produced within the United States. A

central Florida consumer said, “I think for an apple, it’d be local for the United States.” Consumers also discussed humidity in Florida playing a role in apple production and the need to support US apple growers. A northeast Florida consumer said, “It’s too humid for Florida to grow apples, so if you want to define local, then you can only define it as supporting our country’s apple producers.”

PREFERENCE FOR US APPLES

Consumers discussed a preference for US-produced apples during the focus groups. A northwest Florida consumer said, “I would rather have an apple from the US, obviously, than I would from China.” A south Florida consumer discussed their purchasing preference for domestic products and said, “I’d rather buy something domestic than imported, international.”

Coffee

The final scenario presented to consumers was about coffee. The script read as follows:

Coffee trees grow best in tropical climates with high altitudes. In the United States, Hawaii and Puerto Rico have the only climates which support the growth of coffee trees. Other places that produce coffee include Central America, South America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. What do you consider to be local coffee?

LOCAL COFFEE

Consumers had mixed reactions when defining local coffee. Some consumers discussed local coffee as coffee produced within the US or its territories. A northeast Florida consumer said, “Only if it’s grown in Hawaii or Puerto Rico, given that is here, I would say that it is local.” Consumers also discussed not putting thought into coffee’s production location; a central Florida consumer said, “If I was talking about buying coffee from Hawaii or Mexico when there was a choice or one of the other countries, I would buy it from the US, but I really don’t know that I’ve ever put that much thought into where my coffee comes from.” Consumers also discussed a broader definition of the term “local” when applied to coffee as any coffee from the Northern Hemisphere. A south central Florida consumer said, “Maybe this hemisphere. Maybe this side of the globe.”

COFFEE IS NOT LOCAL

Consumers also discussed that they did not consider coffee to be a local commodity. A central Florida consumer said, “I wouldn’t consider there to be local coffee.” Consumers also discussed not being concerned with the origin of their coffee. When referring to interest in the growing location of

coffee, a northeast Florida consumer said, “I don’t care, give me my coffee.”

THE VALUE OF LOCAL PROCESSING

Consumers were also asked if they valued local processing or roasting of coffee. Consumers discussed that local processing would promote the local economy. A central Florida consumer said, “If it will help jobs here locally, even if they weren’t grown here, it would be good for the economy and people, labor.” Consumers also discussed having more knowledge of the regulatory process for American-produced products; a south Florida consumer said, “I would say processing would be important if it is done here, because you know what is going on. More or less the laws and everything, the restrictions.”

Consumers also discussed that locally processed or roasted coffee was important to them. A northeast Florida consumer said, “Yeah, it’s sort of like when a car might be a foreign manufacturer, but like they make the engines in America, it makes a difference to me. It does, yeah it feels either more local or at least made in the USA.”

Opportunities for Extension Programming/Agents

The results of these focus groups suggest several ways Extension agents/programs can promote local food, make use of consumers’ definitions of local food, etc. Extension agents should share this knowledge of consumer definitions of local with producer clientele through economic, marketing, and production programming.

Encourage producers to clearly label the production location. The results in this EDIS reveal that consumers have a flexible definition of “local” and may have different definitions depending on the product. Generally, consumers showed a preference for food produced as close as possible to their location, and they preferred not to buy food grown in other countries if a US product was available. Therefore, clearly labeling the production location of their products could sway consumer decisions, because consumers would prefer to buy products produced closer to home or in the US.

Don’t define “local.” Because of the flexible definition that consumers have of local food, organizations and producers can benefit by not defining local. Extension should encourage producers and organizations to utilize the state *Fresh from Florida* brand or just clearly label the production location, and let consumers make their own decision about

the locality of the product. More information about the benefits of using the state brand can be found in Talking Local: Consumers’ *Fresh from Florida* Perceptions.

Summary

“Local” does not always mean the same thing, depending on the commodity under discussion. Consumers presented with three “local choice” scenarios, featuring tomatoes, apples, and coffee, discussed their flexibility with the term “local.” They were at times willing to accept products from different regions of the state, other neighboring states, the United States, and as far away as anything in the northern hemisphere. Extension programming and product labeling might benefit from indicating the point-of-origin on the packaging, rather than defining the product as “local.”

References

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