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The Influence of Farmer-Customer Interactions at Farmers Markets on Farmer Growing Practices

Allison Perrett and Charlie Jackson
March 2018

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Abstract

This report presents the findings of a study that examined the interactions farmers and consumers are having at farmers markets in Western North Carolina on the topic of farmer growing methods. Overall, findings show that farmers markets are places where shoppers expect to find sustainably grown food. Results also point to the larger role of farmers markets in local food system building and the opportunity farmers have, in sharing production practices, to build customer relations and demand for their product in other retail environments. Additional findings point to the challenges of communicating about growing practices at farmers markets and, from this, the need for farmers to be deliberate in their communication strategies and the need to enhance consumer literacy of growing methods.

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What is the issue?

This research is based on the assumption that place-based experiences with food and farms increase people's engagement with the food system. Knowledge and interest gained through experience motivates people to participate in the creation of food systems, and this process of food system "democratization" shapes the values and practices of food systems. Informed by this framework, this project focused on farmers markets, because they provide opportunities for face-to-face interaction between farmers and consumers. Farmers can communicate with shoppers about their growing practices and market shoppers can ask farmers about how they are growing food.

What did the study find?

Findings showed the majority of farmers at the markets are growing food using sustainable methods. The majority of market shoppers are looking for sustainably produced foods and expressed a willingness to pay more for it. Moreover, customers' market experiences are impacting their food purchasing patterns - they are deciding to shop at farmers markets more often and in other non-direct retail outlets. Additional findings point to the challenges of communicating about growing practices. Busy market environments make conversations difficult. Shoppers make assumptions about the practices farmers use or have misconceptions about growing methods. To facilitate better communication, farmers can display their practices on signage, provide printed materials, and be prepared with brief elevator speeches. Strategies to increase public literacy of growing methods will need to explore actions both inside and outside of market environments.

How was the study conducted?

The study area was Western North Carolina, a region located in the Southern Appalachian Mountains and the site of an active movement to build a local food system. The research focused on farmers markets because they provide ample opportunities for face-to-face communication between farmers and consumers. Research activities included interviews with farmers selling at farmers markets, surveys at farmers markets with shoppers, and an analysis of primary data on farmer production practices.

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from a research project that examined the interactions farmers and consumers are having in farmers market environments on the topic of farmer growing methods. The study area is Western North Carolina, a region located in the Southern Appalachian Mountains and the site of an active movement to localize the region's food system.

Research activities for this project focused on farmer-customer interactions at farmers markets to understand the kinds of interactions farmers and shoppers are having around agricultural production methods. How are farmers communicating their growing practices to consumers? What questions are consumers asking farmers? What are market shoppers' assumptions and concerns about local food and how it is being produced? How is this dialogue influencing the perceptions and actions of farmers and consumers?

Overall, the research showed farmers market shoppers are seeking out sustainably produced foods and many farmers are supplying it. At farmers markets in the region, farmers growing food using sustainable production methods dominate;¹ shoppers are predominately looking for sustainably produced foods and many express willingness to pay more for food grown using sustainable growing practices. Moreover, customers' market experiences are impacting their food purchasing patterns, pointing to the important role of farmers markets in the ongoing development of the region's food system. Consumers are making values-based decisions about the foods they purchase and are seeking out more local food in other outlets based on their interactions with farmers at farmers markets.

The research also identified gaps in customer knowledge and the need for more effective communications at the markets. For farmers, the findings point to the need to clearly communicate growing methods and to view farmers market interactions as an important opportunity to build relationships and trust with customers. The findings also suggest the need to provide shoppers with information and guidance they can use to engage in conversations with farmers about growing methods. Shoppers want to know how food is grown but, as reported by farmers, frequently arrive at markets with incorrect understandings about different growing methods. Paradoxically, while this finding suggests a need for more conversation opportunities about farmer growing methods, the data also suggest that busy market environments are not the best places to have them. Actions taken to increase the public's literacy of growing methods should take this into account and create communication channels both inside and outside of market environments.

¹ Local Food Research Center (2018) *The Growth and Transition of Sustainable Production Practices in Western North Carolina*. ASAP, Asheville, NC. Report on file.

Methodology

At the center of this research is the assumption that place-based experiences with food and farms increase people's engagement with the food system. Knowledge and interest gained through experience motivates people to participate in the creation of food systems, and this process of food system "democratization" shapes the values and practices of food systems.² Informed by this framework, this project focused on farmers markets because they provide opportunities for face-to-face interaction between farmers and consumers. Farmers can communicate with shoppers about their growing practices and market shoppers can ask farmers about how they are growing food.

The context for the research is a long standing Local Food Campaign implemented by Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) nearly two decades ago to raise awareness of and support for the region's farms, develop markets for locally grown food, and provide the people that live in the region a voice in how food is produced. Viewed as a vital means to build meaningful connections between farmers and consumers, the support and promotion of direct market venues has been a key focus of Local Food Campaign activities.

Research activities included interviews with farmers and surveys with market shoppers. Local farmers and consumers of local food were identified through their participation at area farmers markets. Five farmers markets located in the vicinity of Asheville, NC, the largest commercial center in the region as well as the center of Local Food Campaign activities, were selected as research sites. The markets chosen were producer-only, a designation that means that the farmers that sell at those markets are required by market rules to sell only what they grow themselves.

To sample a mix of markets from urban and rural contexts, two markets in Asheville city center, one market in Asheville's Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), and two others in more rural environments were selected. Sixteen farmers (who sell at a total of 12 area farmers markets including the five selected for this study) participated in one structured interview that focused on their production methods, their interactions with shoppers at markets, and the impacts of those interactions on their production practices and communications. Nine farmers were new and beginning farmers (defined by the USDA as farming for 10 or fewer years), two farmers were the youngest generation of multi-generational farming families, and five farmers had farmed for more than 10 years. Thirteen of the farmers grew produce, four produced eggs, and two produced meat.

Farmers reported many different production practices and several cited multiple practices. The distribution of growing practices included 11 growing organically (eight non-certified and three certified), six claiming GMO-free, one using a mix of organic and conventional methods, one following the Certified Naturally Grown™

² Perrett, A., & Jackson, C. (2015). Local food, food democracy, and food hubs. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 6(1), 7–18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2015.061.003>

certification program, one using low spray, three biodynamic methods, and one following permaculture methods.

Intercept surveys were conducted with 237 market shoppers at the five markets and asked shoppers about their preferences for food grown using certain production methods, their interactions with farmers at markets on the subject of growing practices, and how they would like to see information about farmers' growing methods communicated to them at farmers markets. The majority (83%) of respondents indicated they were the primary food shopper in their households. 71% were female and 29% male. The average age of respondents was 56 years of age, and 50% of individuals fell between the ages of 56 and 75. The median household income fell into the \$40,000 to \$59,999 range (this compares to a \$50,541 median income for the Asheville MSA in 2016)³. The education level of respondents ranged from less than high school to doctorate and professional degrees. The education categories with the highest representation included 4-year degree (33%) and masters degree (28.6%). There was an even distribution (4.4% each) between high school GED, doctorate, and professional. Overall, market shoppers attained higher levels of education than average with 96% of shoppers having degrees beyond high school compared to the area average of 63%.

Study Limitations

Limitations relate primarily to a bias in the farmer sample. In selecting farmer participants, the research methodology was originally designed to use a stratified sampling method and to conduct interviews in the winter. The timing of the interviews, however, coincided with a streak of unusually warm weather and farmers were heavily engaged in production activities. To increase participation, the pool of potential farmer participants was expanded and accordingly, the sample of farmer participants is best described as self-selected. Because of their higher frequency at farmers markets, farmers growing produce and using organic methods were oversampled as compared to the general farmer makeup of the region.

Moreover, the majority of the farmers (all but two) indicated that their decisions to produce food in particular ways was a choice they brought with them to farming based on personal philosophies, not market dynamics. To further explore the question of farmer-customer interactions on farmer growing methods in this region, additional research should expand the farmer pool to include a wider range of farmer experiences including farmers from families that have farmed in the region for generations.⁴

³ U.S. Census Bureau, 2016 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

⁴ In Western North Carolina, these farmers are likely to have inherited farms producing crops historically grown in the region (e.g., tobacco, cows for auction markets) in conventional ways and were farming in the region long before the impacts of changes federal policy and Local Food Campaign activity.

Findings

Demand for Local Food Produced Sustainably at Farmers Markets

Farmers market shoppers say they want food produced in environmentally sustainable ways. They want to know the growing practices farmers use.

83% of the farmers market shoppers surveyed indicated that they look for food that has been grown or raised in environmentally sustainable and humane ways. 97% indicated they were interested (59% very interested, 38% somewhat interested) in farmers' growing practices.

When asked what practices they look for, farmers market shoppers cited common production practices and terminology:

- 44% of shoppers said they look for organic products
- 28% of shoppers expressed interest in production methods that do not use chemicals, using the terms “no spray,” “low spray,” “pesticide free,” “herbicide free,” and “no chemicals.”
- 34% indicated a concern with the treatment of animals in meat and egg production, using the terms “pasture raised,” “free range,” “cage free,” “grassfed,” and “humane” or “humanely-raised.”

Farmers market shoppers say they are willing to pay more for food grown or raised in sustainable ways.

The farmers market survey asked shoppers to indicate how much more they think it costs to grow or raise food using environmentally sustainable practices (compared to conventionally-grown food), and how much more they are willing to pay for food grown in sustainable ways. Figure 1 show shoppers perception of costs. Compared to conventionally grown products, 63% of shoppers think it costs more to grow or raise food in environmentally sustainable ways (31% think it costs “a lot” more, and 32% believe it costs “a little” more).

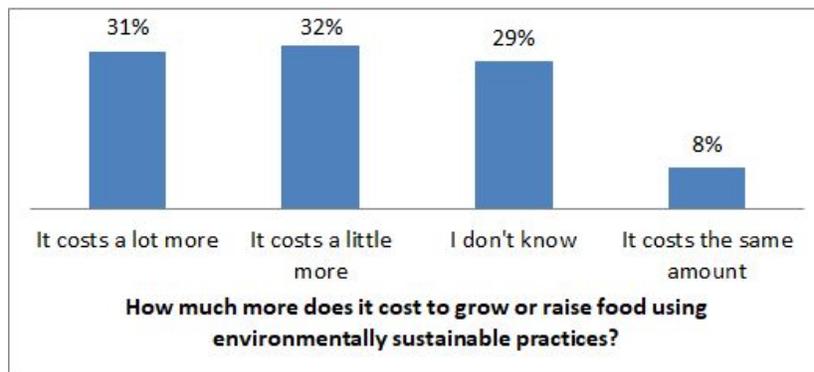
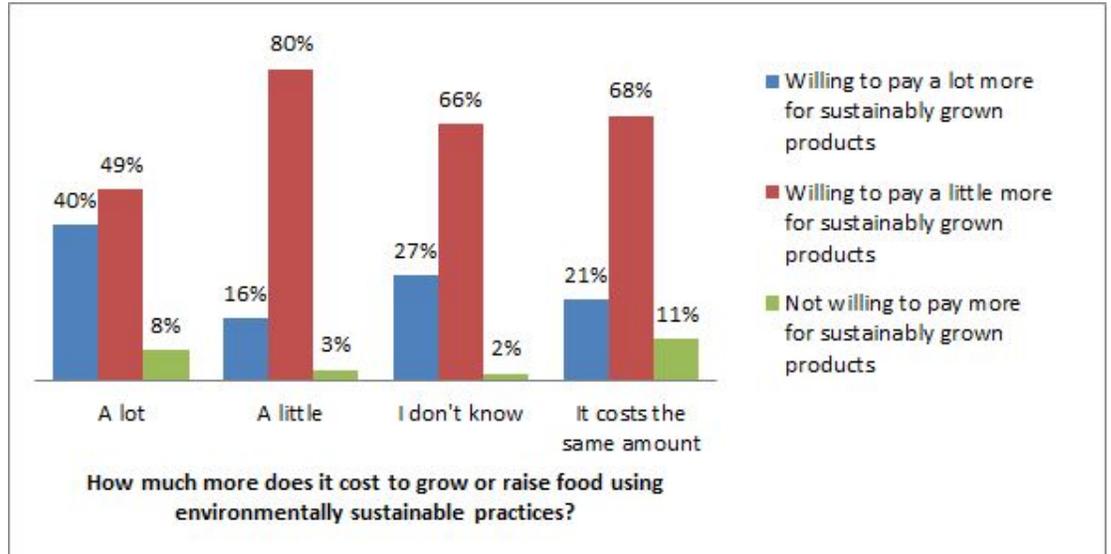


Figure 1:
Perceptions of Cost

Figure 2 shows how shoppers' perceptions of cost correlate to their willingness to pay for food produced in environmentally sustainable ways.

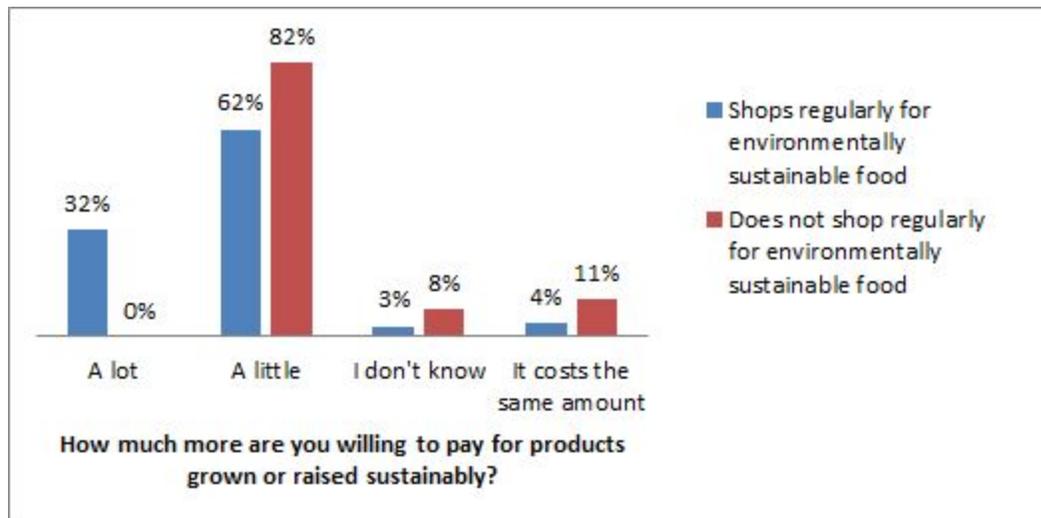
Figure 2:
Perceptions of cost
and willingness to pay



Shoppers who believe it costs “a little” more to produce food in environmentally sustainable ways are willing to pay a little more, and those who perceive it costs “a lot” more have a greater willingness to pay a lot more. Notably, shoppers who indicated they “don’t know” how much more it costs or that “it costs the same amount” also expressed a willingness to pay more for food produced in environmentally sustainable ways.

A deeper look at the data shows that, of the shoppers who regularly shop for food grown using environmentally sustainable practices, 32% are willing to pay a lot more and 62% are willing to pay a little more (see Figure 3).

Figure 3:
Regularity of
shopping for
environmentally
sustainable food and
willingness to pay



Notably, of the shoppers who indicated they do not regularly shop for food produced in environmentally sustainable ways, 82% indicated they are willing to pay a little more.

Market Interactions Around Growing Practices

Farmers and farmers market customers are communicating about growing practices.

77% of customers surveyed indicated they had talked with a farmer about their growing practices at a farmers market. All of the farmers interviewed noted that the most common questions they receive from shoppers are around organic production: Is it organic? Is it organic certified? Is it grown organically? For farmers using less well-known methods like biodynamic and Certified Naturally Grown, shoppers ask farmers to explain what these methods mean. To farmers selling meat and eggs, shoppers asked what the animals are fed. For example, are they getting organic feed or is the feed non-GMO? Shoppers also ask about the life and treatment of the animals. For example, do the animals have access to the outdoors, are they on pasture, or are they free range?

Repeat shoppers have developed relationships with farmers and have already asked them about their practices. The majority of farmers interviewed talked about a repeat customer base that did not need to continue to ask them about their practices. In the survey, 12% of market shoppers indicated they only shop from farmers they know and whose practices they already know about.

In addition, growing practices are communicated by many farmers nonverbally with signage at their stalls. Farmers growing organically, in particular, are using different forms of signage to communicate their practices to shoppers and some noted that because organic is a familiar term a sign satisfies most customers.

Interactions with farmers have increased customers' knowledge, affected the way they think about food and agriculture, and influenced them to shop more frequently at farmers markets.

When asked how their interactions with farmers on farmer growing practices influence their actions, a majority of the shoppers indicated that because of their conversations with farmers at markets they have decided to purchase from those farms because they approve of their growing practices (61%). Conversely, 24% indicated they have made the decision to not shop with particular farms at the market because they not like the practices those farms were using.

Shoppers also indicated that conversations with farmers have had impacts that go beyond immediate purchasing decisions:

- 66% of shoppers surveyed indicated that they think more about what they are eating and how it is grown
- 62% indicated that through their interactions with farmers they have learned more about growing practices

- 62% indicated that because of their interactions with farmers, they have decided to shop more frequently at farmers markets
- 57% indicated they purchased locally-grown food at a grocery store, restaurant, or other outlet that they first learned about at a farmers market

Challenges to Farmer-Customer Interactions About Growing Practices

Busy market environments make conversations about growing practices difficult.

Farmers noted that farmers markets, though providing a place for face-to-face communications with customers, can be challenging environments to discuss growing methods. In busy markets, farmers are likely attending to multiple shoppers and multi-tasking—answering questions about products and pricing, weighing product, taking money, and making change. The customer survey findings suggest that some shoppers also find conversations to be difficult at markets. Of the 23% of market shoppers that indicated they do not ask farmers about their growing practices, 7% said they do not ask because farmers are typically busy with other shoppers or talking to other farmers.

Shoppers make assumptions about the practices of farmers that sell in farmers markets.

Asked why shoppers don't ask about their practices, some of the farmers interviewed stated that they believed that for some consumers a farmers market equates to food that has been grown sustainably. For the 23% of shoppers surveyed that indicated they never ask farmers about their growing practices, 44% said that if the farmer is selling at the market, they assume they are using sustainable practices. In addition, 18% of shoppers, when asked what sustainable practices they are looking for when they shop for food generally, included "local" in their response (naming local in a list with other practices), suggesting a number of shoppers believe, at some level, local implies food grown in sustainable ways or that "local" is an otherwise desirable quality.

Shoppers do not feel comfortable talking with farmers about growing practices.

Of the shoppers that indicated they have not talked with a farmer about farmer growing practices, 32% indicated they do not because they do not feel they know enough about growing practices to have conversations with farmers about them.

Gaps and Needs in Communicating Growing Practices

Communicating growing methods with signage at the market.

Both farmers and market shoppers recognized the value of signage to communicate practices. Nearly 70% of shoppers indicated they want to see clear signage at farmers' stalls stating their growing practices. Half indicated they want farmers to display their growing certifications if they have any. Some farmers acknowledged that having clear signage may also make the difference in a sale. One farmer offered, "I'd be afraid that without the sign, I'd lose shoppers....that maybe they would assume I produced conventionally and they don't feel comfortable asking." For farmers selling in busy market environments, in particular, posting information on growing methods at stalls (e.g., with a banner, a sandwich board, on specific product labels, etc) may be an important time management strategy and save frustration on the part of farmers and shoppers.

Communicating growing methods with an "elevator speech."

For shoppers that do ask about growing practices, farmers can be prepared with a straightforward response - a brief elevator speech that they, their employees, and/or their interns can use to communicate about the farm's growing practices. For farmers using well-known methods, the elevator speech may be one sentence, e.g., "we're certified organic" or "we use organic methods but are not certified." For farmers growing in ways that may be less familiar and require more explanation, the process of crafting an elevator speech can help farmers focus in on the essential information. For example, one farmer, who follows the Certified Naturally Grown program, noted that she developed an elevator speech because she found most shoppers had never heard of the program. She responds to shoppers by saying, "We are Certified Naturally Grown, which is based on the national organic standards. We don't do anything that wouldn't be allowed in that program."

Communicating growing methods with printed materials.

Be prepared to provide more in depth information. For shoppers that ask, farmers can be prepared to provide information they can take with them, e.g., pamphlets, rack cards, or other printed materials.

Providing support to increase the public's knowledge about growing methods.

Most farmers interviewed noted that many of the customers they interact with at markets have misconceptions about specific growing practices, from organic to conventional. One notable example cited by many of the farmers interviewed is the "do you spray" question. It is one of the most common questions farmers get from customers, and one farmer hypothesized it has become another way of asking "are you organic?" (even though, as he noted, farmers growing organically can use approved sprays). Commenting on the trickiness of that question, another organic farmer noted that if he says "yes" to customers that ask "do you spray" he loses them.

“Their eyes glaze over as soon as you say ‘yes’,” he stated, meaning they are no longer receptive to explanations about how the sprays between organic and conventional production differ. Other farmers suggested that some shoppers do not know how to engage with farmers about their growing practices. They do not know the questions to ask or what different production practice terminology actually means.

Though most farmers indicated they believe face-to-face communication is best, they recognized the challenge of engaging in informative conversations with shoppers and correcting misperceptions about particular kinds of growing methods. All farmers interviewed suggested there is a need for outside support to variously provide consumers with guidance on ways to engage with farmers on their growing practices, to address some consumers’ assumptions that “local” means grown in environmentally sustainable and/or humane ways, and to expand consumers’ understandings of specific growing practices (what different growing designations mean) and the true costs of small scale sustainable production. Suggested avenues of support included establishing market staff/volunteers able to provide shoppers with market information including information about growing methods and costs, providing information about the growing methods of vendors on farmers markets’ social media sites, and including descriptions of growing practices in local food and farm focused literature.⁵

⁵ Many of the farmers suggested including descriptions in ASAP’s Local Food Guide, an annually-produced directory of local farms and the businesses that source from them.

Conclusion

Farmers markets are at the nexus of the evolving conversation about how and where food is grown. Overall, findings show that farmers markets are places where shoppers expect to find sustainably grown food and that in Western North Carolina farmers markets attract farmers that are growing using sustainable farming practices. The majority of farmers market shoppers say they are willing to pay more for food produced sustainably. Even those shoppers that do not believe it costs more say they are willing to pay more for local food produced in environmentally sustainable ways. Results also point to the larger role of farmers markets in local food system building and the opportunity farmers have, in sharing production practices, to build customer relations and demand for their product in other retail environments. Additional findings point to the challenges of communicating about growing practices at farmers markets and, from this, the need for farmers to be deliberate in their communication strategies and the need to enhance consumer literacy of growing methods. To further explore the question of the influence of localizing food systems on the decisions of farmers to use particular growing methods, future research should include a more diverse pool of farmers and communities further removed from the influence of Asheville, which is the center of a strong local food effort. Additional research could further explore the extent of the actions resulting from the willingness to pay expressed by market shoppers - do shoppers pay more for sustainably produced foods, and if so how much more? This study also suggests that established markets “select” for sustainably-minded farmers and shoppers - future studies should compare markets in earlier and later stages of development to see if farmer-customer expectations and values change with market maturity.