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**Recommended citation for
this publication:**

Local Food Research Center,
ASAP. (2021). Experiencing
Local. Asheville, NC.

Experiencing Local

The role of place-based food and farm
experiences in a local food system building effort
in Western North Carolina

ASAP Local Food Research Center
August 2021

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Introduction

This paper discusses the findings of research conducted by ASAP's (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project) Local Food Research Center, which investigated the impact of place-based food and farm experiences on participants in a local food system building effort in Western North Carolina (Western NC). The research focused on experiences at farmers markets and on farm tours. As organizers deeply involved in this effort, the research was informed by ASAP's perspective that local food system *building* can be a catalyst of food system change. The transformative potential of local food lies in its capacity to engage people with food and farming in ways that activate an interest and desire to be active food system participants. Consistent with literature on food democratization,¹ the effort in Western NC is grounded in the idea that expanding participation is vital to creating food systems that align with values and that support the health and wellbeing of the communities and environments in which they are embedded.

Hypothesizing the impacts of place-based food and farm experiences

Since its inception in 2000, ASAP's Local Food Campaign has focused on community engagement. Engaging individuals and families directly with local food and farms through activities like farmers markets, farm tours, and farm to school programming has been the cornerstone strategy to connect community members meaningfully to the region's farmers and agricultural base.² This strategy emerged from a firsthand perspective on the impacts that direct sensory experiences with local food and farms have on participants - an activation of curiosity about food and farming, the development of an enthusiasm for local farms and the food that they produce, and the development of participants' desire to have meaningful connections to the food they are purchasing and eating.

In the scholarly literature, the concepts of transformational learning, learning through doing,³ embodied action,⁴ and affective action⁵ all point to the impact of direct experience on established patterns of thinking and ways of acting in the world. Direct sensory experiences provide opportunities for individuals to engage in different ways of doing things. When people participate in new experiences, ideas and beliefs that are taken for granted can be challenged and perceptions and actions altered. In other words, *what we do* has a significant impact on the way we think and on the actions our patterns of thinking inform.

¹ Hassanein, N. (2003). Practicing food democracy: a pragmatic politics of transformation. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 19(1), 77–86; Hassanein, N. (2008). Theory & Applications Locating Food Democracy : Theoretical and Practical Ingredients. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 3(2/3), 286–309; Johnston, J., Biro, A., & MacKendrick, N. (2009). Lost in the Supermarket: The Corporate-Organic Foodscape and the Struggle for Food Democracy. *Antipode*, 41(3), 509–532.; Levkoe, C. Z. (2006). Learning Democracy Through Food Justice Movements. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 23(1), 89–98.

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.

³ Kerton, S., & Sinclair, A. J. (2009). Buying local organic food: a pathway to transformative learning. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 27(4), 401–413; Kerton, S., & Sinclair, A. J. (2009). Buying local organic food: a pathway to transformative learning. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 27(4), 401–413.

⁴ Gibson-Graham, J. K. (2006). *A postcapitalist politics*. University of Minnesota Press.

⁵ Singh, N. M. (2013). The affective labor of growing forests and the becoming of environmental subjects: Rethinking environmentality in Odisha, India. *Geoforum*, 1–10.

Kerton and Sinclair, in their research with farmers market shoppers and CSA subscribers, for example, found that place-based food and farm experiences provided learning environments that were transformational for participants.⁶ Direct connections with food and with the producers of food challenged accepted ideas about food and food production and led to behavioral shifts, for example, inspiring participants to make choices in support of local food production and specific kinds of growing practices, to think more about the processes and practices that put food on their plates, and to share their experiences and personal learnings with other people.

The findings of Kerton and Sinclair's research also point to the capacity of direct sensory experiences to connect us more deeply to the places we live, a capacity that is especially relevant to their potential to transform patterns of thinking and doing. As pointed out by Spinoza, Flores, and Dreyfus, the depth of our connection to where we live has a great deal to do with our awareness of local conditions and problems and with the development of a personal orientation toward the wellbeing of our local communities.⁷ The more deeply we are connected to the communities in which we live, the greater our willingness and desire to take actions in support of them.

This idea is especially germane for understanding the role that local food and farm experiences can play in activating community engagement with the food system. Local farms and the food they produce, because they are anchored in local people, land, communities, food traditions, and relationships, hold the capacity to connect us more deeply in the places we live.⁸ Weekly farmers markets, farm tours, and other local food- and farm-linked activities have the capacity to connect community members directly to food production and, through the social interactions that happen among and between farmers and community members, strengthen and expand social ties. Social ties, because they provide the space for sharing and evaluating new ideas and information, are vital to food democratizing efforts like those trying to create local food systems.⁹

Beginning with the idea that broadening participation in the food system is necessary to change it, our research investigated place-based food and farm experiences in Western NC and asked: what is the capacity of place-based food and farm experiences for activating community participation in shaping the food system? Furthermore, what is it about these experiences that activates people's interest and engagement?

⁶ Kerton, S., & Sinclair, A. J. (2009). Buying local organic food: a pathway to transformative learning. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 27(4), 401–413. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-009-9233-6>

⁷ Spinoza, C., Flores, F., & Dreyfus, H. L. (1999). *Disclosing new worlds: Entrepreneurship, democratic action, and the cultivation of solidarity*. MIT press.

⁸ Perrett, A. (2013). *Cultivating Local: Building a Local Food System in Western North Carolina*. University of South Florida; Perrett, A., & Jackson, C. (2015). Local food, food democracy, and food hubs. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems and Community Development*, 6(1), 7–18.

⁹ Carson, R. A., Hamel, Z., Giarracco, K., Baylor, R., & Mathews, L. G. (2016). Buying in: the influence of interactions at farmers' markets. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 33(4), 861–875; Diani, M. (1997). Social Movements and Social Capital: A Network Perspective on Movement Outcomes. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 2(2):129-147; Perrett, A. (2013). *Cultivating Local: Building a Local Food System in Western North Carolina*. University of South Florida

Methods

Between 2015 and 2019, ASAP’s Local Food Research Center conducted surveys and interviews with individuals that participated in local food- and farm-linked activities and events in Western NC. A total of 895 intercept surveys were conducted with local food and farm participants at farmers markets and farm tours (Table 1). The quantity of data for farmers markets in comparison to farm tours corresponds to differences in event frequency. There is more opportunity to participate in farmers markets - every week for several months of the year and, with an increasing number of farmers markets in the region, year round - than in the farm tour, which occurs once annually.

Table 1. Number of research participants and where they were engaged

Event	Surveys Completed
15 Farmers Markets (2015-2017)	741
6 Farm Tours (2016-2017)	154
Total Research Participants	895

Fifteen farmers markets in eight counties - in a mixture of urban and rural communities in the central mountains, high country region, and south central mountains of Western North Carolina - participated. In addition to representing both urban and more rural communities, farmers markets were chosen based on their relative accessibility to research staff. Surveys were also conducted at six different farm tours - two in the central mountains, one in the southern piedmont mountains, three in the high country. All surveys were administered in person with the exception of the Transylvania Farmers Market where an electronic survey was sent at the request of the market manager. See the appendix for a summary of participating locations.

The majority of survey participants (80 percent) indicated they were full time residents of Western NC. The average age of respondents was 55, over two-thirds (69 percent) identified as female, and nearly all (97 percent) identified as white. This is less racially diverse than the region as a whole, where 84 percent identifies as white and non-Hispanic. The median household income fell into the range of \$60,000-\$79,000. This compares to a \$44,819 median income for the region in 2016. The education level of respondents ranged from less than high school to doctorate and professional degrees. Overall, survey participants attained higher levels of education than the region as a whole, with 95 percent having degrees beyond high school compared to the area average of 63 percent. Education categories with the highest representation included 4-year degree (36 percent), masters degree (25 percent), and some college (15 percent). The final 16 percent were evenly distributed between high school GED (five percent), doctorate (five percent), and professional degree (six percent). See the appendix for a summary of survey participant demographics.

Follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 survey participants. Interview participants were both self-selected and selected randomly. On the surveys, participants indicated if they were interested in participating in a follow-up interview. A random sample generator was used to select from the pool of interested participants. All interviews were conducted over the phone with the exception of two conducted in-person, digitally recorded, and partially transcribed. Of the 40 interviewees, 33 participants had completed a survey at a farmers market and seven on a farm tour. All interviewees indicated they had participated in multiple local food- and farm-linked activities in the region and, for a few, outside the region. Thus participants’ answers to interview

questions drew on the entirety of their experiences with local food and farms and not just on the one experience. Most farm tour participants interviewed, for example, also drew on their experiences at farmers markets. The demographic profile of interview participants was comparable to survey participants - all were Western NC residents, all were white, most were female, the average age was 56 years, all had education levels beyond high school, and the median household income fell into the \$60,000-\$79,000 range.

Limitations

The demographic makeup of study participants was less diverse than the study area as a whole. Local food spaces are often less diverse due to a variety of factors, including financial barriers (some markets lack the ability to accept SNAP/EBT), geographic challenges (lack of access to transportation, and/or markets located in affluent communities) inconvenience (markets only operating limited days/hours), racism that may make BIPOC community members feel unsafe or unwelcome, and cultural norms that can make shopping a confusing or uncomfortable experience (lack of labels or prices on products, a variety of payment methods).¹⁰ A goal for all markets should be to improve practices, programs, communications, and outreach to reduce these barriers and to increase the participation of all community members in local food and farm experiences.

Measures of meaningful participation

To investigate the impact of local food and farm experiences, the research built on the analytical framework developed by Hassanein to evaluate the capacity of food democratizing efforts to bring about meaningful food system participation.¹¹ Hassanein's "measures of meaningful participation" outlined four key indicators: individuals are becoming knowledgeable about food and the food system; individuals are sharing knowledge and ideas about food and the food system with others; individuals are developing efficacy in relation to food and the food system; and individuals are acquiring an orientation toward the common good.¹² Table 2 documents the indicators used to evaluate the impact of local food and farm experiences through surveys and interviews.

The first two, gaining and sharing knowledge about food and the food system, depend on interpersonal interaction at events. Did participants learn something through their experience? What did they learn? Who did they interact with at events? Did they share opinions/ideas with them? What did they share?

Learning and sharing contribute to the development of efficacy in participants, defined as the capacity of community members to identify and take actions that help to solve community food problems. In becoming effective changemakers, community members also gain confidence in their abilities to affect positive change; they believe their actions have an impact.

"Acquiring an orientation toward the common good" is about moving beyond personal interests to act in accordance with the wellbeing of the community and coming to recognize the value of mutual community support/community interconnectivity. The research investigated the presence

¹⁰ Byker, C., Shanks, J., Misyak, S., & Serrano, E. (2012). Characterizing Farmers Market Shoppers: A Literature Review. *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition*, 7(1), 38-52.; Ritter, G., Walkinshaw, L. P., Quinn, E. L., Ickes, S., & Johnson, D. B. (2019). An Assessment of Perceived Barriers to Farmers' Market Access. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 51(1), 48-56.

¹¹ Hassanein, N. (2008). Locating Food Democracy : Theoretical and Practical Ingredients. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 3(2/3), 286-309.

¹² Hassanein's framework also includes another dimension - organizations acting collaboratively toward food system change. While a significant element of the framework, it was beyond the scope of this research.

of this orientation by focusing instead on the development of a desire in participants to take action following Spinosa et al's assertion that an orientation toward the common good is the basis of action. Indicating a proclivity toward engaging more with food and farms in the region, the research asked if participants wanted to learn more about farms and the food that they are eating and feeding to their families. It asked participants to reflect on how their choices affect their community and food system. In addition, it assessed the motivations behind individuals' desires to engage with the food system as well as specific actions they were motivated to take.

Table 2. Indicators and measures used to evaluate the impact of local food and farm experiences

Indicators	Surveys	Interviews
Becoming more knowledgeable about farming and food	Did participants learn something	What did participants learn
Sharing knowledge/ideas about the food system	Did participants talk with friends, family, co-workers, strangers at the event Did participants express their opinion/s or hear others' opinion/s about agriculture and food	What participants expressed or heard from others about agriculture and food at the event
Developing food system/food efficacy	Did participants learn something Do participants want to learn more about food and farms Do participants want to learn more about the food they and their family are eating Do participants believe their personal choices about food and eating have an impact on their community and food system	How often participants have participated in local food and farm activities Do participants feel more knowledgeable about farming and food What participants expressed or heard from others about agriculture and food at the event and after How do participants see their personal choices about food and eating impacting their community and food system
Developing a desire to act	Do participants believe their personal choices about food and eating have an impact on their community and food system	Why participants chose to participate in the event/activity How participants initially developed an interest in local farms and food What participants remember about their experience/ other local food and farm experiences How do participants see their personal choices about food and eating impacting their community and food system
Taking action in relation to local food and farm experiences	N/A	What actions participants have been inspired to take as a result of their local food and farm experiences

Findings

Becoming more knowledgeable about farming and food

Findings indicate that participants learned about food and agriculture through their experiences at farmers markets and on farm tours. Survey results show that 75 percent of participants learned something new about food and farms at events in which they participated (Table 3). These figures were notably higher for farm tours than for farmers markets.

Table 3: At today's event did you: Learn something about food and farms?

	Yes	No	Not Sure
Total Farmers Markets	71%	22%	6%
Total Farm Tours	97%	2%	1%
Total	76%	19%	5%

Interviews show that through their experiences, participants learned about farming and food production in Western NC, about the seasonality of food, about a wider variety of foods and how to cook with them, and about the impacts of large-scale food production. These are summarized in Figure 1 and detailed below.

Figure 1: What participants learned at farmers markets and on farm tours

What participants learned

- Farming & food production in Western NC
 - what small-scale farming looks like
 - farming lifestyle
 - challenges of farming
 - what food grows in Western NC
 - growing techniques and growing methods farmers use
- Seasonality of food production
 - the seasonality of specific foods, e.g., strawberries
 - local seasonal produce is more flavorful and nutritious than out of season produce
 - supermarket produce is mostly not seasonal
- New foods & ways to use them
 - foods they never tried before or thought they did not like
 - information and ideas (from farmers and chefs cooking at farmers markets) on using and preparing
- Industrial-scale food production
 - impacts of large-scale farming on the environment and health
 - importance of growing food in environmentally sustainable ways

Farming and food production in Western NC

In interviews, participants said their experiences at farmers markets and on farms made farming more concrete to them. Stated by one participant, "...reading a book is one thing but actually experiencing it, maybe seeing a farm or going to the market and seeing the stands and seeing the people that are actually growing the food, it just fleshes it out and makes it more real." Another participant said that her interactions with farmers at farmers markets had been "eye opening" in terms of the life farmers lead:

"You're married to the farm and you're married to the rhythms of the things that you're growing and what you have to do to them. It's very, very hard work and they don't have a lot of extra help, a lot of them."

When asked about farming and food production in Western NC, participants indicated that they learned about small-scale farming and what that looks like - what it means to be a farmer in terms of lifestyle; how much farming demands physically, intellectually, and in time spent; what it takes to grow food, sell it, and, as stated by one participant, "to make a living doing it;" what foods grow in the region; and what techniques and growing practices farmers use.

Participants said they learned from farmers about specific challenges related to issues like the weather, the economics of smaller-scale farming, and the fragility of their livelihoods. One participant talked about a farmer that she knew who had to plow-in a whole field of squash one year because he could not get a price for his crop high enough to cover his harvesting costs.

Many participants talked about what they learned in terms of what farmers grow and the growing techniques and practices that they use. A few participants said they learned about polyculture (growing many different crops together) and how farmers farm on small acreages and mountainous terrain. One couple said that a trip to the farmers market is always an educational experience and that they are always learning from farmers - what they are growing and how they are growing it. Many learned about the variety of foods grown in the region and where they can find them for purchase.

Some participants talked about methods they learned from farmers that they then applied to their own gardens, e.g., ways to deal with particular pests or how to grow a particular vegetable. Other participants said they learned more about specific growing practices and what they mean (e.g., certified organic or integrated pest management), and that they used this knowledge to decide what farms to purchase products from. A key learning noted by two participants was that farmers do not have to be certified organic to produce food sustainably, one of them explaining that buying local "gives you a chance to talk with the people who are actually producing it," so certification is unnecessary.

Seasonality of food

Learning about the seasonality of food production was often cited by participants. At farmers markets, in particular, participants learned about the seasonality of specific foods, e.g., strawberries in the spring and tomatoes in the summer. Some noted that they were learning to eat with the

seasons. As described by one participant, “when tomatoes are in season, it’s tomato time.” For these participants, eating seasonally was celebratory and was about eating foods with deeper flavors and more nutrition compared to fruits and vegetables produced in distant places.

For some participants, experiences at farmers markets highlighted the lack of seasonality at supermarkets. One participant talked about how shopping at the farmers market put her “in tune” with seasonal foods:

“...you have no seasons when you shop at the supermarket. When you shop at the farmers markets you have definite seasons, so that’s really nice to be reconnected with the seasons and just to go with them and not fight them, so when tomatoes aren’t in you don’t eat tomatoes.”

Another participant, also referring to differences she noticed between grocery store and farmers market products, talked about the contrast in flavor when eating with the seasons:

“I’m much more sensitive to the seasonality of stuff, compared to, well, you can go to the grocery store anytime and buy apples. And if you buy them they might be good, they might be not so good, but the really, really excellent apples are only available at the tailgate market for a few weeks in the fall and it’s like that with everything.”

New foods and ways to use them

In their interactions with farmers at farmers markets several participants learned about new foods or were reintroduced foods they thought they did not like. One participant talked about the opportunity to taste foods he normally would not have a chance to try and to see how much could be done locally and seasonally. One event reintroduced him to eggplant, which he thought he did not like but found that “if you prepare it right, it can be really delicious!” Another participant talked about eating a beet and trying garlic scapes and ramps for the first time as a result of her farmers markets experiences, as well as how to use pickling to preserve and use excess stems from greens. Another highlighted the impact of farmers’ suggestions on her diet and her willingness to try new foods:

“I really enjoy talking to the farmers and getting their suggestions about how to cook things and meeting new vegetables. Last summer I had no idea there was such a thing as a salad turnip, but I tried them at the urging of one of the farmers and I love them. They’re great. Radishes are too spicy for me, but I like the crunch, so to me salad turnips are a great thing.”

Impacts of industrial-scale food production

Several participants talked about becoming more aware of food production at the industrial-scale as a direct result of their experiences or as a result of becoming interested and seeking out more information. These participants said they learned about monocrop production and about the impacts large-scale farming has on the environment, especially on water and pollinators. In relation to the larger food system, one participant talked about her realization that most people do not know where their food comes from. Two others talked about their increased awareness of the importance of growing food in environmentally sustainable ways, one of them noting that her

participation in the food system in Western NC showed her that small-scale sustainable agriculture can feed people.

Social interaction and the sharing of knowledge and ideas about local farms and food

The survey data show that farmers markets and farm tours are spaces where participants are interacting socially. Across both categories, 91 percent of participants indicated they interacted with people they did not know at events (Table 4), and 57 percent interacted with family, friends, neighbors, and/or co-workers (Table 5). Participants were more likely to see and interact with people in their social networks at farmers markets (59 percent) than on farm tours (49 percent).

Table 4: At today's event did you: talk with people you didn't know?

	Yes	No	Not Sure
Total Markets	90%	9%	1%
Total Farm Tours	99%	1%	0%
Total	91%	7%	1%

Table 5: Percent of event participants that saw and interacted with family, friends, neighbors, and/or people you work with?

	Yes	No	Not Sure
Total Markets	59%	38%	3%
Total Farm Tours	49%	51%	0%
Total	57%	40%	2%

In addition, 69 percent of participants indicated that when they interacted with other people at markets and on farms, they talked with them about food and farming related topics (Table 6). This figure was higher for participants of farm tours (84 percent) than for participants at farmers markets (66 percent).

Table 6: At today's event did you: Express your opinion(s) or hear others' opinions about agriculture and food?

	Yes	No	Not Sure
Total Markets	66%	29%	4%
Total Farm Tours	84%	16%	1%
Total	69%	27%	4%

In interviews, participants were asked to share what types of conversations they had with other participants and farmers. Figure 2 summarizes these conversations.

Figure 2: What participants talked about with other participants and farmers at farmers markets and on farm tours



The interviews show that at markets, with other people standing nearby, participants talked about the products they were looking at and considering purchasing, what else they saw at the market that day, often referring to specific vendors and/or how they planned to utilize a particular product. When asked what she talked about with other farmers market shoppers, one participant said that she often talks about products she's excited about and gave the example of salad turnips, which she learned about at farmers markets: "The salad turnip thing is a topic of conversation. Like, 'Have you had these? They are so good.' I'm a real evangelist for salad turnips."

Another participant said she shares her opinions about particular vendors with other market shoppers:

"I'm not shy. If somebody is at a particular vendor, I will tell them my experience, you know how much I like them or why I happened to choose them or why I'm at the market because of those particular vendors."

On farm tours, participants indicated they might comment to others about what they are learning about on the tour. Several participants, noting that they meet many farm tour participants with a mutual interest in growing food at home, said they had talked with others about what they are currently growing in their home gardens and how, e.g., the particular techniques used or how they dealt with particular pests.

With farmers at markets and on farm tours, participants indicated they asked farmers about the products they had available, about the techniques and growing practices that they use (sometimes asking them for tips on growing things at home), and about their farms and why farmers choose to farm. Some participants stated that they were moved to talk with farmers about issues that concern farming (e.g., labor, government regulation, extreme weather phenomena). Several indicated they talk to farmers about the growing practices that they use, especially with those they do not know. These participants in particular were concerned about the use of chemicals in the production of vegetables and fruits and the treatment of animals in production of eggs, meats, and cheeses. In contrast, with farmers they know through their market experiences, participants said conversations might be about the weather, how things are going on the farm, or about non-farm related topics, e.g., about family or things affecting the wider community.

Developing food system and food efficacy

Community members develop efficacy in relation to food and the food system as their understanding of food production and agriculture increases. Efficacy also develops as individuals gain confidence in the power of their actions. This section explores the impacts participants believe their personal food choices make.

Knowledge

The data on knowledge showed that a majority of participants learned more about farming and food production through their experiences at farmers markets and farms as well as increased their food literacy, i.e., learning about a wider variety of foods, particularly fresh produce, and ways to cook with it. As seen in Tables 7 and 8, the data also indicated that the vast majority wanted to increase their knowledge. In the surveys, 74 percent said they wanted to learn more about food and farms (86 percent for farm tour participants and 71 percent at farmers markets), and 82 percent wanted to know more about the food they and their family are eating.

Table 7: Would you say that because of this event: I want to learn more about food and farms.

	Yes	No	Not Sure
Total Markets	71%	17%	12%
Total Farm Tours	86%	9%	5%
Total	74%	15%	11%

Table 8: Would you say that because of this event: I want to know more about the food I am eating/my family is eating.

	Yes	No	Not Sure
Total Markets	82%	11%	7%
Total Farm Tours	84%	12%	4%
Total	82%	11%	6%

Compared to what they said they learned, interview participants cited many of the same topics for what they wanted to learn more about: how farmers grow certain foods, i.e., in terms of techniques; the growing methods farmers use, i.e., are they using sustainable methods; how to grow things at home, i.e., tips and techniques for a home garden; about new foods and recipes/ways to use them;

and learning about more sources of local food, i.e., other farms and businesses (restaurants, grocers) that source locally.

Believed impacts of their actions

In surveys, 67 percent of participants indicated that they believed that personal choices about food and eating had an impact on their community and food system (Table 9). The figure was higher for farm tours (75 percent) than farmers markets (65 percent).

Table 9: My personal choices about food and eating have an impact on my community and the food system

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Total Markets	65%	29%	5%	0%	1%
Total Farm Tours	75%	18%	7%	0%	0%
Total	67%	28%	5%	0%	0%

In interviews, participants understood the impacts of their choices in three primary ways: how they spend their money, how their choices influence the choices of others, and how their actions and the actions of others combine to create change. These are summarized in Figure 4.

Figure 4: How participants viewed the impacts of their choices

The impact of personal choices on the community & food system

How I spend my money

- Buying locally grown food supports farmers farming and the expansion of local food production
- Buying locally grown food supports broader community benefits
 - Mutually supportive relationships
 - Local food is more commonplace and available to more people
 - Healthier food options
 - Food is produced in ways that supports the environment

How my choices influence the choices of others

- Sharing information
- Leading by example/modeling behaviors

How my actions are part of a greater whole

- Individual actions combine collectively to create bigger change

How I spend my money

Through their direct connections with farmers at farmers markets and farms, most interview respondents saw the impact of their choices in tangible, economic ways. The effect of this face to face experience was captured by one respondent's statement:

"I know that what I'm buying locally is going directly to the people that are standing in front of me, so I know, as an economical impact, it has a really strong, it's really strong economically for the community here that I'm a part of, that I believe in."

Another participant talked about seeing the direct impact of her decision to shop at farmers markets in Western NC in contrast to her lived experience in Texas when she felt her choices could not impact the community around her.

"Everytime the oil would go bust then you end up with houses next to you that are foreclosed on, which directly impacts your life, the value of your house. I have no way, no way of helping those people keep a job directly. Here...I can choose to go to the farmers market and support someone who has a baby on their hip and a carrot in his hand and having a really good life that they choose for their children that isn't going to go crash everytime a dotcom goes down. I mean we all live to eat.... so I feel that we have that kind of direct impact."

Most interview respondents saw that their choices to buy locally grown food directly supported farmers' livelihoods, enabling them to continue to farm. Some talked about their financial support in terms of helping to expand local food production - more farmers and a wider diversity of locally produced foods, as well as supporting certain kinds of food production, most often referred to as "sustainable" and/or "humane" when talking about animal agriculture.

While most interview participants conceived of impact in economic terms, many also tied economic impacts to other benefits - a food system that builds a mutually supportive community, that is more environmentally sustainable, and that produces food that is healthier. This orientation was expressed by one participant when she stated that buying food from local farms has "ripple effects throughout the community." Alluding to an interconnectivity that is created when the economy is locally based, she continued, "Knowing the money I'm spending is going to members of my community. And knowing the money they're spending is going into the community." Another community member, also talking about impacts in terms of community and mutually supportive relationships, stated:

"I think it's just much better for community and the environment to be kind of starting where we are and then branching out. Not that you never go anywhere or buy things from other places or things like that, but I just feel that it really matters to support the people...I think the fact that we all support each other really matters and the fact that it's so much better to buy it locally is an amazing plus."

Some respondents talked about the economic impact of buying directly from local farmers explicitly in terms of creating a local food system. Explained by one participant, buying food from

local farmers “reinforces that what they're doing is right and good and it makes them want to stay and keep on doing these things that are beneficial not just to them for making money but also for all of us to be able to eat local food.” For another participant, “...where you choose to spend your money really counts” and buying directly from local farms challenges a food system dominated by supermarket chains and big box stores. The more people that buy local food, the more local food is available and commonplace. This sentiment was also expressed by another respondent who stated:

“You know, I really try to buy exclusively, when I can, food that’s grown around here and the various organically-produced food that’s grown as close as possible...I just think the more people do it, the more acceptable it becomes to other people and the knowledge can be passed on to other people and it becomes more of a normalcy rather than a deviation from the supermarket shopping, you know?”

Respondents also linked their financial support of local farmers to the development of food production that is better for the environment. For some, “sustainable” was linked to the small-scale farming indicative of the region and conversely to the carbon footprint of large-scale agriculture and to the resources needed to ship food long distances. Others talked explicitly about buying from farmers who use particular types of growing practices and who take care of the soil and pollinators.

Other participants saw that their financial support of local farmers supported healthier food options. Buying food produced by the region’s farmers not only keeps farming viable, it provides the community members with healthier choices. Expressed by one participant, “we can eat better, eat more healthfully, and support the community economically.” Another participant talked about supporting local food production, particularly organic production, to support the availability of healthier food:

“We know there is a correlation between what you put in your body and your overall health. We keep that in mind whenever we are buying produce, meat, fruits, whatever the case would be...the more local you can buy, the fresher the fruits and vegetables... With that in mind, if you’re buying local that’s definitely helping out with the local economy with the funds to grow that, it kind of supports them, it allows them to continue to do that or even in some cases expand and be able to produce more of that.”

How I influence others with my choices

Some participants talked about impact in terms of the way their actions influenced others’ actions. As conveyed by this interviewee, these participants not only saw the direct impact of their economic choices on farmers but their impact on the people around them by what they shared and the actions they modeled:

“...if I’m putting my resources in the hands of local farmers or jam makers or whatever, then I think that’s having an impact and if I’m teaching my daughter that that’s what we do and that’s what I’m serving to friends and talking about and that’s what I’m taking to potlucks ... I guess I’m a believer in just kind of that our actions speak louder than our words, to use a cliché and so that’s what I’m doing with my resources and that’s what I’m demonstrating to other people.”

For some, leading by example had a specific health focus, not only modeling specific food purchasing choices but a way of eating that is healthier and explicitly tied to local food. One participant said she talks to people she knows about the importance of eating fresh, unprocessed foods and also models it to them through what she buys and the meals she prepares. She noted that she had seen an impact on her friends and on her son and his family, who started shopping weekly at the farmers market and eating more fresh, local foods. Another participant linked his economic support of local farmers to his ability to access healthier foods as well as influence the choices of others in his community:

“I also think that by [keeping farmers in business] I will promote healthier choices not only on my part, but other people seeing what I’m choosing to do and how I’m choosing to prepare my food and what kind of choices I’m making, that that will sway other people to do look at local products rather than the national brand.”

How my actions are part of a greater whole

Some participants understood their capacity to impact their community and food system as part of a greater whole. Their actions combine with the actions of others that are also supporting local farms and buying local food. One participant said she realized this when she read a story in a local media outlet that reported a large increase in the number of farmers markets in Western NC in comparison to the rest of the state, which saw a small increase. When she read the story she thought, “yeah, it is making a difference that we are all doing this!” Another participant, trying to remember a time when she saw that her choices were having an impact, stated, “I can’t think of any [specific moments], they’re subtle they’re cumulative and they’re part of the greater, of other people doing the same thing.” Another participant expressed it this way:

“So I don’t feel me, myself, personally have changed some type of farming system...but being part of a larger community that is conscious of that and buying local, I feel like that makes a difference... And you can see that difference in the variety and options that are available.”

Developing a desire to act

The data show that participants of farmers markets and farm tours see that their decisions about foods they buy, prepare, and eat have impacts that go beyond personal preference or wellbeing. These decisions contribute to the creation and support of a particular kind of agriculture, one that supports the environment, the health and wellbeing of the people served, and/or the livelihoods of farmers and other people that are part of the community.

To more deeply investigate the motivations behind participants’ desires to continue to engage with local farms and food or to take other kinds of actions (discussed in the next section), interviewees were asked why they chose to participate in a particular activity, what they remember about their experiences, and what initially got them interested in local farms and food. Interview responses clustered around a few key areas: qualities participants associated with local food; knowing farmers; the role of prior experiences; and, in relation to farmers markets, shopping experiences. Figure 5 summarizes participants’ motivations.

Figure 5: Participants' motivations to engage with local food and farms



Traits of local food

Many participants talked about traits they associated with local food that they valued. Traits included the superior quality attributed to local food in terms of freshness and flavor as well as in the wide variety of foods that are grown locally. Several participants talked about traits of local food in relation to foods produced at an industrial-scale and their desire for an alternative. One participant expressed this perspective by talking about what she had learned by going to her local farmers market: “This place introduced me to fresh greens like fresh lettuce. I never realized what a difference there was between the iceberg lettuce that you buy in the store and the type that you can buy at a farmers market.”

For some participants, the motivation to buy and eat food grown by local farmers was related to eating healthy. Local food is healthier because it is fresher, i.e., it has a higher nutrient content because it does not travel great distances, and because they buy local food that is grown or raised in a particular way, i.e., organic, grown without chemicals, or humanely raised for local meats.

Others talked about the environment as a key motivating factor, and their belief that supporting local farmers and prioritizing local food is better environmentally. Referencing their concerns about negative impacts of large-scale, industrial forms of food production, these participants talked variously about wanting to support small, community-based agriculture, local farmers that use

sustainable growing practices, and a kind of agriculture that has a smaller carbon footprint. As stated by one participant:

“I believe in buying directly from the farmer because I don’t like my food, you know, for environmental reasons, I don’t like it trucked in from other states and other countries. And I am concerned about the environmental impact of it, so I do always buy absolutely everything I can from farmers markets...”

Another participant talked about her desire to support small community-based agriculture as a result of her experience growing up in the Midwest, where she saw negative impacts of really large farms.

“I see the detrimental damages that monoculture and really large farms have done, especially coming from the Midwest where I grew up, where we’ve destroyed all of our wonderful, beautiful native areas and just put huge farms down. So I think that supporting small local growers is very important because I believe in really supporting a local community and I look for, you know, a lot of organic and natural methods, so I’m very driven by that.”

Knowing farmers

One of the most talked about motivations was knowing farmers - knowing the people growing the food that they eat. For some, this factor was explicitly about trust - trusting in farmers and being able to talk to them and ask them questions particularly around growing methods. These participants also expressed concerns about the practices of large-scale agriculture for environmental and/or health reasons. This viewpoint was expressed by this participant, who talked about her support of local food in relation to the conventional food system:

“I’m really dismayed with what we have to offer in the big grocery stores and the fact that we don’t know where it’s coming from or really what’s been done to it, no matter what label they put on it. I like supporting local. I like that there are people who still own farms and live near us and that they want to keep that kind of family business going.”

For other participants, knowing farmers was much more about the enjoyment of having a personal connection with their food and the people growing it. One participant, describing a time she and her family cooked and ate only local food for a week, shared a statement she posted to social media about the experience: “I’m so happy to know personally the people that grew, picked, produced so much of the food we ate today. It’s a very satisfying feeling.” Several other participants went on one or more farm tours in order to visit the farms they purchased food from regularly and actually see where their food was coming from and how it was being produced.

Prior experience

Another prominent category of motivation was prior experience with local food and farms. Participants talked about experiences they had growing up gardening, farming, or visiting farms. One participant talked about growing up eating out of her father’s garden and its lasting impact on her. Here she talked about her decision to make food and where it comes from part of her children’s experience.

“I really wanted my children...so even before my kids were born we had a little bit of a garden and when they came along we tried to integrate them into that. I just want my kids to know that food comes not from grocery stores but from the earth and that people are involved in producing it. That's good living knowledge to me. So we wouldn't just buy the strawberries from the grocery store, we'd go pick them. We've picked apples up here. We picked cherries when they were young. It was important that they experienced that and then as things have evolved in this world with climate change it's become more of a pressing issue to me.”

Other participants talked about their exposure to local agriculture and food as adults in other places they lived or visited. For a few, this exposure happened as part of their university experience as discussed by this participant:

“I went to England where I did my Masters and my PhD and over there they have a really strong local food movement and my friends there all had CSAs that were delivered to their door because none of us had cars, so I got really involved with the food movement over there and when I came back it just sort of spilled over.”

Shopping experiences at farmers markets

Motivations were also specific to farmers markets and many participants cited the experience of shopping at farmers markets as a key factor. For these shoppers, the market atmosphere is engaging and enjoyable and keeps them coming back. Stated by this participant:

“I would never miss this. Just the whole experience of it is so fun and so vibrant...I just love it. I think it's certainly the way, as much as people can, it seems like the way we should all be doing so much of our living and shopping, so yeah...I love the music. I love, like it feels like you're out there with everybody in all the elements, whatever they are.”

Participants also talked about the social experience of farmers markets and the community feeling that they get from seeing familiar faces and getting to know individual farmers. Stated by this participant:

“I run into a lot of friends, actually, at the farmers market, so I think it's a very fun atmosphere that is really nice and engaging because you run into the same people every week and, to me, I really enjoy making the connections with the farmers and just sort of that sense of community, I guess, to me, is what I feel when I go to the farmers market.”

Farmers market experiences were also described as informational and inspirational. Words like “vibrant,” “bountiful,” and “abundant” were used to describe an aesthetic quality of farmers markets that excited participants and inspired them to try new foods. Participants also talked about how much they appreciated the cooking demonstrations, food samples, and recipes and cooking tips provided by farmers. This participant talked about the way cooking demonstrations help her and others figure out ways to use local products:

“The other thing I really like at [Asheville] City Market is that chef guy that comes and he just walks around and selects different items from people's stalls and he cooks up little tiny samples of

different samples of things and gives them out and I really feel like that's really helpful for people to break down some barriers of things."

Taking Actions

Finally, participants were asked about actions they were motivated to take in relation to their experiences with local food and farms. Participants talked about increasing their commitment to local food and farms through changes in habit and lifestyle and about sharing their experiences and encouraging others to support local farms and buy local food. In addition, some participants talked about actions of a political nature. These are detailed in Figure 6 at the end of this section.

Increased commitment and lifestyle changes

Many participants talked about actions they had been motivated to take in terms of an increased commitment to local farmers and local food. Increased commitment looked like more frequent trips to the farmers market, seeking to participate in additional local food and farm experiences (e.g., more farm tours, more markets, farm stands), asking local groceries to source locally, and prioritizing restaurants that source food from local farms. In a few cases, participants said they were motivated to volunteer to support the operations of farmers markets and in one case to support a community garden.

Some participants talked about increased commitment in relation to an increased sense of community and a desire to support people in their community. This participant talked about the way her experiences have instilled a sense of being in community and, in the midst of farming challenges, her desire to ride out those challenges with farmers:

"I think I've learned about or just have, maybe not learned, but just more aware of things related to the growing seasons and the challenges, you know, like if there's a tomato blight there's a tomato blight. We're all kind of, you know, in that together rather than going and buying tomatoes from Ingles. It's like, well, I guess tomatoes are really expensive this year and here's why and there are fewer of them. So I guess I've become more aware of that and feel more a part of that, rather than several steps removed from it...I feel a little bit more involved in the reality of that and kind of more invested. I'm not going to bail...if there's been a drought or too much rain or whatever I feel like I'm kind of in it with everybody, you know."

Increased commitment also led to actions to encourage food retailers to source food from local farmers. One participant began to pay more attention to where produce was coming from in her local grocery store and described her feeling of responsibility to encourage her store to source from local farms. Another participant, noting that her local store did not respond to her repeated requests for local produce, made the decision to stop shopping there.

Several participants described their decisions to frequent restaurants that source food from local farmers. Stated by one participant, "...when we are looking for places to go out to eat, it matters to us that restaurants have locally sourced food on their menu." Another participant stated that when she goes to restaurants she won't order meat that hasn't been raised locally and asks where the food is from and if they are buying locally. She continued, "I definitely look for restaurants that are associated with local farms and I favor those, by far."

For many participants, increased commitment to local farms and food led to changes in lifestyle. For some, the change was about making the farmers market part of their weekly routine. For others, the change was in the way they eat - eating with the seasons, trying new foods, cooking more, eating more healthfully, i.e., more fresh unprocessed foods. A couple of participants talked about a reversal of their approach to food shopping and cooking - rather than buying what they want to cook, shopping with the season and cooking what they buy. In addition, some participants noted that they were inspired to start a garden, expand their gardens in relation to new knowledge about what grows in the region, or focus their gardens on supporting pollinators.

A couple of participants attributed changes in their habits to reduce food waste to their experiences with local food and farms. Both talked about becoming more aware of their personal choices and the environmental impacts of the larger food system. Both were inspired to integrate composting into the way that they live. One was also inspired to think more broadly about his consumption patterns and to reduce waste more generally:

“If I’m making a purchase of something that I feel like I’m not going to keep for very long and it’s going to end up in a landfill relatively soon then I rethink it and I think ‘is there a better way to do this?’ Is there a way to get it maybe secondhand or where is it going to go when I’m done...if I can’t answer those questions relatively easily then I reconsider my purchases. And that’s just something that goes along with the mindset that I think taking part in local agriculture has contributed to...because before I moved here I wouldn’t have given it a second thought. I would have just said buy it, use it, throw it away. And that would have been it.”

Sharing and encouragement

Almost every participant said they talked about their experiences at markets and farms afterward with family, friends, neighbors, or co-workers as a way to encourage them to have similar experiences. Farmers market shoppers said they shared how much they enjoyed the shopping experience as well as information about the quality of the products, what is in season, and what they bought and prepared. They recommended particular farmers markets (“their” markets) and vendors, e.g., one participant gave the example of sharing their opinions about buying goat cheese (who has the best goat cheese, the practices they use, how they treat their animals). One participant stated, “I’m kind of like the little directory for tailgate markets because I really, really love them.” Another identified herself as a “bit of a [farmers market] crusader” stating:

“...I actually sort of chastise my friends when I see that they’ve been to the supermarket and have packaged strawberries during strawberry season for instance. Why in heavens would you buy California strawberries when Hendersonville strawberries are fresh and beautiful and lovely? Yeah, I actually recommend to a lot of my friends to go to the farmers markets.”

Some participants said they share their market experiences by creating and sharing dishes with neighbors, friends, or co-workers. One participant, for example, described a watermelon salsa that she tried at her farmers market and then made to share with co-workers.

Similarly participants of farm tours indicated that they shared their tour experiences with people in their social networks - about what they learned and saw and about the tours themselves (when and

where they are) to encourage others to go. Described by one participant, "...I'd always heard about these farm tours but had never been and I've definitely talked that up with friends and let them know that that's something they should really explore, how much fun it was, how informative it was." Another regular farm tour participant said he shared his experiences annually with co-workers by setting up a slide show of farm tour photos. He said he encourages co-workers with children especially, noting, "it's a neat thing to do with kids and see farm animals and things being grown."

Some participants said they talked to other people more generally about the availability (where they can find it), diversity (the variety of food grown locally), and superior quality of locally grown food (freshness and flavor). Others said they share their opinions about why eating locally grown food is important. These participants framed their sharings with others as a kind of civic duty, feeling a sense of responsibility to encourage people to think more about the food they are buying and eating, to get others excited about local food, and to do what they can to support local food production. One participant described herself as a local food "proselytizer" who promotes it to people she knows, in her words, "to get them to change their habits." Another stated that she sees sharing as a clear action that she can take:

"I see that that's one way I can contribute to encouraging people to think more deeply about, to think about shopping at the tailgate market and get past the actual price of things. What's the real cost, what's the financial advantage, the economic advantage of shopping at the tailgate market even if the sticker price might be higher than what you pay at Ingles."

A third participant, concerned about the carbon footprint of large-scale agriculture and big factory farms, said she encourages people she knows or meets to go to the farmers market or to try a CSA. Asked why, she said she sees that these conversations help support the local food system, and "the more people that do it the better off the farmers are, the better off the farmers are the more likely it is they'll be able to stay in business."

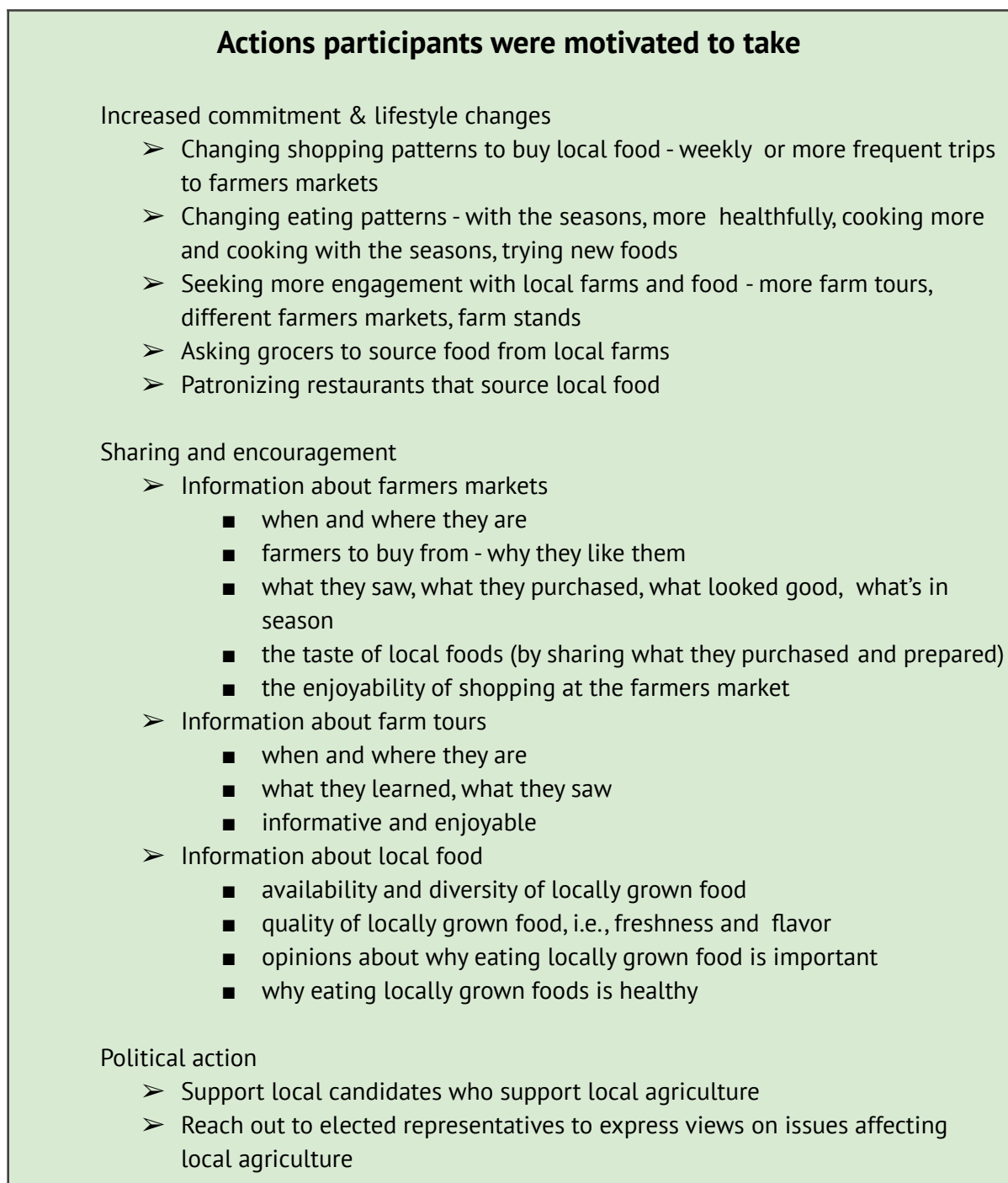
For some, conversations focused on the intersections between local food and health and specifically about farmers markets as places where people can find abundant fresh foods. One participant said she talked to her friends about how eating local food had positively impacted her health to get them excited about buying local. Another gave the example of encouraging a young, mid-20s co-worker to go to the farmers markets because of all the fresh foods. And another participant said she likes to share information with people "outside the choir" about how good and healthy local food is:

"I've been speaking at Rotary meetings and trying to get them more interested and involved even just as shoppers. So basically I want healthy organic non-GMO food and I want other people to have the same access I do and it's so good and it's so much fun to be at the market."

Political

A few participants stated that they felt moved to take actions of a political nature. For these participants, their experiences influenced them to support local candidates whose platforms had a stated support of agriculture in the region and/or to reach out to elected representatives to express their opinions about issues affecting farmers and agriculture in the region.

Figure 6: Actions participants were motivated to take



Conclusion

The Power of Local Food and Farm Experiences

The findings of this research show that direct experiences with local food and farms are a powerful way of cultivating interest in food and food production, instilling a concrete sense of being in community, and of activating engagement with the region's evolving food system. Farmers markets and farm tours provided social spaces where participants interacted and learned about farming and food production and gained ideas and knowledge and inspiration for cooking with and eating fresh seasonal foods. Inspired by their experiences, participants altered their lifestyles to engage more with local farms and food and acted as advocates for farmers markets, farms, local products, and local food production more broadly with friends, family, neighbors, and other people in their social spheres. Returning to the measures of meaningful participation, the research found that:

Individuals became more knowledgeable about food, farming, and food production: Though the survey data point to stronger learning outcomes for participants of farm tours (given the purpose of farm tours to educate and demonstrate, this apparent difference is perhaps not surprising), the interview data show that farmers markets were equally as educational for farmers market shoppers. Through experiences at both markets and farms, individuals in Western NC learned about farming - about methods and techniques, what it takes to grow food, the challenges farmers face in the region. They discovered they prefer the flavors and varieties of in-season fruits and vegetables. They learned about new foods and how to cook with them. They learned how the small-scale food production indicative of the region differs from industrial-scale production. The data also show that farmers markets and farm tours were equally impactful in sparking curiosity in participants, inspiring them to learn more about what they are eating and feeding their families.

Experiences at markets and on farms stimulated conversation between participants: The data show that farmers markets and farm tours in the region are social occasions with high levels of interpersonal interaction among and between fellow participants. At both types of events, participants talked with one another and with farmers about what they were experiencing, learning, seeing, or curious to know more about. The survey data suggest that different types of interactions may be more common at each venue. On farm tours, interactions between people that do not know one another is higher whereas interactions with friends, neighbors, family, and co-workers is higher at farmers markets. That interactions with friends, family, and other known individuals would be more common at farmers markets is not surprising given their weekly occurrence and location within particular communities.

Participants acted as advocates for local farms and food: Excited and inspired by their experiences on farms and at markets, sharing information afterwards with other people in their social circles was a natural outflow for participants. While the survey data show a higher percentage for farm tour participants, the interviews show that without exception farmers market shoppers were highly motivated to talk about their market experiences with others. Participants from both tours and markets encouraged friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, and others to variously shop at farmers markets, go on farm tours, or more generally to seek out food grown by the region's farms for the

quality of the food, for the satisfaction of knowing the person that grew it, for the environment, for the wellbeing of the larger community, and/or for the health benefits of eating fresh foods.

Individuals saw the impact of their personal actions on their communities and food system: The survey data show that a majority of farm tour and market participants saw the effect of their personal choices in the wider community and food system. The interviews show that this was especially true for farmers market shoppers who indicated they were able to see the impact of their actions in tangible ways. Participants saw that spending their money on local food directly supported local farmers and farmers' abilities to continue farming and producing food. Moreover, participants saw that their direct financial support helped to create broader benefits for the wider Western NC community - more availability of healthier food options, food produced in environmentally sustainable ways, and communities strengthened by the expansion of mutually supportive relationships.

Farm tour and farmers market participants also saw that their actions to support local food production had power to create change in combination with others' parallel actions. This was also especially true for farmers market shoppers who had observed changes firsthand - more farmers, more variety, more people at markets, as well as more farmers markets overall. Some participants saw that their choices to support local food production and/or engage in healthy lifestyles linked to local food positively influenced the people around them, and they made choices to share information and/or model certain behaviors (e.g., frequent farmers markets, eat a certain way, cook more, etc) to engage others with local farms and food.

Individuals were motivated by their experiences to act: Experiences at farmers markets and on farms motivated individuals to seek out additional local food and farm experiences, make eating and lifestyle changes linked to local farms and food, advocate for local farms and food with the people around them and in some cases with food retailers, preference farm to table restaurants, and take actions of a political nature in support of the viability of local agriculture.

Participants were motivated by qualities and values important to them - food that is fresh, flavorful, and seasonal; food that is healthier; food production that is environmentally sustainable; food grown close to home that allows them to know the people that grew their food and how. Prior experiences with local farms and food - as children or adults - were also significant motivators. For these individuals, experiences gardening and farming instilled an appreciation for local agriculture that continued to inform eating and lifestyle choices. The experience of shopping for food at farmers markets was also a key motivating factor for many participants. In counterpoint to shopping at mainstream grocery store outlets, participants enjoyed and looked forward to shopping at farmers markets for their vibrant and interesting atmospheres, for the felt sense of community, for the variety of locally produced foods available, and for the educational aspects - cooking demonstrations, recipes, sampling, etc.

Implications for food system organizers, farmers market leaders, and farmers

Returning to the idea that increasing participation in the food system is necessary for changing it, the findings of this research point to the vital role of direct experiences with farms and food for engaging individual community members and for developing support for a food system in the

Western NC region that is progressively rooted in the land, local farmers, local relationships, and communities.

The data show that both farmers markets and farm tours provided participants with compelling experiences that inspired them to share, seek out additional experiences, and implement lifestyle changes to support their abilities to choose local food and support local food production more broadly. Participants not only made changes to their lifestyles to be able to source the food that they eat from local farmers, they also endeavored to influence the food-related actions of those around them. They directed friends, family, neighbors, and others to specific farmers markets and farms. They expressed opinions about why they value local food and seek it out. In doing so, they made themselves into active changemakers - expanding the number of people engaging with the region's local food system and elevating the visibility of local food and farms as a whole. These findings have enormous implications for the strategies and actions of food system organizers, farmers market managers, and farmers; it points to the necessity of directing energy and resources into creating experiences with local farms and food that engage and inspire the public.

Given their frequency and relative accessibility, farmers markets play an especially pivotal role in the region's local food system building effort. Findings show that participants' experiences at farmers markets motivated them to continue to engage with local farms and food at markets and in other ways. Customers inspired by market atmospheres and the market experience became billboards for "their" farmers market and for specific farms and products, helping to strengthen the viability of farmers markets and farm businesses that make up the local economy. In addition, the findings show that farmers markets are tremendous learning environments. Through their interactions and experiences, farmers market shoppers learned about the processes that farmers use to grow food, came to appreciate the labor and energy that put food on their plates, and saw the impact of their own actions on farmer livelihoods and the region's food system. Moreover, findings point to the role that farmers markets play in connecting people and instilling in them a sense of community centered around local farms and food, which is vital to motivating individuals to act beyond self-interest and in support of their communities and neighbors.

For all these reasons, removing or reducing financial, physical, and cultural barriers to farmers markets is crucial. This includes, but is not limited to: ensuring farmers markets accept SNAP/EBT, and exploring ways to offer incentive programs like ASAP's Double SNAP program and Produce Prescription program; sharing clear and accurate promotional materials in multiple languages and on multiple platforms (flyers, social media, newspapers, etc.); cross promoting the market with other service providers and community groups; conducting creative outreach with other community groups; locating markets in central locations with easy access to public transportation and providing maps or other communications detailing how to access markets; offering engaging and culturally relevant activities at the market; reviewing vendor application processes and market rules to ensure they are accessible to all potential vendors; and providing in-person or virtual farmers market tours to introduce new shoppers to markets and clarify how payment systems work. A report from Community Food Lab shares additional action steps that market managers can take to work with BIPOC communities to build racial equity at farmers markets.¹³

¹³ Lowry, M., White, E. (2020). *A 2020 NC Farmers Market Survey and Action Proposal*. Community Food Lab.

Food system organizers, farmers market managers, and farmer vendors have weekly opportunities to engage community members in creative and meaningful ways with food, food production, and the growing food system. Experiences at farmers markets have the capacity to shepherd participants through the growing season and create a culture of health by showing them the seasonality of food production, introducing them to farmers, inspiring them to try new foods, teaching them ways to cook, and building a strong and supportive community.

Appendix

Summary of Participating Farmers Markets and Farm Tours

Farmers Markets

Buncombe County: Asheville City Market, Black Mountain Tailgate Market, North Asheville Tailgate Market, River Arts District Farmers Market, Weaverville Tailgate Market, West Asheville Tailgate Market; **Haywood County:** Haywood Historic Farmers Market; **Henderson County:** Flat Rock Farmers Market, Henderson County Tailgate Market, Mills River Farmers Market; **Mitchell County:** Spruce Pine Farmers Market; **McDowell County:** Historic Marion Tailgate Market; **Polk County:** Saluda Tailgate Market; **Transylvania County:** Transylvania Farmers Market; **Yancey County:** Yancey County Farmers Market

Farm Tours

ASAP Farm Tour; Articulture Tour; Polk Fresh Farm Tour; and High Country Farm tours in Ashe, Caldwell, and Watauga counties

Summary of Participant Demographics

Gender	Survey Participants	Interview Participants
Male	31%	27.5%
Female	69%	72.5%

Race	Survey Participants	Interview Participants
White	97%	100%
Hispanic Alone	1%	0%
Multiple Races/Ethnicities	2%	0%
Asian or Pacific Islander	0.6%	0%
Black	0%	0%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0%	0%

Age	Survey Participants	Interview Participants
Min	18	27
Average	55	56
Median	59	57
Max	86	75

Combined Household Income	Survey Participants	Interview Participants
Student	3%	0%
Less than \$20,000	9%	0%
\$20,000-\$39,999	17%	22.5%
\$40,000-\$59,999	19%	15%
\$60,000-\$79,999	16%	27.5%
\$80,000-\$99,999	10%	5%
\$100,000-\$149,999	14%	12.5%
\$150,000-\$199,999	6%	7.5%
\$200,000+	5%	5.0%

Highest Level of Education Completed	Survey Participants	Interview Participants
Less than High School	1%	0%
HighSchool/GED	5%	0%
Some College	15%	10.0%
2-year degree (AA, AS)	8%	7.5%
4-year degree (BA, BS)	36%	42.5%
Master's Degree (MA, MS)	26%	25.0%
Doctorate (PhD, EdD)	5%	7.5%
Professional Degree (MD, OD)	6%	0%

Full-time WNC Resident	Survey Participants	Interview Participants
Yes	80%	100%
No	20%	0%