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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.