

Illinois Consumers Talk About...

Buying Meat

Introduction

The information in this series was gathered by The Lab for Community and Economic Development in the Department of Human and Community Development at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. LCED talked to six focus groups in Illinois to ask people about their perception of and concerns about foods, specifically genetically engineered foods. The six focus group locations included three rural areas and three urban areas throughout northern, central, and southern Illinois: Rock Falls, Rockford, Latham, Champaign, Waterloo, and Carbondale. In the study a topic emerged which was not expected — meat. All the groups, in all locations, express explicit concerns about this food group.

Buying

"I don't buy beef in the store and if I can, avoid buying pork. Because first of all, I'm not adept to buying meat. I don't know how to do that that well."
(Latham participant)

"That red light they have there will always make it redder than it really is. You get home and you're like 'Wait, it wasn't this brown.'"
(Carbondale participant)

"I never buy marinated meats either. My mom always said, 'That's how they cover up bad meat.' I don't know if that's true or not, but I don't want to find out."
(Champaign participant)



Problems people mentioned with meat included the difficulty of determining whether a cut of meat was safe, frustration with poor meat quality in grocery stores, and concerns about freshness. Participants mentioned watching out for a variety of tricks that stores use to improve the appearance of their meat selection (see box), which led some to suggest purchasing meats from alternative sources, such as local providers. Although individuals in two groups complained that buying meat was expensive, a more common theme was that buying groceries in general was expensive, indicating that meat was not considered uniquely high priced.

Quality of Meat

"If you want to get stuff that's injected, go to a Wal-Mart Superstore. They're putting solutions in almost everything they have, and I don't agree with that; that's terrible. If you want cheap but bad steaks, in my opinion, go to a Wal-Mart Superstore."
(Rock Falls participant)

"It just doesn't taste like beef. It looks excellent when it's sitting there but when you cook and eat it, the taste is just not the same as going and getting it some place where they butcher the meat themselves."
(Rockford participant)

"Some people from work told me 'If you're going to buy meat, why are you buying your meat at Wal-Mart?' and I said, 'Oh, because it's cheap.' They're like, 'We have [a local meat market] right here, you go down the road and buy quality meat.' Yeah, you pay more, but you can tell."
(Waterloo participant)

Five of the six focus groups agreed that grocery store meat typically is of inferior quality (Wal-Mart was commonly mentioned). Individuals in four groups felt that animal treatment, such as antibiotics, hormones, or stressful quarters, could make meat unhealthy and undesirable. Some focus group participants were actively seeking out alternative types of meat, such as free range, and some were changing buying habits, such as shopping at meat markets or local vendors.

Although the majority of the groups complained of the poor quality of store-bought meats, a few individuals argued that they could still find quality meats, albeit with considerable time and effort.

A majority of the focus group participants agreed that meat markets are the preferred source of meat, with four of the six focus groups stating that meat markets provide superior quality meats (as opposed to larger grocery stores).



Source of Meat

"The cholesterol issue probably comes from animals not raised in healthy quarters. They're stressed, and if you've got a more naturally-raised animal—not grain-fed—then you'll have a healthy animal."
(Rock Falls participant)

"I know I've had steer from down in Texas, and it's stringy awful. You get something that's up here, and it just tastes so much better. So maybe it depends on where they get their beef."
(Rockford participant)

"We do quite a bit of research at our house. When mad cow was going on, we talked to all of the meat counters in town to see where they were getting their meat, and none of them could answer the question. So we went up the corporate chain, and frankly they could not either, because you don't know where it's all coming from."
(Champaign participant)

Focus group participants typically preferred meat from meat markets over those from grocery stores, generally for reasons of quality. Four of the six focus groups, for example, said that meat markets provide superior meats. All mentioned local meat sources as good choices. Three groups (two rural and one urban) argued that home grown or butchered meats taste better and are more trusted by the community.

Additionally, three focus groups (two rural and one urban) felt that Illinois meats taste better. Most groups agreed that the specific geographic origin of the meat was important and expressed regret and frustration at the loss of local meat sources and the unknown origins of many meats.

The concern extended beyond the geographic location of the meat (local, within Illinois, or globally) to include how the livestock was raised. Four of the six groups agreed that free range meats are healthier, tastier, fresher and more natural.

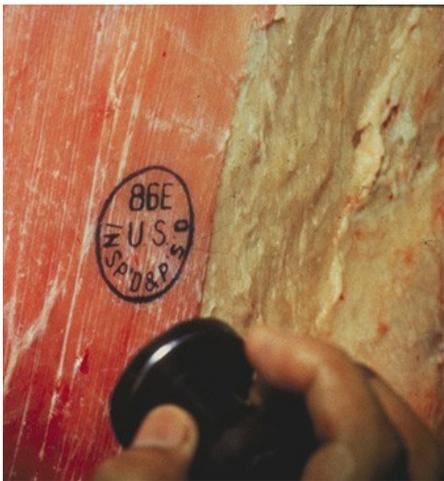


Conclusion



In general, most participants thought that buying meat was difficult and that large grocery chains have poor quality meat. Additionally, group members preferred buying more local meat sources (either locally-raised or from local meat markets). Some shoppers, frustrated with large-scale meat production, are turning to alternative sources in order to obtain meat more to their standards. However, not all consumers had either the time or the money to purchase the types of meats they preferred.

Implications



Illinois consumers want more information on:

- tips on buying meats, including how to identify quality,
- how meats are prepared to ensure their safety, regardless of their origin,
- how to choose the best meat provider.

The report was sponsored by C-FAR ILLU-45-0237.

Data collection and transcription was conducted through the Laboratory for Community and Economic Development; initial analysis and report preparation by Shaunna Barnhart; summary preparation, editing, and final report preparation by Kywana Austin and Lauren Bell. Photo Credits: University of Illinois, College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, Information Technology and Communication Services, page 2 bottom, page 3 bottom right, page 4 top left; USDA photo services, page 1 middle, page 4 bottom left.

Report prepared under the supervision of Ann Reisner, Department of Human and Community Development, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences.