

Illinois Consumers Talk About...

The Farmers' Market

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.

Quality

"You figure food is fresh if somebody has grown it themselves..."
[Rockford participant]

"It doesn't take me five minutes to pick out a bag of tomatoes in Urbana (at the farmers' market); it takes me one minute..."
[Champaign participant]

"At a farmers' market or a roadside stand, the person selling it knows what the heck it is. They're there; they grow them; they know what it is. That expertise is usually standing right there..."
[Carbondale participant]



Participants associated farmers' markets with freshness and superior quality, adding that since farmers sell what they grow, they also know exactly what is on the product. Some participants said that produce shopping at a farmers' market saves time since they spend less time picking out fresh produce. Buying local was an added appeal; since the produce does not sit in transit for days, the food was fresher. Focus group members repeatedly mentioned that they preferred produce at farmers' markets because it had not been treated with freshness-preserving chemicals.

Community Support

"I like to go to the farmers' market just to make sure they're there...buy from them and make sure they stay in business... Farmers who bring their produce to the farmers' market are very important to me in terms of the stability of living."
[Carbondale participant]

"...[there's a] nice interaction between people that you can't get at a grocery store."
[Rock Falls participant]

"...at a farmers' market, you have a better opportunity to find out whether it's chemical free or whether it's organically grown..."
[Rock Falls participant]

"There's where the social interaction play of the farmers' market comes into effect. If you don't trust the person, then you cannot buy from them."
[Rock Falls participant]

Most of the focus group participants also go to farmers' markets to support the farmers. Participants appreciated that the farmers grow the food, as opposed to the giant grocery chains, and they were choosing to shop at markets to make sure that the farmers' fresh produce would be there in the future.

Personal shopping experience. In addition to better quality and selection, farmers' markets also offer customers more personalized shopping. "The people selling you their produce," one participant said, "it's like a family." More than one customer liked that farmers allow them to sample the produce before they purchase—a benefit not offered at grocery stores. Focus group participants also mentioned direct access to produce-related information as an important benefit. Participants liked that farmers are there to answer questions, such as whether they spray their produce and how much fertilizer they used. Since consumers directly question the grower, the focus group participants who shopped at farmers markets felt they could be well-informed about their purchases.



Control and choice

“At the farmers' market, if you can't find something right then, they can tell you they can bring it for you next week.”

[Carbondale participant]

I'd rather go to a farmers' market if it was more convenient just because the food's not juiced with all kinds of chemicals...”

[Rockford participant]

“At a farmer's market or a roadside stand, the person selling it knows what the heck it is.

They're there; they grow them; they know what it is. That expertise is usually standing right there...”

[Carbondale participant]

“I know that they are not juiced with something so that they can stay good until they get shipped to where they're going...”

[Rockford participant]

“...if they tell me they spray, I just leave.”

[Rock Falls participant]

The focus group participants said that farmers and customers at farmers' markets had a reciprocal relationship. In exchange for their business, consumers learn from farmers' expertise and authority that comes from growing the produce they sell. And consumers can get answers directly on the production techniques that matter to them, such as whether the produce has been sprayed with pesticides or whether their animals are free-range. Further, participants were quite aware that farmers' market produce had fewer chemicals. Even if farmers sprayed on field, the produce was not treated with chemicals help to keep the produce “look good, rather than be good.” Local, participants said, also meant fresher in that produce is not sitting days in transit.

The focus groups' reaction to farmers' markets as a place of equality and exchange is a stark contrast to their discussions about large supermarkets, where the talk includes frequent stories about being controlled and manipulated by product placement or handling, including placing sugared products at eye level to attract children's attention or waxing produce to improve its appearance.



Drawbacks

"My question is, 'What gives that guy that's standing behind the stand credibility? He can tell you whatever he wants.'"
[Rock Falls participant]

"...they can put something out there and say it's good, and the next thing you know, you open up your watermelon and say, 'I don't think so.'"
[Carbondale participant]

"The only thing for me is time. I don't get to the farmers' market. It's only once a week for part of the day..."
[Champaign participant]

"It's a lot easier to go to one of the other local markets in town."
[Carbondale participant]

"We only buy organic and if they tell me they spray, I just leave. It's pretty simple for me in that respect."
[Rock Falls participant]

Convenience. Participants said that schedule conflicts were the main reason they did not go to farmers' markets. Since farmers' markets typically open only one day a week, participants who had plans or traveled out of the area could not get to the market that week. Others just found it easier to go to the local, more accommodating markets in their town.

Skepticism. While some focus group participants said farmers' markets offer fresh produce and a more personalized shopping experience, some skeptics disagreed. A few focus group participants expressed concern that farmers might have more difficulty meeting regulations and standards than grocery stores. Additionally, a few focus group participants openly distrusted the farmers, saying "[the farmer] can tell you whatever he wants."

Chemicals. A few focus rural participants said they do not purchase produce from a farmers' market if the farmer sprayed it with chemicals.



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