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Exploring Consumer Perceptions in a Food Backwater

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Until five years ago, I was a comfortable Madison, WI alternative foodie consumer. I bought most of my produce and meat and cheese at the farmers' markets and food coops that were on my biking route to and from the University of Wisconsin. I was friends with local farmers; I knew whose cheese didn't have rBGH in it and who did and didn't use sprays, even if they weren't officially certified organic. I followed the kerfuffle over organic certification rules in 2000 – the coop posted notices and encouraged us to write letters of protest to our Congresspeople – and I participated in discussions when the coop debated whether or not to go entirely organic, even if that meant not buying as much local produce. (They decided to stay local). When newspapers and magazines – even *Time*! – proclaimed that "local was the new organic," I agreed: all around me were local organic farmers, selling directly to consumers in community-supported agriculture ventures and at farmers' markets. Even the Whole Foods that had arrived in town bought from farmers I knew, just as did the coops. Small-scale dairy farms were going organic to stay in business: with the Organic Valley Cooperative based in the region, they had the option to switch over and gain a price premium from the cooperative for their newly-organic milk, which guaranteed both the price and a market.

But when I moved to South Carolina, things suddenly became more complicated. The doubling of farmers' markets around the country (Halweil 2004) hadn't brought anything more than a small market to my new downtown, and of the four or five produce vendors, two were wholesalers of non-local produce. There were a few remaining old-timey local farms that were about as far from organic as you can get and a handful of folks who had small-scale farms (gardens, really) who said they didn't use sprays. Looking online, I found there were 14 certified organic acres in my entire *state*. Suddenly, local wasn't looking like the new organic; organic was new (and strange), and local was old-time.

Back in Wisconsin, the assertion in the sustainable agriculture community of local *and* organic being the new ideal had seemed not only obvious, but relatively achievable. Now I wasn't so sure. This new uncertainty about the glorious future of local organic food made me wonder as well whether the obviousness of local and organic was a movement frame, rather than a reality to consumers. I decided to look at how consumers were responding to the claims and frames of the sustainable agriculture movement. Did they understand what organic was? Did they want to buy local? How did they decide between the local pesticide-ridden peach and the organic peach from California? When local is not organic, and organic is from far away, which trumps the other in purchasing decisions?

I also wanted to know how savvy consumers were about the issues behind the organic and local discussions. Local had been a response to the industrialization of organic after sustainable agriculture as a movement did something few movements have done – it sought out government regulation. Although it took a few rounds, the organic standards that have emerged are relatively strong (with the exception of the problematic area of grass-fed beef and free-range eggs; for more discussion see Frommartz 2006). With uniform standards at the federal level, large-scale farming gained access to organic certification, and as a result, many of the organic products now in wide distribution are produced by large-scale agribusiness, or by companies now owned by large corporations (for a chart of acquisitions, see Howard 2007; for a discussion of the development of the standards, see Ingram & Ingram 2005). The local food movement emerged as a way to reclaim the attributes of organic that had been lost by what some see as an agribusiness takeover (for a detailed discussion of industrialization of organic see Frommartz 2006, and also Pollan 2006). In most respects, though, local and organic are still conflated in representations to consumers (more on this later).

Framing 'Local' and 'Organic'

One way that some consumers no doubt first become aware of the benefits of local and/or organic food is through the ubiquitous "Top Ten Reasons For Buying Local [Organic]," which are found on most advocacy websites, local food sites, posted in a food coop, and – probably the most prominent location – the side panel of the paper bags at Whole Foods. These lists function as a highly distilled indicator of the frames used to promote organic agriculture in the United States. The following claims are part of the "organic" frame (this list was generated by compiling over 15 various "10 Reasons To Buy Organic/Local" lists), including the one on Whole Foods' paper bag. I've grouped them loosely into categories:

- Personal Benefits: no drugs or hormones, greater nutrition, reduced health risks, better taste;
- Environmental Benefits: no hidden costs, improving the soil, good for the environment, good for wildlife, saves energy;
- Economic Benefits: helps family farms, protects workers, supports the local economy;
- Global Benefits: in harmony with nature, preserves diversity, builds sustainability.

But as the organic market now contains a large number of agri-business firms (even Wal-Mart sells organic milk), not all of these claims have remained (or ever fully were) accurate. All that remains *definitively* true of organic in principle are the following: a) no drugs or hormones, b) reduced health risks, c) protects workers, and d) better for the environment. Note that these last three are true because of the reduced pesticides used in organic methods. The greater nutritional value of organic food has been documented for some organic produce, but has not been confirmed for industrial organic food specifically (Kimbrell 2002). So much of the list is at this point highly idealistic when applied to organic food as a whole.

By contrast, when those same claims are made of local food (and usually the "top 10 reasons to buy local" are comprised of these items as well), the list becomes a different set of idealistic overstatements. What remains accurate are the following: a)saves energy, b) helps family farms, and c) supports local economy.(And what becomes idealistic includes everything related to how the produce was actually grown). Depending on how local food has been handled, one might make a claim for better taste and better nutrition, but this has not yet been confirmed independently. Supporting local farms might under some circumstances protect workers and preserve diversity, but local farming can be just as pesticide-ridden and monocropped as any other farming – you just happen to be living near it, if it is local.

Consumers' Responses to Local and Organic Claims

Little is known about how closely consumers have tracked the vicissitudes of "organic," from the battles over certification and standards to the promotion of local organic food as a response to the industrialization of organic. From within the movement – as I was in Madison – it seems everyone knows about buying seasonally and is joining a Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) organization. From outside the movement – as in South Carolina – most folks don't really understand what the fuss is all about, and some seem to resent organic as elitist, yuppie food (Guthman 2003). And despite the recent spate of attention to the local / organic conundrum (Pollan 2006, Cloud 2007, Smith and Mackinnon 2007), most consumers still aren't really paying much attention.

We also don't know very much at all about what consumers think about these food issues. Most of the research has been done for the food industry by market research firms, and their data is available only for a large fee. Julie Guthman, who is one of the only people to examine in detail the scale, composition and practices of the organic industry as a whole, says that consumer understanding is one of the biggest unknowns. Focus group data from the Food and Society Project at the Kellogg Foundation suggests that consumers have a great deal of difficulty thinking about food at a systemic level) and that they find the proliferation of labeling systems – organic certification, fair trade certification, fair trade, and so on – more than a little confusing (Cultural Logic, for the Kellogg Foundation, 2005). Most organic purchasing seems to be done for health-related reasons, although studies of such purchasing have focused primarily on supermarket and health food store shoppers, and have left largely unexplored the alternative systems of distribution that are central to the mission of the sustainable agriculture movement. And the bottom line is, the percentage of people who are committed to buying organic food is quite small (in the range of 2-3% of the population (Sligh 2003) – in part because, consumers are concerned about a growing range of food issues, from genetic engineering (Center for Food Safety, nd) to globalization of food systems (Wimberly et al 2003).

Investigating the Choice Between 'Local' and 'Organic'

If consumers are confused about organic standards and about food issues in general, one way to develop a deeper understanding of the trade-offs between local and organic is to start with people who are already informed at least to a degree in food issues. These consumers would potentially understand the trade-offs between local and organic, and would likely have at given at least some thought to which of the local and organic frames they find compelling. Available to me were a few sites: a newly formed organic buying club whose members joined together to buy organic produce at reduced costs from a wholesale distributor; two health-food stores, both of which carried organic food as well as a little local produce; and two farmers' markets, one run by the state that included wholesalers as well as local farmers, and the other downtown, composed almost entirely of local farmers. I decided to work with the organic buying club and the downtown farmers' market, primarily for reasons of access, but also because I guessed these people would be the most committed.

In focusing on these two groups, I wanted to assess their members' knowledge in several dimensions. First and foremost, I was interested to see if they could differentiate between industrial organic and local organic – and if they could recognize that local does not necessarily mean organic. Did they value both, as movement leaders often assume, or were they committed to local only OR organic only? That is, are local food consumers convinced by the overly broad claims of the sustainable agriculture movement, or are there actually separate audiences for organic and for local?

Obviously, these are broad questions, but since we know almost nothing, a pilot study is a good place to begin. I surveyed 20 members of the organic buying club and about 20 regular attendees of the farmers' market (meaning people who came almost every week). Response rates were very high: approaching 90% for the buying club, and very few attendees at the market refused to participate. The survey asked questions about their purchasing habits, purchasing priorities, their definitions of local and organic, and also asked them to rank various attributes as more or less closely associated with local and with organic (the attributes were the 15 claims discussed above).

Purchasing Choices and Priorities

The differences between the groups lined up in the way I had assumed. The members of the organic buying club made a point of purchasing most of their food organically (a quarter exclusively buy organic food, and a majority said they did so frequently), while the farmers market regulars were much more likely to say they bought local food (some claimed to do so "always," which is an impossibility in this region!). Most organic club members bought local food only sometimes.

Their purchasing priorities reflected their group memberships as well. The groups were given the following options to prioritize: grown locally; grown locally & pesticide free; grown locally & certified organic; grown in SC & certified organic; and certified organic. Organic club members valued local, but prioritized organic higher: they ranked *grown locally & certified organic* the highest, followed by *grown in SC & certified organic,* but most chose *certified organic* as their third choice, and *locally grown* was a distant fifth behind *grown locally & pesticide free*. The farmers' market regulars also ranked grown *locally & certified organic* the highest, but differed in that they ranked *locally grown* over even *grown in SC & certified organic*. The buying club members said they would pay more for organic food; the farmers' market regulars would do so for local food.

The groups also differed in their attitudes about, and knowledge of, organic food. The organic buying club trusted certifying labels more (for example, they agreed that food is actually organic when it is labeled as such), but they also understood that farms can be organic without being officially certified (particularly small farms often forego the expensive certification process), and they were more willing to trust and recognize those farms as organic. Farmers' market attendees rejected farms that were not certified, but also tended not to trust the certification process (a contradiction that suggests a deeper confusion about the role of certification).

The organic buying club had a much broader definition of what constituted local food, defining such food as being grown within 100 miles, while farmers market regulars saw local food as being grown within 25 miles. This is consistent with the finding above, where farmers market attendees didn't seem to see *grown in SC* as locally grown. I believe that the organic buying club holds this broader sense of local because it is organic or sustainable local farms that count as local in their minds. These farms are scarce and thus, more spread out: the buying club was more likely to occasionally purchase from a organic CSA 100 miles away than its members were to frequent a large local non-organic farm 15 miles up the road. I take from this that the buying club members related to local from the standpoint of organic consumers: that is, they were coming to local from organic. For them, local meant an extension of organic, so the only local that they could see was small-scale local that was also organic or that was self-consciously identified with sustainable agriculture. Farms in the region were not, I believe, for these consumers, actually "local." If this is the case, then, at least for these consumers, it is a highly partial local which counts as local, and therefore we would expect to see some serious misunderstandings of local by the organic club members. It is to these constructions of organic and local that I now turn.

Consumers' Understadnings of 'Local' and 'Organic'

To address consumer acceptance of the local and organic frames, we asked the buying club members and market regulars to rank each of the fifteen attributes discussed above (from "no drugs or hormones" to "builds sustainability") in terms of how closely they were related both to the term "organic" and to the term "local." We found that organic club members were, in general, more accurate then market regulars about the elements of *both* frames that were correct. However, they were also more idealistic about the attributes of organic food.

Organic club members were more likely than market regulars to accurately assess the organic frame elements: they saw greater nutritional benefits to organic food and lessened health risks for organic food. They also believed it tasted better, improved the soil, and was good for the environment, which are relatively accurate. But they were also much more idealistic about organic food than the market regulars, tending to believe that organic helped family farms, built sustainability, and was in harmony with nature; this despite their own purchasing of globally transported industrial organic food through a distributor. Thus, while club members were better informed about the actual benefits of organic, they were also more uncritically accepting of the untrue elements of the organic frame – and more likely to miscast organic as having the benefits of *local* organic.

Organic club members also were more likely than farmers market attendees to accurately comprehend the most distinctive attributes of local food. They were more likely to see helping family farms and supporting the local economy as very closely related to local food. (These were in fact the attributes they saw as most closely related to local food.) They also saw local food as saving energy, which demonstrates an understanding of the environmental implications of the global transport of food. But they did not see local food as being fresher, even given this transportation issue; in fact, they did not see nutrition or taste as a quality of local food at all, even as local food proponents focus on nutrition and taste as key elements of food which has not been shipped thousands of miles. Market regulars didn't emphasize the fact that local saves energy, but they did see local food as tasting better. Interestingly, while they saw "local" as beneficial, they were much less consistent in their responses and missed some key benefits of local food (at least as articulated by the sustainable agriculture movement).

Implications

What we see here is consistent with market research that finds that consumers are primarily motivated to buy organic for health concerns. The buying club members were clearly concerned primarily with nutrition and the health risks of pesticide exposure. This focus led them to glorify organic food to some degree. However, their involvement in the club had clearly exposed them to more elements of the organic frame and to important ideas about local agriculture, thus encouraging them to think about food at a more systemic level as well. They may be very consumers who evolve into the ones who agonize over a choice between local and organic. But for now, they definitely choose organic.

The market regulars are *not* the sustainable agriculture movement's ideal consumer, knowledgeable about food systems and making purchasing decisions that take into account the multiple factors of "food drenched in oil" and pesticide use. This raises a key question: in a state with a rural tradition that has persisted entirely distinct from the sustainable agriculture movement, are local food purchasers likely to be part of that movement or something completely different? The persistence of rural tradition does not necessarily breed a consumer for local organic. And the "sustainable local" frame presumes a certain orientation towards food systems that is very unlikely to be shared by rural people or formerly rural people.

I also see a larger problem in how I, and others, have thought about these issues. We have accepted the (market-driven) premise of much of the research so far, which has asked questions primarily about what *consumers* believe and what they understand. But the movement is larger than consumption, and many participate for reasons and in ways that go beyond what they choose to spend their food dollars on. The organic club promotes organic purchasing, but also requires that its members do volunteer work and offers educational events to the community at large. Similarly, purchasing locally produced products at the downtown market may be as much entertainment, civic pride, or downtown involvement as it is supporting local agriculture. Teasing out these various interrelated meanings will require a broader understanding of the meaning that the work of procuring food has in people's lives. Taken in this context, the assessments that people make of the claims for local and organic are far more complicated than one might expect.

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Key words :- Consumer Perception , Food Delivery Applications, Influencing factors. I. INTRODUCTION. Consumer perception implies ones behaviour towards any product or service marketed , it is that marketing concept which encompasses a consumerâ€™s acquaintance about offerings of any product or service of a particular company.Â Everyone is in a race to cope up with the fifth-generation technology. India is rich in food culture which is being now marketed with the help of various food applications like Zomato, Swiggy, Ubereats etc. that provide services to the users to explore the tastes of various restaurants sitting at residence or even at workplace. PDF | Current food consumption and production cannot be considered sustainable due to extensive ecological, social and economic issues along the supply | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate.Â 13. Kameke & Fischer - Preventing household food waste via nudging: an exploration of consumer perceptions. Preventing household food waste via nudging: an exploration of. consumer perceptions. Carolin von Kameke1, Daniel Fischer1. The results show that how consumers perceive food safety risks is influenced by their trust in the public management ability of the government, their understanding of the risks, as well as the time of survey. On this basis, several coping measures were put forward to maintain consumer trust in the government and enterprises, and to stabilize the food consumption market. The research results provide the evidence for the government to formulate sound policies on food safety.Â Consumer perceptions of best practice in food risk communication and management: implications for risk analysis policy. Food Policy, 35(4), 349-357.Â Exploring a spatial statistical approach. to quantify flood risk perception using cognitive maps. Natural Hazards, 76(3), 1573-1601. Food additives, such as food colours or sweeteners, play an important part in food supply. For a variety of reasons, some consumers might regard the use of food additives, especially artificial ones, with suspicion; food additives are considered unnatural, unhealthy or even a public health risk. The goal of this study was to investigate consumersâ€™ perceptions and the most essential variables related to the acceptance of food additives.Â @article{Bearth2014TheCP, title={The consumerâ€™s perception of artificial food additives: Influences on acceptance, risk and benefit perceptions}, author={Angela Bearth and M. Cousin and M. Siegrist}, journal={Food Quality and Preference}, year={2014}, volume={38}, pages={14-23} }. Angela Bearth, M. Cousin, M. Siegrist. Consumer perception of food quality is considered one of the more challenging areas of consumer research, however, understanding consumer perceptions of food quality is fundamental to the success of the agri-food industry (Cardello, 1995). In order to be successful in todayâ€™s highly competitive market, it is imperative that food retailers and producers effectively interpret consumer quality expectations and incorporate this into their product, as ultimately the consumer is the final user of the product (Grunert, 2005; Hansen & Bush, 1999; Issanchou, 1996).