Eating at home

Canadian households and the motivations and obstacles related to buying locally grown food – a pan-Canadian study

Equiterre

June 28, 2011

Equiterre received funding from Industry Canada's Contributions Program for Non-profit Consumer and Voluntary Organisations. The views expressed in the report are not necessarily those of Industry Canada or the Government of Canada.

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Local food has gained popularity in recent years in Canada and worldwide. From the 100-Mile Diet in British Columbia to the declaration of *locavore* as word of the year in 2007, buying local seems to resonate with North American consumers. Government support for local food initiatives is also on the rise as evidenced by Quebec's $14 million investment in diversifying short supply chains (2009) and $50 million for the *Mettez le Québec dans votre assiette* campaign (December 2007).

To remedy the lack of Canadian data and to follow up on a 2007 survey, Equiterre, in partnership with Leger Marketing, conducted a nationwide survey between August 5 and 14, 2010 on a sample of 1121 Canadian French- and English-speaking men and women age 18 and over. The complete report includes a review of the literature as well as an analysis of the survey results, before putting forward a series of recommendation.

Buying local: a political choice

The survey reveals that in situations of choice, Canadian consumers prefer to buy a domestic product, even from a faraway province, rather than an American product that was grown nearer by. Not just a question of kilometers, buying local is an act that is motivated by political rather than environmental concerns. When respondents were questioned on ideas associated with local foods, 94% (the highest rate) said that purchasing local fruits and vegetables encourages the local economy.

Moreover, the majority of respondents (70 %) prefers buying a non organic tomato grown locally, rather than an organic one grown in Florida or California. Both the literature review and the survey indicate that a definition of local that refers to the province of origin would be the most effective strategy for engaging consumers.

Who buys local?

Not surprisingly, 78% of respondents said that they favor buying local – a result similar to the 77% of respondents who said the same in Equiterre's 2007 survey on the topic. Seniors, retirees, people without children at home and people living in rural areas are significantly more inclined to buy local food. Unlike some studies though, income didn't have a significant influence on buying local. Ultimately, sociodemographic variables don't seem to have a clear impact on purchasing behaviors, according to either the survey or the literature review, which was also contradictory at times.

Walking the talk

The survey has its limits as a research tool: it measures consumer intention – not real behavior at the cash register. To test the strength of respondents' convictions, Equiterre asked them if they usually bought strawberries in the winter. Nearly 42% of the 78% who said that they favor buying local said they buy strawberries in the winter. A portion of consumers, therefore, have a pragmatic rather than ideological approach, whereby a diversity of products is more important than seasonality or provenance – a finding that is validated by our literature review.

The desire for variety is not the only obstacle to buying local. The survey also identifies certain buying habits that pose a problem for development in this sector:

- Consumers only frequent one or two establishments to buy fruits or vegetables.
- Supermarkets are the most frequented place of purchase, but…
- Local food is more likely to be purchased in local shops such as neighborhood grocery stores, greengrocers and public market / urban kiosks.

The following table lists the factors that would encourage consumers to integrate more local foods into their purchases.

To what extent does each of the following factors motivate you to buy more local products?

	Total Yes	A lot	Somewhat	Total No	Not very much	Not at all	I don't know / I prefer not answering
More availability of local products at the supermarket	87%	53%	34%	10%	7%	3%	3%
Local products of better quality	85%	49%	36%	12%	9%	3%	3%
Points of sale close to your home	85%	45%	40%	12%	8%	4%	3%
A lower price	83%	53%	30%	14%	11%	3%	2%
More variety of local products	82%	42%	40%	15%	11%	14%	3%
Better indication of product origin in store	78%	41%	37%	18%	14%	5%	3%
Better knowledge of the local products available depending on the season	77%	32%	44%	20%	14%	6%	4%
Local products available off-season (canned or processed)	53%	17%	36%	42%	26%	16%	5%
Having the skills to cook with them	48%	18%	30%	48%	25%	23%	5%

Source: Leger Marketing 2010

In general, the incentives with the greatest impact have to do with transaction costs, i.e., availability, accessibility, price, and information.

A majority of consumers (87%) don't have access to enough local food at the supermarket, and increasing the number of points of sale would benefit 85 % of them. Measures should be taken to promote a larger part of local fruits and vegetables in the food aisle.

More points of sale could decrease the distance between the customer and local food. Support to direct sale initiatives (farmers' markets, online markets, community sustained agriculture, etc.) would provide more options to buy local, adapted to both the customer and the producer.

A clear identification

Seven out of ten respondents say that they spend less than 30 minutes at the place of purchase, which raises questions about the means used to inform and educate consumers. Indeed, a consumer buying dozens of products in less than 30 minutes probably won't take the time to read the labels or logos.

Furthermore, if they are uncertain of a product's origin at the grocery store, half (50 %) of the respondents would still make their purchase, without asking for information or trying to substitute the product.

Already, in 2007, the majority of respondents (81%) to the survey "What you can do – responsible consumption: study on the factors that motivate consumers to buy responsible food products" said that they were in favor of obligatory, certified designation of origin for food products.

The results of the survey suggest the need for a basket of strategies for easier identification of local products, beyond just a logo or a brand. Strategies could be adapted to the consumer, depending on the environment (rural/urban, province of residence) and the place of purchase. For example, a neighborhood greengrocer that has the complete confidence of its consumers could rely exclusively on identification at the display or a procurement policy, whereas bigger chains may need to use a label. Employees could also be provided with better training to help them guide clients towards local products.

This study brings out that customers seem to be ready to buy more locally-grown fruits and vegetables, but governments and industry must create the conditions to do so / but the conditions to do so still lack.