

# Research on Local Food Connections 2003

Report to Iowa Food Policy Council

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## Description

As part of a continuing effort to gather empirical evidence about local food purchasing, a mail survey was developed for producers and college and university foodservice directors in Iowa. Surveys were mailed in March 2003. Preliminary findings are presented here.

## Producer Survey

All growers/producers listed in the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship's Fruit and Vegetable Growers and Family Farm Meats Directories were sent a mail questionnaire in March 2003. Data were collected from 181 (35% response) growers/producers regarding their perceptions of benefits and obstacles to direct marketing to restaurants and other foodservice operations; types of products and estimated quantity of foods produced; current status of foodservice sales; and what sources of information they found helpful related to direct marketing to foodservice operations.

Although direct sales to consumers (82%) and farmer's markets (74%) were reported as the primary markets used by local growers/producers, **many indicated they currently sold (25%) or had sold in the past (27%) product to local foodservice operations.** Tomatoes, onions, peppers, corn, and potatoes were the most commonly sold products.

Growers/producers were asked to rate the importance of a list of benefits and obstacles using a 5-point scale. Table 1 summarizes ratings of benefits and Table 2 provides ratings of obstacles.

Most of the **benefits** received a mean rating of three or greater, suggesting many perceived benefits from selling to local restaurants or foodservice operations (Table 1). The top three benefits indicated were: supporting local farmers, providing fresher food for the customer, and a shorter distance for the food to travel.

The greatest **obstacles** to selling to local foodservice operations were perceived to be year-round availability, lack of a dependable market, ability to charge desired price for a product, communication with the food buyer, and ability to produce needed quantity (Table 2). However, most obstacles were rated less than 4.0 and almost half were rated less than 3.0 on the 5-point scale indicating they were perceived to as only slight obstacles.

A variety of sources of information had been used by growers/producers to learn about selling to foodservice operations. Workshops (34%) were the most common, followed closely by producer organizations (25%), Extension publications (24%), and arranged meetings with buyers (24%).

**Growers/producers indicated having a list of foodservice buyers (52%) and having arranged meetings with foodservice buyers (46%) would be most helpful in their effort to learn more about selling to local foodservice operations.**

**Table 1: Benefits to Direct Marketing to Restaurants and Foodservice Operations**

<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Mean<sup>1</sup> ± SD<sup>2</sup></b>
Supports local farmers	4.71 ± .75
Fresher food for customer	4.62 ± .74
Food travels shorter distance	4.47 ± .93
Higher quality food	4.46 ± .81
Manager knows source of food	4.32 ± .95
Good public relations	4.29 ± .96
Higher nutritional quality of food	4.25 ± 1.00
Safer food	4.12 ± 1.07
Aid to local economy	4.09 ± 1.08
Knowledge of production/growing practices	3.96 ± 1.04
Less harm to environment	3.87 ± 1.22
Greater variety of food	3.69 ± 1.19
More stable market	3.54 ± 1.24
Ability to concentrate on fewer crops	3.28 ± 1.26
Reduction in marketing time	3.26 ± 1.33
Fewer buyers to work with	3.25 ± 1.34
Less expensive food for restaurant/foodservice	2.93 ± 1.31
Reduction in amount and type of equipment needed	2.81 ± 1.29

<sup>1</sup> Scale: 1 to 5, with 1 = No Benefit and 5 = Strong Benefit.

<sup>2</sup> SD = standard deviation.

*n* = 160-177

**Table 2: Obstacles to Direct Marketing to Restaurants and Foodservice Operations**

<b>Obstacles</b>	<b>Mean<sup>1</sup> ±SD<sup>2</sup></b>
Year-round availability	4.28 ± 1.21
Lack of dependable market	3.67 ± 1.15
Ability to change desired price for product	3.50 ± 1.21
Communication with the food buyer	3.42 ± 1.07
Ability to produce needed quantity	3.36 ± 1.39
Local and state regulations	3.30 ± 1.26
Knowledge of restaurant's/ foodservice's purchasing practices	3.17 ± 1.12
Equipment and storage costs	3.17 ± 1.18
Liability issues	3.16 ± 1.27
Availability of labor	3.14 ± 1.28
Infrastructure for ordering	2.98 ± 1.06
Delivery to restaurant/foodservice at set times	2.89 ± 1.34
Availability of proper packaging	2.88 ± 1.31
Communication with the food buyer	2.75 ± 1.12
Payment procedures of the foodservice	2.70 ± 1.19
Transportation for delivery	2.57 ± 1.18
Food safety issues	2.49 ± 1.25
Ensuring safe food supply	2.34 ± 1.25

<sup>1</sup> Scale 1 to 5, with 1 = No Obstacle and 5 = Strong Obstacle.

<sup>2</sup> SD = standard deviation.

*n* = 170-176

## College and University Foodservice Director Survey

A mail questionnaire to all college and university foodservice directors in Iowa was sent in March 2003 (N=28). Responses were received from 8 directors of one regent institution and seven private colleges (28%). A follow-up mailing will take place this fall in an effort to provide a complete profile of local food purchasing in Iowa colleges and universities. While the response is not complete, findings do allow for a preliminary review of potential opportunities in the college and university foodservice market.

Directors were asked their perceptions of benefits and obstacles to purchasing locally grown or processed foods; information about the college or university foodservice and purchasing policies and practices; factors important in selection of a supplier; and the level of importance students on their campuses would give to a list of current food issues. Many of the items on the director survey are similar to those on a survey sent to college and university directors in the state of New York, as part of a Cornell University project. Results from that study are currently being analyzed

Preliminary findings from the Iowa survey indicate **there is support by college and university foodservice directors for local food purchasing**. Key benefits identified (mean ratings 3.50 or higher on a 5.0 scale with 5 = Strong Benefit) were aid to local economies; fresher food; higher quality food; and good public relations. Many of the listed obstacles received mean ratings of 3.5 or higher (5 = High Obstacle). These included issues with adequacy and reliability of supply, order and payment procedures; timeliness of delivery; clean packages with consistent sizes; product cost and extra preparation; local and state regulations; knowledge about local growers and obtaining approval for these; and finally, working with more vendors.

**Half of the respondents identified food safety as somewhat important or the most important consideration when purchasing from local sources. This finding was strongly reiterated when all responding directors identified certification of food production practices and food safety assurances as very important selection factors for suppliers (Very Important = 5.0 on the 5-point rating scale).**

When responding to the attitude statements, directors indicated a sense of responsibility to help local economies by purchasing from area farmers, and that if students requested locally grown foods, then they would be likely to serve them. However, there is some confusion as to what are regulations governing local food purchasing and there is concern about dealing with more vendors.

Directors were asked to assess the level of importance that they thought students on their campuses would give to food production issues. **Issues considered important to students included availability of organic, vegetarian and nutritional food choices; production practices used for purchased foods; environmental considerations; and the use of locally grown foods.**

In conclusion, preliminary data suggest support by college and university foodservice directors for purchasing food from local sources. Concerns for safety of the product are high, and producers should be aware there may be a need to provide some certification of the use of good agriculture practices and the need to provide clean and consistent packaging of foods. While directors are supportive of use of local foods, there appears to be confusion as to what products can legally be purchased from growers. *Food Code 97*, currently used in Iowa, states "approved suppliers" be used for foodservice establishments and that package materials protect the integrity of the food. Fact sheets with information about food purchasing regulations could be developed and disseminated via the web. Workshops about local food purchasing could be part of regional or NACUFS presentations, with the benefits to smaller institutions highlighted.