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# Revealing the lifestyles of local food consumers

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816

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Changing consumption patterns have led to a number of transformations throughout the food cycle, and understanding how and why people purchase local food is important. This paper aims to examine the characteristics of the people leading this phenomenon: those that prefer to buy locally produced food.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In order to explore the characteristics of local food purchasers, a single item question, “I try to buy a lot of locally produced food”, was included in the food section of a New Zealand consumer lifestyles survey for which 3,556 responses were collected. The full survey included 600 questions across the full attitude, interest and opinion schedule.

**Findings** – For people who express a strong intention to purchase local food, this behaviour is linked to the types of food they eat (e.g. unprocessed foods), where they buy it (e.g. at speciality stores), and how they cook it (e.g. follow recipes). A range of personality and other personal characteristics differ between local and non-local food buyers, with the former segment being more liberal, interested in quality, and frugal.

**Practical implications** – Consumers who express an interest in purchasing local food are a demanding segment of the population whose interest in food makes them critical judges of produce. Local food must thus be fresh and value for money. Growing this sector requires making local food more accessible through mainstream retail outlets.

**Originality/value** – While something is known about why people buy local food, less is known about other aspects of local food consumers, the range of attitudes they hold towards food or their food-related behaviours.

**Keywords** Local food, Food lifestyles, Food purchasing, Food and drink, Food industry

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Paradoxically, alongside the current trend of food markets becoming increasingly global in nature, we are witnessing a counter-trend with a growing interest in local food. Evidence of this local food trend is apparent in many areas. In the popular press, there are recent books such as *Coming Home to Eat* (Nabham, 2002) and *Eat Here* (Halweil, 2004). The food activist discourse discusses creating food sheds (Kloppenburger *et al.*, 1996) and reducing food miles (Pretty *et al.*, 2005), and academic literature is writing about the practice and politics of food system localisation (Hinrichs, 2003; Duffy *et al.*, 2005; Ilbery *et al.*, 2006; Alonso and O’Neill, 2010; Coderre *et al.*, 2010). One concept being discussed in the consumer behaviour literature is the notion that some consumers are voting with their wallets for locally produced food (Shaw *et al.*, 2006). While some of the motivations for purchasing local food have been explored in previous research (Weatherell *et al.*, 2003), work on food lifestyles (Grunert



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*et al.*, 1993; Grunert, 1996; Cicia *et al.*, 2002) suggests that the preference to buy local food could be linked to food attitudes and behaviours and personality characteristics. We use data from a New Zealand consumer lifestyle study to examine the characteristics of the people leading this counter-trend in food purchasing. The benefits of obtaining such an understanding are twofold: First, it will highlight marketing opportunities and challenges involved with meeting the demands of these existing customers. Second, as this segment are in effect the market leaders in the local food market, an understanding of their behaviour will provide insight into how marketers may assist in creating more demand for local food products beyond this small committed base, thereby expanding the size of the local food sector and the consequential benefits to both individuals and society at large.

## 2. Context and literature

Interest in, and use of the term local food is developing in two main ways. First, local food refers to where the food is produced, sold and consumed within a limited geographical area. Second, it refers to locality and is used to add value to regional food products which are branded as coming from a specific geographical place but are retailed and consumed outside of that region (Morris and Buller, 2003). While the focus of this article is on the first case, the second case illustrates that the locality of food is becoming increasingly important, influencing both marketing practice (e.g. adding value to brands) and policy (e.g. accreditation and other name protection schemes). Although the overall importance of the local food sector in the aggregate food system of developed countries is relatively small (for example, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs reported that in 2003, the local food sector in the UK accounts for between 1 and 5 per cent of the total grocery market), there are indicators that suggest that it may be the beginning of more significant changes in food systems. The food miles debate, for example, is one area which is likely to gather more momentum as the issues of peak oil and global warming become more accepted. The fact that governments are increasingly showing an interest in supporting and promoting local foods (Ilbery *et al.*, 2006; Friedmann and McNair, 2008; Coderre *et al.*, 2010) also indicates that this sector will continue to grow in the future.

In objective terms, the actual purchasing of local food is difficult to identify and classify. An understanding of what actually is local can vary according to production and trading areas. In New Zealand, a major influence on consumers' food choice has been the growth in farmers' markets supported by local and regional authorities who set the local boundaries according to their interest areas (Guthrie *et al.*, 2006). However, our own qualitative work (feedback we received during the questionnaire testing process) has made it clear that consumers' perceptions of what is local are flexible and vary according to expectations. For example, the New Zealand climate supports citrus fruit throughout a large part of the North Island but much of the South Island is too cold. Thus, for a person in the South Island an orange produced in the North Island could still be described as local food, but in contrast a local apple would be defined as coming from the South Island.

Understanding who is buying local food is important because changing consumption patterns have already led to a number of transformations throughout the food cycle. Production has changed with the introduction of farm sheds, (a form of community-supported agriculture). Distribution has changed through the

(re)emergence of shorter and alternative channels such as selling at the farm gate, co-operatives and farmers' markets, as well as vegetable box schemes. Examples of both voluntary and regulatory place labelling can be found and there are more initiatives to brand and promote local food, as well as the development of local economic trading schemes to purchase locally produced food. A number of reasons for buying local have been identified (Weatherell *et al.*, 2003) and they can be broadly divided into either societal or personal motivations. Societal motivations include buying local food because it is perceived to be more environmentally sustainable (e.g. less food miles are necessary to transport the food to market), and more socially responsible (it directly supports the local economy as opposed to larger, perhaps global, players). Personal motivations for buying local include:

- it is more pleasurable (it tastes better, and the purchaser has more contact with rural life);
- it is seen as healthier (because it is fresher and eaten in season, fewer chemicals are required to preserve the food for shorter transportation and storage times); and
- it is perceived to be safer than non-local food because traceability of the food is possible for consumers who can feel more connected with their food producers.

While we know something about why people buy local food, less is known about other aspects of local food consumers. Therefore in this study we investigate the characteristics of local food consumers, in particular:

- the range of attitudes that they have towards the food they purchase;
- their food and non-food related behaviours; and
- their personality and other personal characteristics.

In short we wish to see if people interested in buying local food exhibit different lifestyles than those who do not.

### **3. Research method**

In order to explore the characteristics of local food purchasers, a single item question "I try to buy a lot of locally produced food" was included in the food and drink section of a national consumer lifestyles survey. Conforming to the standard format in the survey, responses were measured on a five-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The full survey included 600 questions across the full activities, interests and opinions (AIO) schedule as defined in early research on lifestyle segmentation (Plummer, 1974). A total of 10,000 questionnaires were posted out to a random sample of New Zealanders aged 18 and over using a commercially acquired mailing list. A single reminder was issued ten days after the first mailing and a range of incentives were used to encourage responses, including a prize draw for a range of small electrical goods and a \$1 donation to charity for each questionnaire returned. Out of 10,000, 246 questionnaires were returned as not known at the address or deceased and a total of 3,556 completed questionnaires were returned, an effective response rate of 36.5 per cent. The sample approximated census information on all data (sex, income, work status and geography) except for ethnic background and age. With respect to ethnicity, there were slightly fewer Maori and significantly fewer Pacific Island

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respondents in the sample. Unfortunately these are known biases in New Zealand surveying work however the questionnaire form is administered. With respect to age, both the under 20 group and the over 70 group were underrepresented. The former could in part have been a feature of the mailing list while the latter was possibly because of the overall length and complexity of the questionnaire. Data analysis was conducted using standard procedures contained in PASW, including ANOVA, using the general linear model and logistic regression. The general linear model was preferred to other methods for comparing means because observed power statistics are available for checking significant differences with a large data set.

#### 4. Results

Initial examination of frequencies revealed that 151 respondents (4.2 per cent) strongly agreed that they made efforts to buy local food, while a further 1,426 (40.9 per cent) agreed. A total of 702 respondents (21.1 per cent) either disagreed or disagreed strongly that they made efforts to buy local food. Since related research on matters relating to sustainable food (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006) through to purchasing other ethical products such as fair trade coffee (De Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2005) has consistently shown that expressed attitudes are more positive than actual behaviours, we decided to be cautious and restrict further analysis to the 151 respondents who strongly agreed with the statement and contrast those respondents with those 702 respondents who indicated that they did not make any effort to buy local. We have labelled these two segments local food buyers and non-local food buyers respectively. Table I presents the results of a comparison of means between these two segments across a range of attitudinal statements relating to food purchasing and consumption. Responses to the attitudinal statements in the table were measured on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, thus a higher mean value indicates a higher level of agreement with the statement.

It is clear from these results that making a special effort to buy local food produce is part of a general interest in food that is different from the non-local buyers. Besides the expected associations with statements associated with quality, organic and non-GM food, local food buyers are also significantly different from non-local food buyers on health related attitudes and clearly have more interest in the whole food preparation and cooking process. The statements with non-significant results are equally insightful. Despite having a more pronounced interest in health, local food buyers are just as interested in a drink at the end of the day, dessert with dinner, cooking up a barbeque or going out for a meal.

Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted on a range of food behaviours included in the survey (measured on a five point scale ranging from “eat daily” to “never eat/haven’t eaten in the last 12 months”). The results are shown in the Table II. Differences in the two end columns are all significant at  $p < 0.001$ .

These food behaviours are generally in line with expectations considering the attitudes detailed in Table I. Local buyers show more desire for fresh and unprocessed foods and eat fewer of the convenience and snack items included in the survey. However, there are some interesting nuances in the data. Our previous work on the general lifestyles segmentation (Todd *et al.*, 2001) has never found any difference between those people who eat cooked breakfasts and roast meals but local buyers eat more cooked breakfasts. One possible explanation is that cooking breakfast is clearly more discretionary than cooking

Food attitude statement	Buyers			Observed power
	Non-local	Local	Significance	
I make a point of purchasing natural or organic products	2.22	3.74	0.000	1.000
A drink or two at the end of the day is a perfect way to unwind	3.24	3.19	0.615	0.079
I am concerned about how much sugar I eat	3.20	3.78	0.000	0.999
Dinner is not complete without dessert	2.19	2.20	0.932	0.051
In our house, nibbling has taken over and replaced set eating hours	2.16	1.96	0.000	0.999
I am concerned about how much I weigh	3.34	3.70	0.017	0.668
I try to avoid foods with a high cholesterol content	3.12	3.83	0.000	1.000
I like nothing better than a backyard BBQ with friends	3.77	3.83	0.537	0.095
I make a special effort to eat natural unprocessed foods	2.55	3.90	0.000	1.000
I enjoy exotic foreign food	3.22	3.60	0.001	0.920
I make special effort to eat low fat food	3.01	3.69	0.000	1.000
I like to try new foods that I have never tasted before	3.35	3.74	0.000	0.970
I do not mind paying a premium for organic food	2.08	3.28	0.000	1.000
It is important to choose food products for their taste rather than their nutritional value	2.79	2.33	0.000	0.996
I prefer fresh food products to frozen products	3.71	4.70	0.000	1.000
I prefer fresh food products to canned products	3.73	4.64	0.000	1.000
Cooking is a task that is best over and done with	2.93	2.31	0.000	1.000
We use a lot of pre-prepared foods in our household	2.68	1.92	0.000	1.000
Going out for dinner is a regular part of our lifestyle	2.57	2.64	0.509	0.101
Dining with friends is an important part of my social life	2.97	3.31	0.002	0.881
Product information is of major importance to me; I need to know what the product contains	2.89	4.21	0.000	1.000
I like to follow a recipe	3.14	3.58	0.000	0.989
I compare labels to select the most of nutritious food	2.65	3.72	0.000	1.000
Shopping for food does not interest me at all	2.57	1.84	0.000	1.000
Before I go shopping for food, I make a list of what I need	3.39	3.67	0.012	0.716
I have a tendency to buy a few more things than planned	3.90	4.05	0.067	0.449
I prefer to buy my food from speciality shops instead of supermarkets	1.94	2.49	0.000	1.000
I like to eat in new and different restaurants	3.07	3.24	0.129	0.329
We plan our evening meals in advance	2.74	3.09	0.001	0.909
Eating genetically modified food does not bother me	3.02	2.13	0.000	1.000
I consider myself a good cook	3.50	4.02	0.000	1.000

**Table I.**  
A comparison of means between non-local and local buyers across a range of attitudinal statements relating to food purchasing and consumption

for a main meal and local food buyers do profess to enjoy cooking and have the time to do so. Salted nuts are eaten with the same frequency between the groups in contrast to the other snack foods. While acquiring fast food for lunches and dinners was clearly more prevalent in the non-local buyers, eating in restaurants was common to both buyers with the same frequency. A separate question on the frequency with which people dine out as a family is clearly associated with the local buying group and the explanation does not seem to be related to household composition.

Initial examination using a variety of ANOVAs and cross tabulations suggested that a range of personality and other personal characteristics differed between local and non-local buyers. In order to explore the personal characteristics held by local food buyers, we conducted a binary logistic regression using a forward Wald entry method

Local buyers do/buy more	No differences	Non-local buyers do/buy more
Cooked breakfasts	Roast meals	Fizzy drinks
Home baking	BBQs	Chocolate bars
Wine at home	Beer at home	Chewing gum
Yoghurt	Low cholesterol margarine	Potato crisps
Muesli	Milk	Ready prepared stir fries
Brown bread	Salted nuts	Ready prepared cooking sauces
Fresh fruit	Ice cream	Fast food lunches
Fresh coffee	Continental style cheeses	Fast food dinners
Dine out as a family	Fresh pasta	
Shopping for food	Lunch in a restaurant	
Work in the vegetable garden	Dinner in a restaurant	

**Table II.**  
Food behaviours of local and non-local buyers

that selected the most important variables from the relevant parts of the lifestyle data pertaining to personality, family life, general shopping attitudes and demographics. This had the advantage of sorting the variables in order of importance and removing some of the confounding variables. For example, occupational status dropped from the model when level of education was included. The personality/general shopping attitude material (measured on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) included several recognised scales from the literature designed to measure important consumption traits including frugality (Lastovicka *et al.*, 1999), dispositional innovativeness (Steenkamp and Gielens, 2003) materialism (Richins and Dawson, 1992), mavenism (Feick and Price, 1987) and time pressure (Mittal, 1994). All of these concepts were regarded as potentially important explanatory variables in this context.

The final results for the logistic regression selected 31 variables that were included in the equation which correctly classified 95.6 per cent of responses (98.4 per cent of the larger group of non-local buyers and 81.2 per cent of the smaller group of local buyers). Since a random allocation of cases of the group sizes would have been expected to correctly place 72.4 per cent of respondents this result can be seen to be a significant improvement over chance and the correct allocation to the smaller group is pleasing.  $-2 \log$ -likelihood was 105.081, Cox and Snell  $R^2$  was 0.495 and Nagelkerke  $R^2$  was 0.845. Age and education were the only two demographic variables included in the analysis and local buyers were both older and better educated. Summarising the remaining personality and interest variables, it is clear that local buyers are more liberal, and environmentally and socially concerned than non-local buyers. They appear to be in closer family units, they value family time and activities, but they emphasise the importance of careers. Local buyers are more interested in both quality and personal service when shopping and they are definitely more frugal than non-local buyers. Interestingly, they do not feel to be under time pressure in their lives and the overall pattern of their responses indicates that they put an effort into shopping. The other significant personality variables all suggest that as a group these people are in control of their lives, less concerned about appearance and social standards, confident in their abilities and life situation, and not easily troubled by others. Considering the recent growth in local food supply, one construct that we expected to be related to the intention to buy local was dispositional innovativeness. In fact, this did not show through at all and on reflection, the people attracted to local produce may in fact be simply reverting to what they consider to be more traditional forms of food supply.



## 5. Implications

The results of this study reveal that for people who express a strong intention to purchase local food, this behaviour is strongly related to the types of food they eat, how they cook their food, and where and when they eat it. In this respect, the pattern of results supports the idea that buying local food can be a way of life (Schifferstein and Pam, 1998). These results makes sense and fit into the bigger discussion in the literature of food lifestyles (Grunert *et al.*, 1993; Grunert, 1996; Cicia *et al.*, 2002).

The information revealed about local food purchasers in this study offers a number of micro- and macro-managerial implications and as such it is likely to be of interest to everyone involved in the production, distribution, retailing, marketing, planning, and legislation of food.

Producers need to be aware that local food consumers express a preference for organic and non-GM foods. Distributors need to consider the absolute importance of freshness for this segment. Retailers must take into account that these consumers view shopping as an activity to be enjoyed and work hard to create retail environments which offer a relaxing atmosphere and emphasize personal service. Furthermore, when setting prices for local foods, retailers must be mindful of the fact that while local food buyers suggest that they are more prepared to pay a premium for organic produce, this segment is also associated with frugality. This result is interesting and suggests that they are not exactly free with their money. As conceptualised by Lastovicka *et al.* (1999), frugality recognises both efficiency and sufficiency in purchasing but more than anything else, the items on the frugality scale emphasise value for money.

Marketers should focus on the fact that these consumers express an interest in food preparation and cooking. Thus an effective way to market local food may be through using these products in cooking demonstrations either at the farm gate, the farmers' market, in store, or on the television. This segment's frequent use of shopping lists suggests that including recipes based around local food products in cooking magazines along with pull-out ingredient lists may be worthwhile. An obvious issue that many local food buyers face is the tension between wanting to buy local, and the desire for exotic foods and good tasting coffee. Those responsible for promoting local food could perhaps help consumers resolve this dilemma by producing ethical shopping guides. These could be similar to those produced by non-for-profit organisations such as Forest and Bird whose "best fish" guide aides consumers to make good choices for the oceans (available online, [www.forestandbird.org.nz](http://www.forestandbird.org.nz)). Such guides would encourage food buyers to choose locally produced food when available, and if is not an option, to then choose products that are produced in a socially just manner (e.g. those which carry the Fair Trade trademark). Finally, food planners and legislators need to be alerted to the fact that labelling of local food is important for these consumers. Not only do they want to know the exact origin of what they are eating but they also want information on how it is produced and its nutritional content.

As well as working to meet the demands of these existing customers, it is worth considering how more demand can be created for local food products beyond this small committed base. An obvious challenge is the limited distribution of local food products, which currently are often only available at the weekend farmers' market. This presents a number of problems for the non-local food buyer for who convenience is quite clearly an important factor. Simply increasing the frequency of farmers' markets however is unlikely to be the solution given that non-local buyers have stated that they are



unlikely to take time to shop around and buy food from speciality outlets. Furthermore, non-local food buyers have expressed that they do not particularly enjoy shopping for food and thus are less likely than local food buyers to value the convivial shopping experience that farmers' markets provide. Rather, making more local food readily available in traditional shopping outlets such as supermarkets would be a better alternative. In a similar vein, increasing the number of fast-food outlets that source produce locally would be an effective way to augment the number of people eating local food, though there are obvious paradoxes between the ideologies of the local food movement (which promotes the environmental and social benefits of local food) and the fast-food industry (which is often seen to be prohibiting progress in these same areas). As non-local food buyers are less environmentally and socially concerned than their local food buying counterparts, marketers may find that emphasising the personal value of eating local food may be the most effective persuasion strategy. Thus advertising campaigns could focus on promoting the links between local food and food safety for example.

Given the environmental and societal benefits of re-localising a greater part of the world's food system, research which continues to explore local food issues is warranted.

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Dr Miranda Miroso lectures in the Food Science Department at the University of Otago, New Zealand. Miranda is a consumer behaviour researcher and her research interests include sustainable consumption, consumer movements and activism. She finished her PhD at the end of

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2009 which was entitled “Dynamic ideologies: insights from the slow food movement”. Using a qualitative research methodology, the thesis explored the interaction between consumer movements and ideological change. Miranda Miroso is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [miranda.miroso@otago.ac.nz](mailto:miranda.miroso@otago.ac.nz)

Lifestyles of local  
food consumers

Rob Lawson is a Professor of Marketing at the University of Otago, New Zealand, where he has worked for over 20 years. Rob’s education and early career were at the universities of Newcastle and Sheffield in the UK and, although he has published over 100 papers across a wide range of topics in marketing, his main area of interest is consumer behaviour. He is the immediate past-president of ANZMAC and was granted Distinguished Membership of the Academy in 2007. He has also worked as research dean at the University of Otago and was a member of the PBRF Business and Economics assessment panel for research quality New Zealand in both 2003 and 2006.

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825