

# Local tops organic among consumers, study finds

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A worker at the Willamette Valley Fruit Co. in Salem, Ore., feeds blackberries onto a conveyer, after which they'll be individually quick frozen. The company is a wholesale packer of fruit, but it has also expanded into branded cobbler, pies and other products made with local berries.

The Willamette Valley Fruit Co. has found that consumers respond to the "local" nature of its branded pies, cobbler and frozen berries. "They feel good about keeping the money in the local community," said Dave Dunn, general manager of the packing company in Salem.

Compared to another popular food claim -- "organic" -- it's more economical for the company to emphasize locality, he said. That's because risking disease in perennial caneberry vines can be more financially damaging than failures of annual crops, Dunn said. "You lose the plant and you're really in trouble."

As it turns out, the term "local" may carry more weight with many consumers than "organic" anyway, according to an agricultural economist studying sustainability claims.

Whereas many consumers still don't quite understand what "organic" means, "local" is self-explanatory and has several positive connotations, said Dawn Thilmany, professor at Colorado State University.

Consumers associate local with freshness, better traceability, reduced carbon emissions and support for the community's economy, she said. "It's very approachable, it's very transparent," Thilmany said. "They feel like they're doing good in a lot of different circles."

Using a simulated buying experiment involving tomatoes and apples from different regions and production systems, consumers were found to have the highest "willingness-to-pay" for locally produced food, according to a study by Thilmany published earlier this year.

Organic labeling also boosted willingness-to-pay, though the effect was weaker on average than the local claim, the study found. However, the organic claim did help improve the willingness-to-pay for imported products, which consumers tended to discount.

Consumers may have more confidence in imported products that are organic because the certification process represents a level of independent oversight, Thilmany said. Fair trade labeling had a similar effect. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the markets for organic and local products are largely independent, though there is some overlap, she said.

Some consumers respond to the authority conveyed by the USDA organic seal, while others place more confidence in direct contact with local farmers, Thilmany said. "It's really different people buying in those categories," she said. "They're commonly grouped in the same sentence, but they're really not the same thing."

The study noted that controversies over organically labeled food -- "including concerns about the rigor of standards and corporate participation in that sector" -- may also have affected consumers' trust in the label.

Mark Kastel, executive director of the Cornucopia Institute organic watchdog and advocacy group, said he would expect the study to generate different results if it had focused only on consumers who shop at farmers' markets and natural food stores.

Thilmany's study analyzed the preferences of a sample that represented the "primary grocery shopper in the household." Educated consumers try to find out more about their food and then make choices based on that information, Kastel said.

For example, they may forgo organic labels if they find local products produced without pesticides that aren't actually certified, he said. Such consumers will often buy local as well as organic food.

Kastel disputed the notion that controversies over some companies' organic certifications have undermined overall confidence in the label. Rather, educated consumers use such information in their buying decisions, he said. "Organic sales haven't gone down with any of these controversies," Kastel said. "People haven't abandoned organics."

Though Kastel supports buying food from local sources, he said it's troubling that the local label doesn't have a standard meaning in the marketplace. The definition of local will depend on where the food is sold, which can be misleading to consumers, he said. "Natural and local mean whatever the person who puts the label on wants," Kastel said. "We're seeing abuse of the term 'local.'"

Thilmany acknowledged that labeling claims can be divisive in agriculture, and can be prone to misinformation. For example, the reduced carbon footprint associated with local food often isn't as dramatic as expected, due to the efficiencies of the transport system, she said. "That argument doesn't seem to hold up as much as people would like," Thilmany said.

Nonetheless, it's apparent that some consumers are voting with their dollars to support such claims, which farmers can benefit from, she said. "There's room in the marketplace for all these models."