HAL open science

CONSUMER COPING STRATEGIES OF EATING LOCAL

Jim Bingen, Julie Sage, Lucie Sirieix

To cite this version:

Jim Bingen, Julie Sage, Lucie Sirieix. CONSUMER COPING STRATEGIES OF EATING LOCAL. ISDA 2010, Jun 2010, Montpellier, France. 9 p. hal-00525606

HAL Id: hal-00525606

https://hal.science/hal-00525606v1

Submitted on 12 Oct 2010

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

ISDA 2010 Agriculture and Food
Innovation et Développement Durable
dans l'Agriculture et l'Agroalimentaire
Montpellier – France
28 Juin – 1er Juillet 2010
www.isda2010.net

CONSUMER COPING STRATEGIES OF EATING LOCAL [1]

Jim BINGEN * , Julie SAGE**, Lucie SIRIEIX***

* Professor of Community, Food and Agriculture
Michigan State University, USA

** Engineer student in agronomics sciences
Montpellier SupAgro,
2 Place Pierre Viala, 34060 Montpellier Cedex 1 France

*** Montpellier SupAgro, UMR MOISA 1110
2 Place Pierre Viala, 34060 Montpellier Cedex 1 France

Abstract — This paper reports the results of an exploratory investigation of the coping strategies of a small group of local food consumer "activists" –those committed to, and those who promote "eating locally" in Michigan. Following a brief review of discussions surrounding different definitions of local food and the concept of coping strategy, this paper presents the methods for collecting preliminary information about local food coping strategies in Michigan and then discusses the coping strategies of these activists.

The consumers we interviewed mostly adopt problem-centered strategies: they change their food-consumption habits including shopping, purchasing, cooking, storing and obviously, eating. None of these changes are easy to implement, and most require re-allocations of time as well as trade-offs to overcome time and cost barriers. In return, most of these consumers feel empowered.

Key words : Local food, consumption, coping strategies

---

[1] The authors are listed in alphabetical order.

Résumé — Les stratégies de coping (ou d'ajustement) des consommateurs de produits locaux.

Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude exploratoire des stratégies de coping (ou d'ajustement) utilisées par des consommateurs « engagés » dans la consommation et la promotion de produits locaux au Michigan (USA). Après une revue de la littérature portant sur les définitions du local et du concept de stratégie de coping, cet article présente la méthodologie utilisée et les stratégies utilisées par les consommateurs de produits locaux interviewés.

La plupart adoptent des stratégies dites « orientées vers le problème » : ils changent leurs pratiques alimentaires incluant les achats (lieux et produits), la préparation, la cuisine, la conservation et évidemment la consommation. Aucun de ces changement n'est facile à mettre en œuvre, la plupart requérant des ré-allocations de temps et des choix pour surmonter les barrières de prix ou de coût. En retour, la plupart de ces consommateurs ont le sentiment d'avoir plus de pouvoir dans leurs choix d'alimentation.

Mots clés : produits locaux, consommation alimentaire, stratégies de coping ou d'ajustement

INTRODUCTION

American consumers are presented with an increasing number of reasons to buy and eat local food products. One refers to the importance of the origin of the products they purchase. A second, and closely related reason, refers to being concerned about the food miles, or the distance foods have travelled from where they are grown or raised, to where they are purchased or consumed. If the act of "eating local" is often presented as beneficial and virtuous (for example, health and civic responsibility), it also embodies obstacles such as the time and sometimes skills required for both shopping and preparation. Such obstacles often discourage many from buying local fresh produce. This paper draws on the results of several focus groups and individual interviews with consumers in Michigan who are committed to eating local. The paper offers insights into how these consumers cope or balance their commitment to eating local with the constraints they face on buying and preparing local food. Following a brief review of discussions surrounding different definitions of local food and the concept of coping strategy, this paper presents the methods for collecting preliminary information about local food coping strategies in Michigan and then discusses the coping strategies of these activists.

1. ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

1.1. Defining local

Local food does mean different things to different people (Wilkins, Bowdish and Sobal 2002), but it expresses a value-based awareness and conscious food choice-making by consumers.

Perhaps the most common definition of local food derives from the distance between the point of production and the point of consumption. This, of course, is the idea behind the "100 mile diet." In the US, this is commonly interpreted to mean food grown within the governmental unit of a county or sometimes even a state (Wilkins, Bowdish and Sobal 2002).

While a definition of "place" in local is recognized,[2] two of the most common sets of definitions are based on attributes ascribed to local food by consumers. For some, local food is preferred because of its "taste, freshness and quality," or because it is assumed to be "healthy" (Anderson 2008). These features are identified as intrinsic to the food products and include notions of the food as more authentic and higher quality (Weatherell et al., 2003), as well as fresher (Jekanowski et al., 2000; La Trobe, 2008) more nutritious, tasty and safe (Seyfang 2004). In addition, some ascribe more extrinsic and even somewhat abstract features to local food. These involve notions of the contribution of (purchasing) local food to environment and community building (Seyfang, 2004), "sustainability," "food security," environmental preservation, animal welfare and human rights (Anderson 2008). While this latter set of attributes is still consumer-based it draws upon a more ethical and altruistic dimension that involves a "moral and aesthetic anchor" in food choices (Warde 1997) and expresses a relationship between consumer behavior and change in the industrialized food system (Follett 2009).

[2] For example, Herrin and Gussow (1989) refer to local food as "food grown in a common, specific bioregion, under a common watershed, soil types, climate, and vegetation."

1.2. Defining coping strategies

With its origins in psychology, Lazarus and Folkman (1980) define coping as the cognitive and behavioral efforts "to manage specific external or internal demands (and conflicts between them) that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of a person" (Lazarus and Folkman, 1980, p. 141). As summarized by Bruchon-Schweitzer (2001), coping refers to specific behavioral and psychological efforts that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize stressful events.
Two types of coping strategies have been distinguished. One includes problem-centered strategies in which an individual faces and accepts the disturbing aspects of a situation, and for which resource mobilization is efficient. A second includes emotion-centered strategies which tend to be more fatalist and sometimes less efficient with respect to resource mobilization. Research indicates that people use both types of strategies to combat most stressful events (Lazarus and Folkman 1980).
Since Duhachek's (2005) first contribution to the emerging consumer coping literature, Duhachek and Kelting (2009) reported that recent consumer behavior research using the theoretical lens of coping has produced rich insights concerning consumer reactions to persuasion, negative emotion or technological innovation . To our knowledge, the coping strategy literature has not yet been used to think about and explore how local food consumers perceive the need to eat local as well as their decisions to act on these perceptions. For example, a consumer who wants to cook with local produce and cannot find it may decide to use a local substitute (problem-centered strategy) or give up the idea of the recipe (emotion-centered strategy).

2. METHODS

The exploratory research upon which this article is based involved a series of guided focus group discussions, individual interviews, and the review of popular magazines, newspaper articles and blogs about local food in Michigan and the Midwestern US.
A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to address many of the key issues raised in the literature dealing with consumer perceptions and behavior related to local food. The discussion guide was divided into three parts.
- The first part focused on perceptions of local food and aimed at identifying the different definitions and ideas associated with the term.
- The second set of open-ended questions dealt with a range of questions concerning the main reasons that initiated the individual decisions to turn towards local food, as well as the advantages resulting from such a decision. These questions sought to learn more about their consumer behavior, as shoppers, cooks or eat-out consumers. Questions that aimed at identifying constraints (or barriers) to getting more involved into the local food movement were included.
- The third set of questions was oriented towards their feelings of empowerment as local food consumers and their strategies regarding how to strengthen the local food movement within the current food system.

In order to ensure consistency across the groups, each discussion was facilitated by the same interviewer (Chambers et al., 2007), who also did the transcription and content analysis. Each discussion lasted from 1 to 1.5 hours and followed the discussion guide described above (Krueger 1994)

3. MAIN RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: COPING STRATEGIES AND EMPOWERMENT

This section provides and interprets the results of the research. The first three parts identify the coping strategies used by these activists to eat locally before moving in part four to an assessment of the ways in which eating locally has contributed to their feelings of empowerment.

3.1 Coping strategies related to seasonality

Given the need to eat seasonally, if one wants to eat locally in the upper Great Lakes region of the US, one of the questions posed to all of the focus groups was: Considering that we are in the Upper Midwest, how do you adapt to the difficult availability of fresh produce? Somewhat surprisingly, participants did not consider seasonality as a barrier to their strategies. One comment summarized the approach from all of the groups and interviews: "I haven't thought about it as a constraint because it is the opposite: a way to get better food, there are more bonuses than minuses" (ELFCO, Male, 69, MSU Faculty & Organic Grower). As others indicated, problem-centered strategies are adopted without difficulty: "sometimes you have to do without" (expert 1), "You do have to change your diet and eat apples instead of oranges" (Slow Food, Female, 45, Writer & Librarian). And one participant, summarizing an overall pragmatic approach expressed in the groups, said "I'm not a locavore purist. In the winter I will purchase fresh produce from out of state" (expert 3).

3.2 Coping strategies related to time-constraints

On the other hand, the discussion around how to cope with time-constraints related to buying local and preparing fresh produce was quite animated. It appears that the responses and approaches to this issue varied by the length of time that individuals had been involved in seeking to eat locally. Those who were just starting raised the standard problems, as a participant who stated, "I just don't have time to grow my food … and I have difficulties with the whole canning/preserving/freezing thing. Besides, I don't have space to keep all this stuff." (ELFCO, Female, 28, Researcher / Outreach). These participants tend to be more fatalist and adopt emotion-centered strategies.

But for those with more experience, overcoming some of the barriers is a question of trial and error over time. "Yes, it was extremely time consuming at the beginning, almost impossible with a full-time job. But I learned how to be more efficient, to go faster, and as a result the time required becomes less difficult to manage" (expert 1). Another participant confirmed this adaptive approach: "It means having a different concept of time. It's about priorities and making choices to take the time and benefit from the pleasure and excitement that eating locally generates such as making my own yogurt, jam, bread" (Slow Food, Female, 45, Writer & Librarian). To eat locally means "to learn slowly how to eat more locally"(Slow Food, Female, 45, Writer & Librarian).[3]

[3] Interestingly, participants did not voluntarily raise the issue of the higher cost of local food. When the question about costs was asked specifically the responses were somewhat equivocal with most feeling that local food cost about the same, or perhaps was even cheaper than food available in the supermarket.

3.3 Coping strategies related to cooking and eating out

In order to gain additional insights into eating local coping strategies two specific questions related to very practical, everyday activities such as food preparation and to dining outside the home were included.
The first question was: When a recipe requires a non local or non-seasonal ingredient (for example, a Mango), do you change the recipe or do you still buy that ingredient? This question generated a wide range of answers. For some, the option was to use a local substitute. As one participant observed, "Cooking is not an experiment, you can always adjust the recipe and use substitutes." (Slow Food, Male, 58, Librarian). Others preferred to follow the recipe even if it meant using a non-local ingredient which can be seen as an emotion-based strategy, since they surrender when facing the problem. Some put forward other arguments to justify their choice "The quality of the product is another important factor" (Slow Food, Female, 62, Court Administrator). But among this group of respondents, some would spend time to find an item that also embodied some of the principles of local, such as a fair-trade or organic product that for them carried a sense of support of a community or environmental sustainability. On the other hand, others took a much more pragmatic approach that they did not see as weakening their commitment to eating locally "So yes, we still buy the ingredient when it makes sense, and substitute when it does not. We are not local purists - just local enthusiasts" (expert 3).
A second question was: What does this local food movement mean when you go out to eat? What do you do when you go out to eat? Responses to this question reflected less flexibility on the part of most participants. Most felt that eating out is generally not consistent with eating locally largely because of the very limited number of restaurants that seek to use local products. Many said that they "always ask about the origin of the food" (expert 2) since there were many dishes, especially salads that could be made with local ingredients such as dried cherries. At the same time, several participants acknowledged that the servers never knew about the origin of the products used on the menu.

3.4 The feeling of empowerment

The following question was posed to all of the groups: "To what extent do you feel like contributing to the growth of the local food movement? Do you feel empowered as a "local food consumer"? Quite enthusiastic responses and lively discussions ensued. "Absolutely YES! I feel very empowered. Consumers are becoming increasingly aware and there is an enormous potential. It's the coolest thing going on in the state. You know where your food dollar goes. It circulates and multiplies within the community. There are many opportunities contributing in a variety of ways, such as helping farmers markets to start, presentations about personal experiences and what can be done to get involved" (expert 1). Another said, "Yes, I do feel empowered. I contribute with my time and energy. I spend a fair amount of both when advocating local food choices" (expert 3). And more broadly, "acting locally helps our society in the sense that it lessens the negative impact of the food system" (Slow Food, Female, 29, Graduate Student).

At a minimum, choosing to eat locally can be considered as empowering because it represents the expression of a specific decision to participate in a localized food system in contrast to a more passive participation and acceptance of the food choices presented by an industrialized and globalized food system (Follett 2009). This somewhat limited, choice-based definition of empowerment becomes more robust as individuals reflect concerns with

two additional dimensions. First, eating locally offers the opportunity to know who produces the food and, as a result, to identify the origin of their food.[4] Second, participating in the shorter local food supply chain encourages action to strengthen relationships within local communities, to establish producer-consumer relationships based on fairness and equity, and to help keep buying power within the community. These kinds of actions can help redefine the role of consumers in the marketplace (Zepeda and Li 2006). As such, these actions may facilitate the establishment of food democracy and contribute to more sustainable environmental practices (Pettit and Wheeler 2005).

CONCLUSION

This paper presents the results of a short and exploratory study of local food activists in the central part of Michigan (USA).
The transition to eating locally generally involves pursuing different coping strategies. The committed consumers we interviewed mostly adopt problem-centered strategies: they change their food-consumption habits including shopping (frequency, retail outlet visited, etc.), purchasing (buy in bulk, quantity, etc.), cooking (new recipes, canning, preserving, etc.), storing and obviously, eating. None of these changes are easy to implement, and most require re-allocations of time as well as trade-offs to overcome time and cost barriers. When local food is not available, local food consumers make efforts to find substitutes that share as many attributes as local food's to adjust coherently according to their beliefs, perceptions and resources. This effort to seek consistency with one's beliefs, perceptions and resources is typical of a problem-centered coping strategy. It also reveals a concrete awareness of the dimensions and impacts of local foods. In return, local food consumers feel empowered and part of a dynamic social network that offers support for eating responsibly.

In contrast, it is possible that those who complain about the unavailability of local products may be those who are either “new” to eating locally or those for whom their strategy is more emotion-based and less oriented to problem solving. This shows that the type of coping strategy adopted can vary from one consumer according to the context (the season within the year, outside or inside one's home,…), the controllability of the situation to another according to the level of commitment and awareness.

These results are preliminary but they suggest the usefulness for more refined study and more in-depth analysis based on the coping strategy conceptual framework. This framework offered a new way to think about and explore how local food consumers perceive the need to eat local as well as their decisions to act on these perceptions.

[4] As captured in a new USDA program, “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food.”

REFERENCES

Anderson, M.M. (2008). "Rights-based Food Systems and the Goals of Food Systems Reform." Agriculture & Human Values 25:593-608.

Bruchon-Schweitzer, M. (2001). "Le Coping et les Stratégies d'Ajustements face au Stress." Recherche en Soins Infirmiers 67:68-83.

Chambers, S., A. Lobb, L. Butler, K. Harvey, and T.W. Bruce. (2007). Local, National and Imported Foods: A Qualitative Study. Department of Agricultural and Food Economics, University of Reading.

Duhachek A., K Kelting. (2009) "Coping Repertoire: Integrating a new conceptualization of coping with transactional theory", Journal of Consumer Psychology, 19,473-485

Duhachek A., (2005), Coping: A Multidimensional, Hierarchical Framework of Responses to Stressful Consumption Episodes, Journal of Consumer Research, 32, 1, 41-53

Follett, R. (2009). "Choosing a Food Future: Differentiating Among Alternative Food Options." Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics 22:31-51

Jekanowski M. D., I. Williams and W Shiek (2000). "Consumers' Willingness to Purchase Locally Produced Agricultural Products: An analysis of an Indiana Survey", Agricultural and Resource Economics Review, 29:43-53

Krueger, R.A. (1994). Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

La Trobe H. (2008). "Farmers' Markets: Consuming Local Rural Produce." International Journal of Consumer Studies. 25,3 : 181-192

Lazarus, R.S., and S. Folkman. (1980). "An Analysis of Coping in a Middle-Aged Community Sample." Journal of Health and Social Behavior 21:219-239.

Pettit, J., and J. Wheeler. (2005). "Developing Rights? Relating Discourse to Context and Practice." IDS Bulletin 36:1-8.

Seyfang, G. (2004). Local Organic Food: The Social Implications of Sustainable Consumption. University of East Anglia.

Warde, A. (1997). Consumption, Food and Taste. London: Sage Publications.

Wilkins, J.L., E. Bowdish, and J. Sobal. (2002). "Consumer Perceptions of Seasonal and Local Foods: A Study in a US Community." Ecology of Food and Nutrition 41:415-439.

Zepeda, L., and J. Li. (2006). "Who Buys Local Food." Journal of Food Distribution Research 37:1-11.

APPENDIX. TABLE 1 FOCUS GROUPS: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Group 1 East Lansing Food Coop Members

Profession	Gender	Age	Background (rural/urban/suburb)	
			Current	**Growing Up**
Teacher	F	62	Urban	Small Town
Researcher/outreach	F	28	Suburban	Suburb
Attorney	M	60	Urban	Urban
MSU Faculty & Organic Grower	M	69	Urban	Rural (Michigan Farm)
Graduate Student	F	25	Urban	Rural
Actuary	M	25	Urban	Suburb
Librarian	M	58	Urban	Urban

Group 2 Student Organic Farm

Retired Social Worker	F	56	Rural	Rural farm
Student Farmer	F	24	Urban	Suburb
Student Farmer	F	28	Urban	Rural
Student Farmer	F	45	Rural/Urban	Urban
Student Farmer	F	26	Urban	Suburb
Student Farmer	F	23	Urban	Urban
Student Farmer	M	22	Urban	Urban
Student Farmer	F	23	Urban	Suburb
Student Farmer	F	24	Urban	Urban
Student Farmer	F	27	Rural/Urban	Suburb
Student Farmer	F	53	Rural/Urban	Urban
Student Farmer	F	23	Rural/Urban	Urban & suburb
Instructor	M	32	Urban	Rural
Farmer	F	21	Urban	Urban
Student Farmer	F	49	Suburban	Suburb
Instructor	F	35	Urban	Rural

Group 3 Slow Food Ann Arbor (Huron Valley) Convivium Members

Writer & Librarian	F	45	Urban	Suburb
Graduate Student	F	29	Urban	Urban & Suburb
Info. Tech Mgr	F	44	Urban	Urban
Teacher &. Tutor	F	74	Urban	Farm
Court Admin	F	62	Urban	Urban