

PFI Local Food Study uncovers disparity between perceptions and purchasing practices

by Tomoko Ogawa and Rich Schuler

Many PFI members have expressed interest in increasing purchases from local farmers. In response, PFI launched a Local Foods Project in May 2010. To increase local food purchases, or to intentionally spend a certain percentage of our food dollars on locally raised food, we must first grasp how our food dollars are currently being spent on foods grown locally and in distant places.

Numerous studies document the economic benefits to the community in buying local, and many of us have pledged to purchase more locally grown food. But just how much local food are individuals really buying? Uncovering the answer requires a real commitment by participants. Fortunately, PFI had six dedicated families that painstakingly recorded their total food purchases for 15 months.

What is local?

Before beginning the study, the first task was to answer the question, "What is local?" This turned out to be more difficult than expected. For example, should the definition of local food be based simply on the distance it travels? Does it need to be purchased directly from the farmer? Should bread made by a local bakery with grain from out of state be considered local? In the end, we settled on food produced in Iowa. (See detailed guidelines in the "Methodology" section.)

Next, we recruited 22 households, and two businesses, but by the end of 15 months, only six households completed the study. Participants are Harold and Marilyn Andersen, Joel and Amy Logan, Dean Lewis and Anita Maher Lewis, Tomoko Ogawa, Teresa Opheim and Rich Schuler, and Susan Posch.

What did we expect to see in terms of the local foods purchased throughout the year? First, if a household was actively purchasing locally, we expected the local food expenses to vary with the seasons. We also expected a wide range of daily purchases from \$0 on a "non-shopping day" to more than \$100 on a "big shopping day." To create a plot that was easy to read, PFI staff

Tips for increasing local food purchases

From what the participants learned through this project, here are some tips for increasing your local food purchases:

- Start by reading labels and learning how far the food travels at the grocery store or food coop.
- Ask questions at grocery stores, farmers market and other food venues about where food is from. This builds awareness and shows that your desire to supporting local producers.
- Shop at farmers' markets.
- Join a CSA (vegetable subscription service).
- Join an online year-round local food outlet such as Farm to Folk, Iowa Food Coop or River Valley Co-op.
- Buy seasonal food in bulk and preserve it for use in the off-season.
- Purchase dairy and meat products from local farmers or lockers.

reported the data as a 90-day average. Each daily food purchase point on such a graph is the average of that day and the preceding 89 days. Not only does this approach "smooth out" the peaks and valleys of the various shopping days, it also illustrates how purchases vary by the season (see Figure 1, below, for one participant).

Perception differs from reality

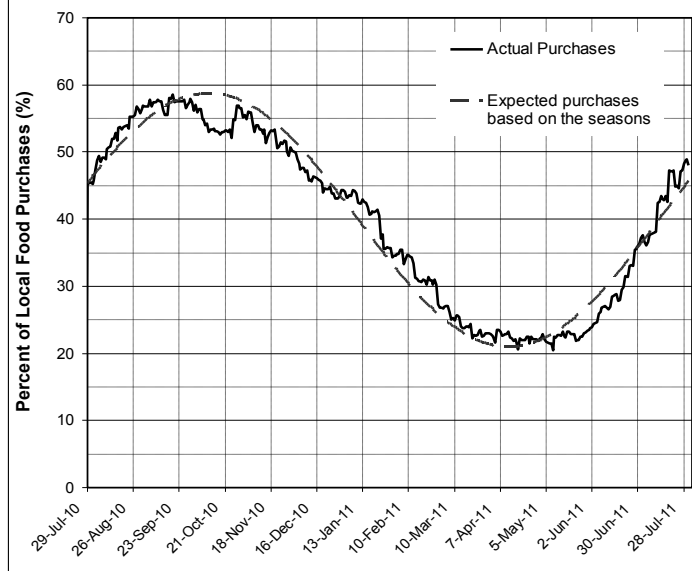
The rigorous approach yielded a rich harvest of unique results, which (thanks to the participants) are supported by nearly 3,000 days of recorded food purchases. The most dramatic finding from this project was that the perception of buying habits does not match reality. For example, one of the questions in the pre-survey study focused on local food purchasing goals for the study. The minimum percentage goal for all participants was 50%, and the majority was more than 75%. In stark contrast to the perception, the 90-day average percentage of local food purchases for all the participants at the end of the study was 32.8%. The peak 90-day local purchase average for all participants on single day was 75.8%, and a value of 75% local was exceeded on only four days.

As one of the participants, this project helped PFI staffer Tomoko Ogawa examine her food purchases. She had always thought that she was good at eating locally, but through this project, she realized how much she depends

on the industrial food system. Similarly, some of our participants found it surprising to see how little they actually spend on local foods. After two months of record keeping, Merissa Landrigan says, "I was shocked to learn that for someone who does almost all her shopping at Wheatsfield Co-op and through Farm to Folk, I was still spending only about 12% locally." After the study, participant Sue Posch decided to join a second Community Supported Agriculture (CSA or vegetable subscription service). Reviewing her food purchases made her realize that the stores she has been shopping in Ames do not carry many local products. She says, "The

Figure 1

Figure 1. Local Food Purchases - 90 Day Average





Participant Sue Posch (left) and friend Beth Larabee

project is making me even more appreciative of the CSAs and farmers' markets in the area."

Dietary restrictions, home gardens affect purchases

Dietary restrictions affect participants' local food purchases. One participant is on a gluten-free diet. The choice to consume organic, gluten-free food limits this person's capacity to purchase local food. Also about halfway through the project, Tomoko realized that her lactose intolerance was more serious than she had thought, and she dramatically cut her dairy intake. At that point, dairy represented the majority of her local foods purchases. Eliminating dairy from her diet resulted in a reduction in her local food consumption.



Marilyn Andersen

from which she derives most of her family's food throughout the growing season. Another participant had a medium-sized garden that supplements the household vegetables. As expected, the local food purchases for these participants decreased during the growing season and increased during the offseason.

Purchases dependent upon food outlet offerings

Shopping venues influenced the percentage of local food purchases. The participant who shopped primarily at farmers' markets had a sharper decrease of local food purchases during the offseason compared to those who shopped at year-around local food outlets such as Farm to Folk, Ames. The participant with the highest 90-day average on a single day (75.8%) bought meat in bulk directly from a producer. This type of purchase is possible in any season, and results in a large local food percentage whenever those purchases are made.



Joel and Amy Logan



Rich Schuler

After 15 months, our study has concluded that when households keep accurate records, they discover that they simply aren't buying as much local

food as they think. It's clear that all participants in the study lean heavily on the industrial infrastructure model of food production and distribution. Shifting the bulk of food to a local economy requires a significant commitment from the community to purchase food grown locally. The challenge to making this shift lies not only with the individual community members but in creating a "local food infrastructure" capable of both growing and delivering the variety and quantity of food required to support an entire community. This cannot happen without the demand created by a critical mass of residents within any community.

Methodology

PFI solicited participants from PFI Member Survey respondents who indicated interest in increasing their food purchases from PFI farmers. We also sought Farm to Folk (F2F) members to participate.

PFI provided the participants with an Excel spreadsheet to document their food purchases. The spreadsheet contains three sheets. In the first sheet, participants enter their food purchase dollar amounts. The formulas in the spreadsheet automatically provide the percentage of local versus distance food purchases. The formulas also give cumulative food spending as well as average daily food expenditure. Sheets (2) and (3) provide 30-day and 90-day moving averages of food purchases per person respectively.

We have set the following rules so that all the participants have the same understanding of what is local and how

purchases should be recorded to increase the accuracy of the data collected.

1. "Local" = within Iowa
2. Include only food and drink
3. Baked goods are "local" if baked locally
4. Do not include home gardening equivalents – this survey is measuring purchases from Iowa farmers
5. Do not include sit-down restaurant expenditures
6. Do not include tax and bottle deposits

Participants who have CSA subscriptions were asked to provide the start/end dates of their shares as well as the cost. We then divided the cost by the number of days for the period when they received produce. Participants entered these daily CSA costs during the period of their shares. This was done to avoid a spike in local food purchases at the point when a participant pays the CSA cost for the entire season. Instead, daily cost of the CSA share is shown throughout the season.