

Farmer's Market's and Consumer Behavior in Concord, CA

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ABSTRACT

Consumer behavior has shaped the local food movement's focus on the supply of small, community based agricultural products through farmer's markets. Studies have highlighted the role of farmer's markets and consumer behavior in rural and urban environments, leaving a gap in knowledge regarding their role in suburban areas. Eighty surveys were collected from customers at Todos Santos Plaza farmer's market in Concord, California. Survey respondents were asked to indicate the locations from which they had purchased groceries in the previous month, provide their definition of "local produce", and rate the importance of specified motives when buying food from farmer's markets. Results showed trends consistent with other rural and urban studies, with freshness, taste, and nutrition ranking highest in values, and that perceptions of food quality and healthiness were the primary motives for buying from farmer's market. Family experience also ranked relatively high as a motivation, indicating a slight difference from rural and urban studies, and suggesting that farmer's market visitors in suburban areas more strongly value farmer's market shopping as a family experience.

KEYWORDS

alternative food movement, local produce, suburban consumer, family experience

INTRODUCTION

The alternative food movement began at a small-scale, slowly taking fire in various parts of the United States in the last decades of the 20th century. The movement's focus on community based food networks manifests in the prevalence of organic foods, farmer's markets, and community supported agriculture (CSAs) that offer new supply sources to meet the demand of consumers for fresh, tasty, and healthy food alternatives. In the early to mid-20th century instances of systemic malnourishment, environmental degradation, and poor local economic growth arose a result of the industrial food system that displaced many of the local and regional food systems (Zepeda, 2004). By the late 20th century, many consumers began rejecting mass-produced food for seasonally available foods, regional cuisines, organic products, and environmentally sustainable foods (Selfa, 2004). The organic food industry increased at a rate of 20% per year from 1990 to 2006, at which point it generated \$17 billion in revenue. The number of farmer's markets in the U.S also doubled in that timespan to over 4,000 markets (Zepeda, 2009). Understanding the various dimensions of farmer's markets is important, as they are key to the alternative food movement.

Consumers have benefitted in many ways from increased small scale, organic, and local food networks. Farmer's markets have been essential to producing healthier, environmentally friendly food alternatives, and represent the central nodes in bringing better quality food to many communities (Kremer 2011). Consumer attitudes and behaviors have shifted in sync with the many perceived benefits of farmer's markets. In addition to gaining access to nutritious, fresh, and tasty food alternatives, consumers also receive the satisfaction of knowing their food is healthy, environmentally sustainable and of higher quality than industrially produced food (Aucoin 2015). Local food networks have also affected communities indirectly, as local foods provided at farmer's markets enhance the well-being of communities by increasing fruit and vegetable consumption (Evans 2012), promoting local businesses, and having positive effects on the economy (Ekanem 2016). Farmer's markets are the alternative food movement's greatest asset, and they facilitate a greater diversity of food products, which in turn attracts a greater variety of food shoppers (Brown, 2003). Farmer's markets serve to "increase the density of local food networks," and are the keystones of the alternative food movement (Brown, 2009).

Changing consumer behavior has fueled the growth of alternative food markets. Understanding the values and motives of individuals who buy alternatively produced food products aids of determining why consumers shop at farmer's markets. Value-Belief-Norm theory (VBN) and Attitude-Behavior-Context theory (ABC), both of which seek to predict consumer behavior based on variables including background, habits, and attitudes. Combined, these two theories can offer a framework to account for attitudes based on values, beliefs and norms, which, in turn are affected by context, demographics, and information/ knowledge seeking. Over time, attitudes are transformed into habits, which translate into behavior, and can aid in determining the motives behind why consumers shop alternative food markets. However, predicting consumer behavior is difficult, as the VBN/ABC framework when empirically tested only accounted for one-fifth of the variation among test results trying to predict consumer behavior (Zepeda 2009). Identifying motivations behind buying alternative foods is vital to understanding the relationship between consumers and food alternatives.

Many studies of the alternative food movement have focused on urban and rural areas, identifying relationships between farmer's markets and consumer behavior. Yet, very few studies have addressed consumer behavior in suburban populations which often have a relatively high proportion of low middle to high middle income families. These characteristics may be associated with differing values and motives from those driving consumer behavior in urban and rural settings (Feldmann 2015). Identifying the relationship between suburban food preferences and farmer's markets will serve to build on the extensive research on rural and urban areas.

My central research question is: How do suburban consumer attitudes and preferences for food at farmer's markets differ from traditional rural and urban studies? To answer this, I pose the following sub-questions: Where do suburban consumers shop for food? How do they utilize famers markets? How do suburban farmer's market customers define "local food"? What motivates suburban consumers to buy from farmer's markets?

METHODS

My study site was the Todos Santos Plaza (TSP) Farmer's Market, located in Concord, California (Figure 1). The Farmer's market provides healthy food alternative such as fruits and vegetables, honey, eggs, and meat. The nearby cities of Pleasant Hill, Concord, Walnut Creek, and Martinez are suburban populations ranging from approximately 30,000 people to 125,000 people.

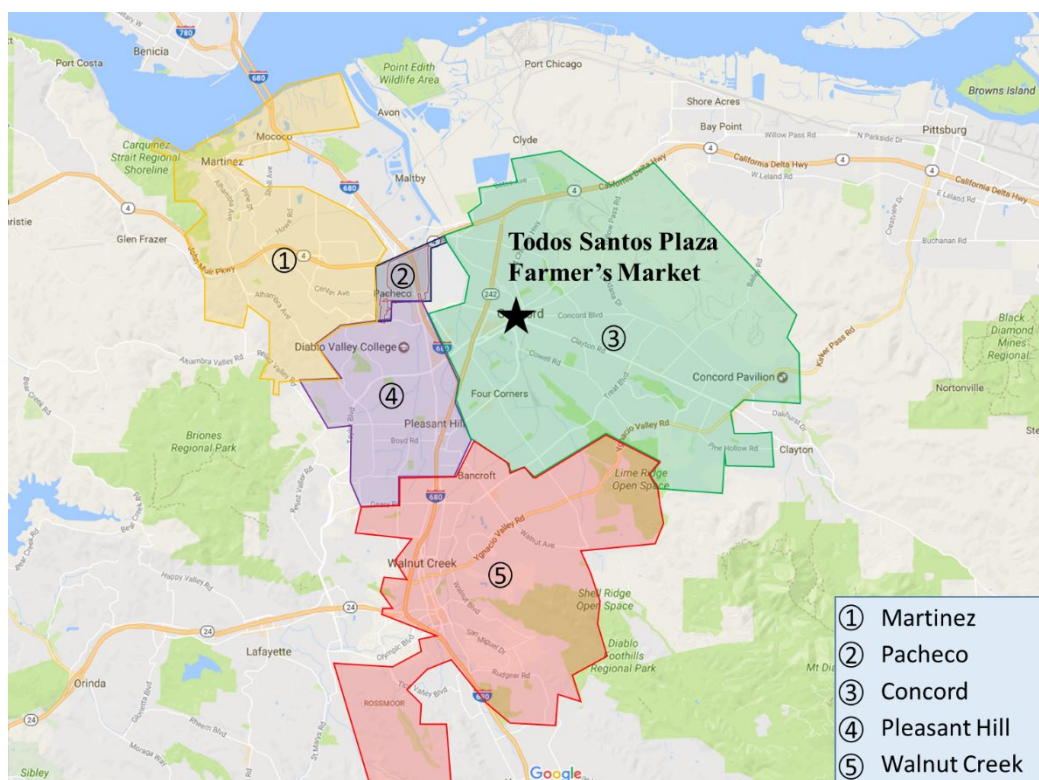


Figure 1. Study Site. Credit: Google Maps ©2017 Google

Data Collection:

To document consumer preferences in a suburban population, I surveyed 80 customers at the TSP farmer's market, using a survey that was distributed in person. My survey captured information on the locations from which consumers purchased groceries, their definition of the term "local produce", and their values and motives when purchasing food from a farmer's market.

Survey respondents were asked to rate their values and motives for buying food at a farmer's market on a scale of 1 to 5. The final segment of the survey asked for demographic information.

Surveys were conducted during the time period of February 28th to March 28th in 2017, from 10am to 2pm every Tuesday, during the hours of operation of the TSP farmer's market. A random sampling method of asking 1 out of every 3 customers was used to collect surveys.

RESULTS

Where Suburban Consumers Buy Food

To establish where consumers in a suburban environment typically go to buy food, respondents were asked to fill out how many times they visited each of listed locations (Figure 2). Respondents visited Safeway, or a similar conventional grocer most often, averaging about 5 visits per month. Upscale grocers were the least visited at less than 1 visit per month, and farmers markets were visited about 2 and half times in a month.

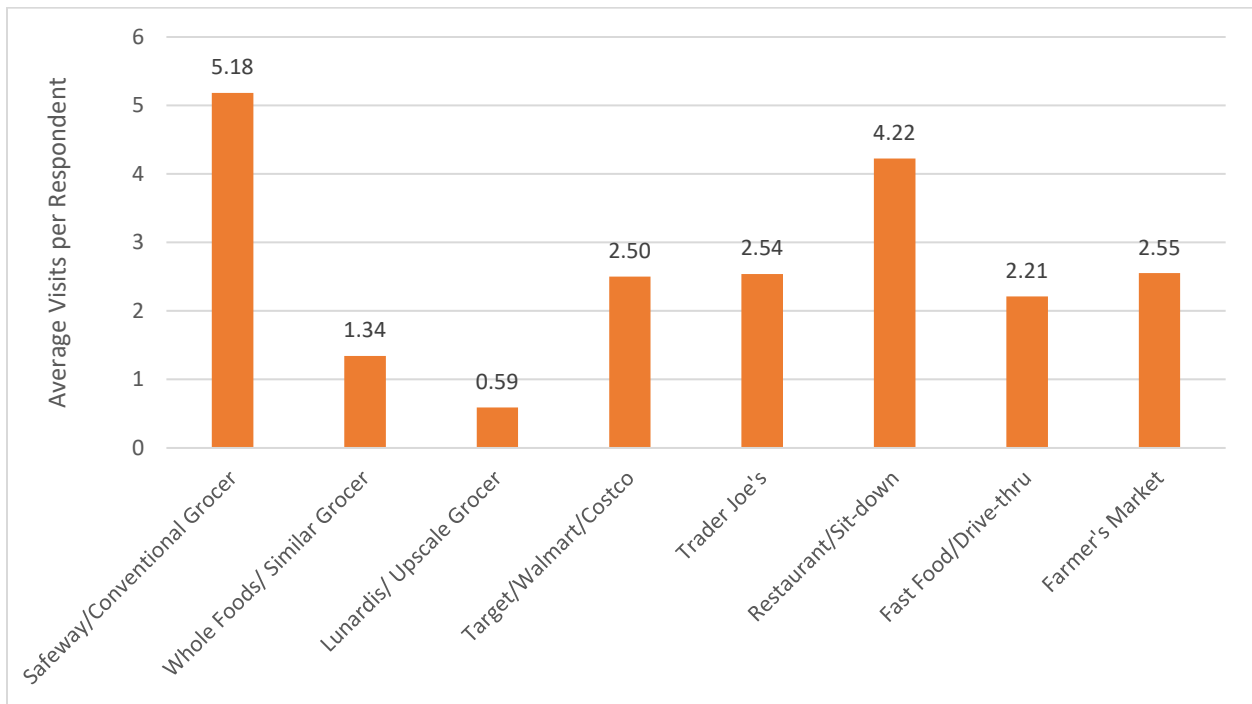


Figure 2. Number of visits on average each respondent goes to each category in a month. (n=80)

Defining Local

Most respondents defined “local food” as originating from within the same or adjacent county of the Bay Area (71%). Twenty-one percent of respondents identified the California state or western region as local, and 5% believed U.S.A is the boundaries of is considered locally produced food (Figure 3).

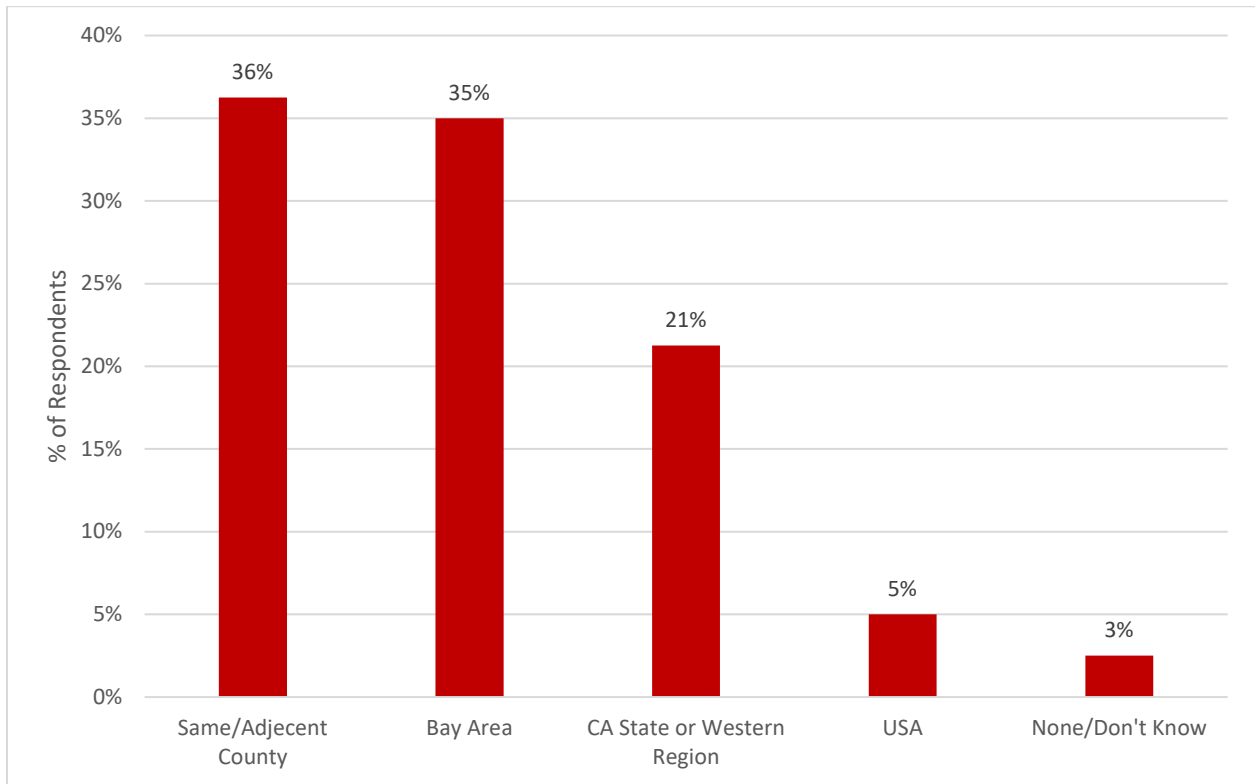


Figure 3. The percentage of respondents who defined local as one of the five categories. (n=80)

Consumer Values and Motives

Freshness, taste, and nutritional value rated highest in what consumers looked for when buying food from farmer’s markets (Figure 4). Appearance, ease of preparation, and organically grown rated as the lowest values. However, 9 values were rated relatively close to each other, and no discernable trend was observed.

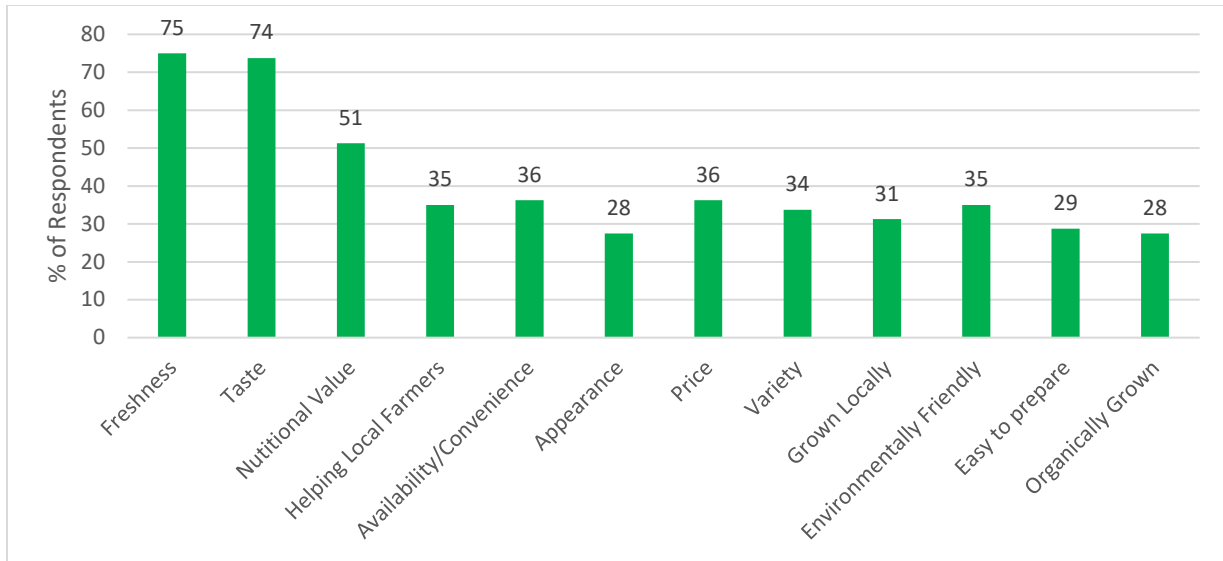


Figure 4. Highest ranked consumer values. Respondents asked to rate level of importance on scale of 1 to 5 for each value. Graph displays only percentage of respondents who ranked each value at 5. (n=80)

Respondents ranked “better quality” and availability of “healthy food” highest in motives for buying from farmer’s markets (Figure 5). Family experience ranked 3rd highest, with environmentally sustainable one percentage point below that. Tradition was considered a less important motive, with 6 other motives differing by 8%.

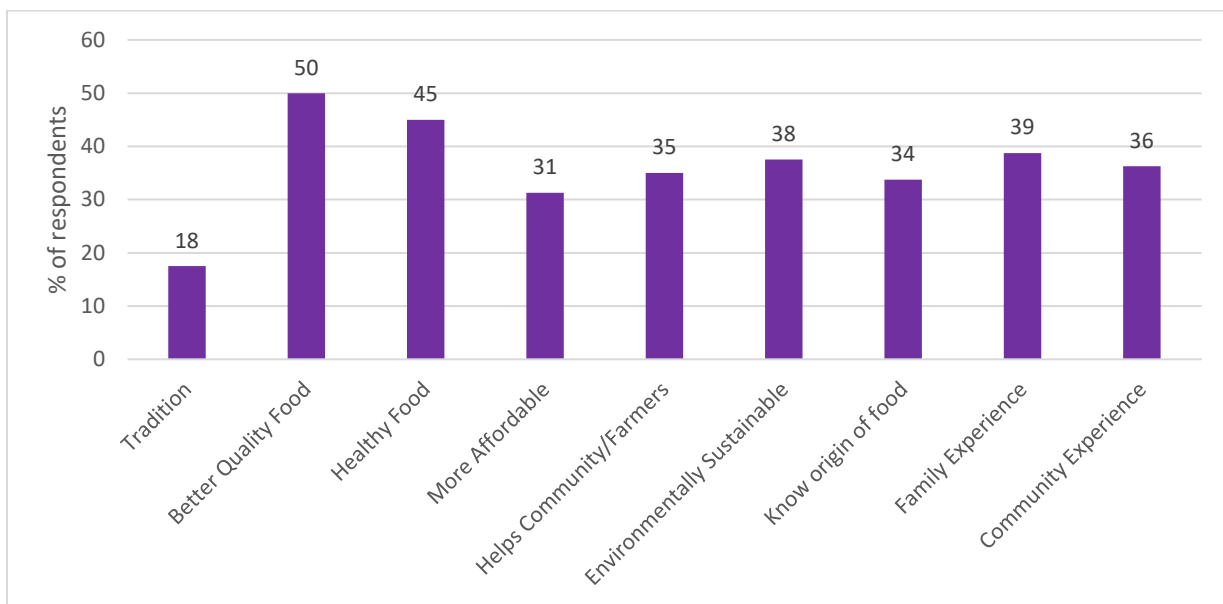


Figure 5. Highest ranked consumer motives. Respondents asked to rate level of importance on scale of 1 to 5 for each motive. Graph displays only percentage of respondents who ranked each motive at 5. (n=80)

DISCUSSION

Consumer Behavior in Suburbia

Suburban environments characteristically host several supermarket chains in relative close proximity to the surrounding population. The availability of several grocers, restaurants, and farmer's markets explains the variety of visits to different grocers among survey respondents. In suburban Concord, CA, consumers use farmer's markets to augment their diet, unlike in rural and urban environments where a larger proportion of consumers use farmer's markets as a primary source of food (Feldmann 2015). Healthy food access becomes a major issue when these markets are not present in rural and urban settings. In the context of Concord, consumers have ample access to a variety of different types of foods from supermarkets and grocers, and have many options to procure healthy, nutritional food. Suburban consumers hold similar values and motivations with rural and urban populations, though family experience appears to be the unique identifier that sets suburban populations apart.

Defining "local food"

From a consumer stand point, "local food" can have many definitions, depending on the perspective of the consumer. From a producer's stand point, it could be defined in terms a certain number of miles that food must travel to reach the consumer. By documenting consumer perspectives, researchers can determine the willingness of consumers to buy "local food", whether it be shipped from an adjacent county, from a certain region, or within a state or country. Most respondents (71%) define local food as being produced within an adjacent county, or in the Bay Area. Of the respondents that defined "local food" as being produced within the Bay Area, those who highly value local food were more likely to shop at farmer's markets knowing that food provided at these places is shipped from nearby regions (Selfa, 2004). Understanding consumer perceptions of "local food" provides a framework for determining the value consumers place in having their food delivered locally, and is important when analyzing consumer behavior.

Determining Consumer Values

Freshness, taste, and nutritional value were most important to suburban consumers when buying food from farmer's markets, reflecting the same values farmer's markets advertise for their products. This holds consistent across other studies of consumer values, in which the quality of food, taste, and nutritional value were rated far higher than any other values (Brown, 2003). All other values ranged between 28% and 36%, with the lowest being organically grown and appearance. Fewer respondents rated organic production as an important quality when buying food, perhaps reflecting the fact that organic products also have large industrialized production methods, and are widely distributed in supermarket chains. A survey of 500 people from Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri and Wisconsin, found consumers preferred locally labeled food (48%) over organically labelled food (25%) (Berlin, 2009). These findings suggests a key distinction in preference for consumers from large organic industries to local alternatives. Overall, the values respondents found important in Concord are consistent with studies across the United States in rural and urban areas.

Why shop at Farmer's Markets?

The motivation behind consumer food choice is a primary factor in consumer behavior in Concord. Better quality food, healthy food, and family experience were the most important motivations in which consumers visit and buy from farmer's markets (Figure 5). Better quality food and healthy food were consistent with these consumer values, and are similar to the findings of rural and urban studies (Feldmann 2015). Family experience however, is significant to this suburban environment. Thirty-nine percent of respondents rated family experience as an important motivation for going to the farmer's market. This is unique to suburban areas relative to other areas, as family consumers predominate in these areas. It is well established from previous studies that farmer's markets benefit the community, though community benefits are not rated as a primary motivation for visiting the farmer's markets in urban and rural areas. It is possible that farmer's markets in suburban areas cater to family oriented customers by providing music, an open area, play spots, and treats for kids to enjoy. Suburban consumers may enjoy experience oriented trips when buying food, preferring the experience of a farmer's market over a grocery store visit. Family

experience was not rated significantly higher than other motivations, but this trend serves as a possible indicator that a family oriented experience is relatively important in a suburban community.

Limitations and Future Directions

Before applying the conclusions of this study to describe other suburban areas, the limitations of this study should be taken into account. The sample size of this study was relatively small, and so comparisons among demographic variables yielded no statistically significant results. A large percentage of respondents were white, and tended to be much older in age, skewing the demographics. Also, surveys were done in a relatively short period of time, and answers may not accurately reflect each respondent's true values or motives. Only one farmer's market was used to survey customers, and thus only reflects the attitudes and beliefs of customers who frequent the TSP farmer's market. Surveys were conducted before the summer season, so other farmer's markets were not open during this time to be surveyed.

Further study and research would need to be conducted to accurately determine values and motives driving consumers to buy from suburban farmer's markets. Visiting more farmer's markets, surveying additional customers, and conducting more in depth interviews of individuals instead of 3 minute surveys would generate more accurate depictions of consumer behavior in suburban environments. Consumer behavior is by nature unpredictable, and surveying different areas could yield very different results. However, it is clear there is a connection between suburban environments, and urban/rural ones as quality of food remains a constant among studies done across the U.S as the primary motivation for buying food from farmer's markets. Suburban environments may cater more to family experience, and more research would need to be done to distinguish this motivation from other consumer values.

Conclusion

The alternative food movement has had a significant impact on changing the food system over the past few decades. Farmer's markets have emerged as the primary force for spurring growth of local community agriculture. Understanding consumer behavior, and what customers

want out of their farmer's markets will allow local farmers and vendors to continue to cater towards local populations and support the values that customers want when buying food. Better quality food succeeds in being the primary reason why customers buy alternative foods, though there are several underlying reasons consumers also find important when purchasing food. Family experience is an interesting trend that should be further researched in suburban environments, and is possibly an important distinction from rural and urban environments. The alternative food movement will continue to grow as access to information continues to increase, and consumers continue to shift their buying preferences from industrialized food supermarkets to local, regional alternatives.

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