Bolster Sales with Consumer-Informed Marketing



Heidi Blanck & Jessica Ruiz, ASAP's Local Food Research Center
Holly Whitesides - Against the Grain

February 28, 2026

SARE
Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education

Mentimeter

Scan the QR code or visit www.mentimeter.com and enter the code: 8457 5768

Where are you traveling from today?

Question:
What is the percentage of WNC consumers that shop for local food at least once a month?

Background: ASAP's Theory of Change

Changing the food system requires broad and active participation. Through participation, people create food systems that align with their values. Being part of the local food system -

- Offers multiple, broad benefits beyond just preserving farmland
    - local economy, economy, cultural heritage, resilience, community health, food security
- **AND** engages more people in the solution. People with different values could join the movement for different reasons. Easy to participate.

ASAP supports farmers and also works to create opportunities to engage people with local food and farms in meaningful ways so that they can better participate. These experiences help to:

- heighten citizen awareness & understanding of food and agricultural issues
- awaken an interest in local food & agriculture
- encourage them to take actions that support the food system they want to see

Local Food Research Center (LFRC)

Established in 2011 to study the effects of food system localization on the community, economy, and environment.

Primary Roles:

- Conduct research on factors involved in building a thriving, local food system
- Assess the impact of our work - systems change, programs, and practices
  - Informs the development of ASAP's models (community-adaptive) partnerships & strategies
  - Understand changing trends, factors & consumer values
  - Disseminates findings to the public and best practices to farmers, market managers, food businesses, and schools

WNC Consumer Research

Research project funded by a 3-year USDA SARE grant (2023-2026)

Goal: to examine and improve the feedback loop between consumer values and farmers marketing strategies in WNC

1) What do consumers value? And how do consumers engage with educational and promotional resources?

2) How do farmers communicate their values and offerings?

Objective: Assess what drives WNC consumer demand for local food

SARE Consumer survey – “How do you shop for food?”

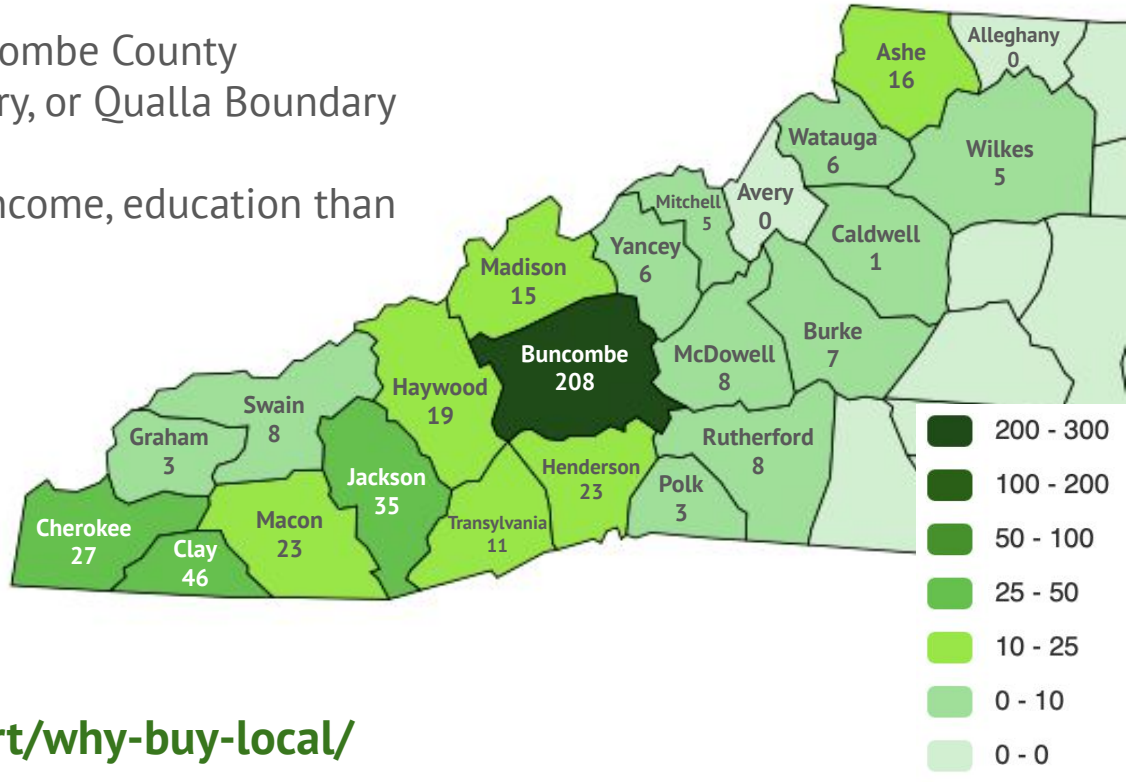
- >Online Survey; April to Oct. 2024
- Total responses: 553
- Goals: to get feedback representative of the community geographically, demographically; assess those who regularly buy local food (at least monthly) and “typical” food shoppers
- Report for the public, farmers, support providers (extension agents)

Client Survey Demographics

- **43%** of respondents lived in Buncombe County
  No responses from Alleghany, Avery, or Qualla Boundary

  Slightly older (>45-74y), greater income, education than census

- Length of residence in WNC:
  - Less than 1 year: 4%
  - **1 to 5 years: 24%**
  - 6 to 10 years: 16%
  - 11 to 20 years: 17%
  - **More than 20 years: 25%**
  - My entire life: 13%



https://asapconnections.org/report/why-buy-local/

Local Food Shopping: Priorities and Barriers

Interest in Buying More Local Food

87% of respondents shopped for local food once a month

61% of local food consumers purchase from farmers markets, whereas only 15% of typical shoppers purchase there - however:

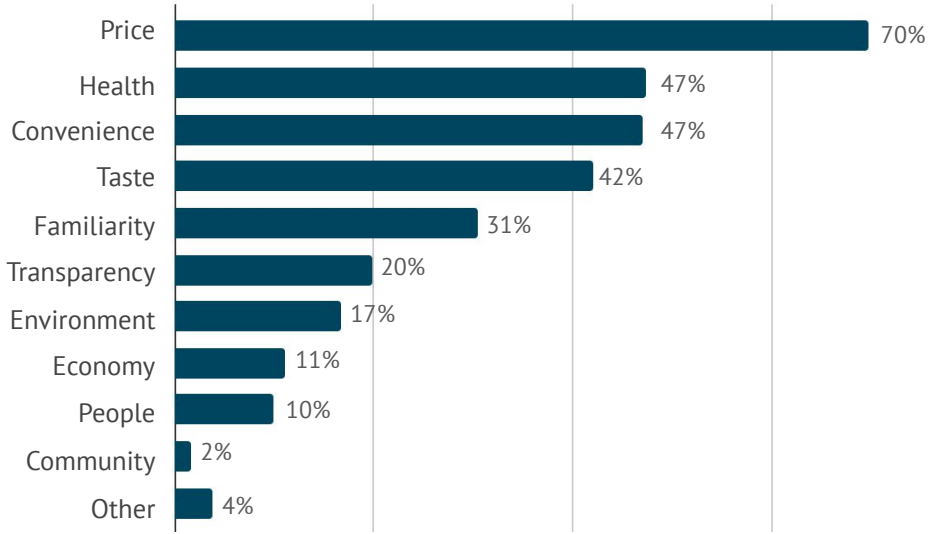
- **74%** of typical food shoppers **want to buy local food**
- **87%** of local food shoppers **want to buy more local food**

Top Considerations When Buying More Local Food

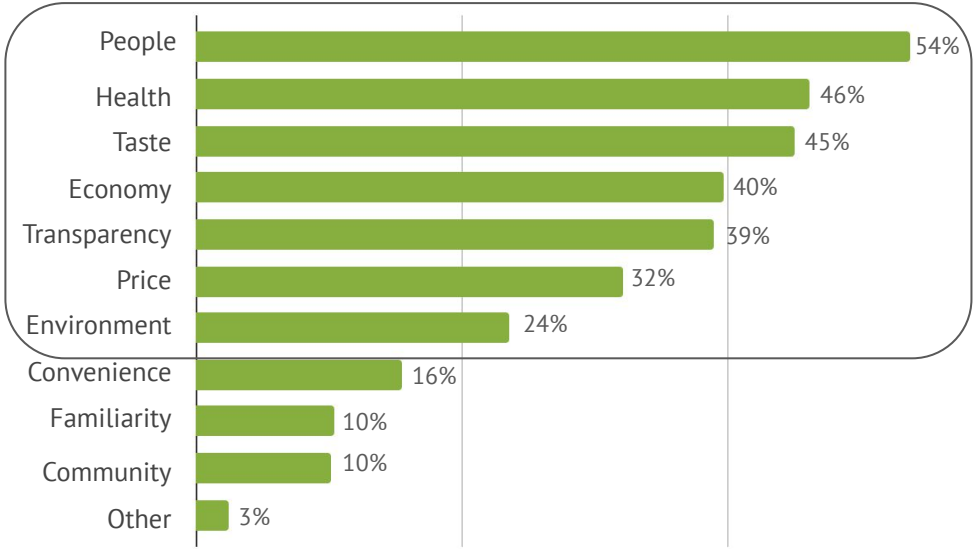
We asked customers to select their top 3 priorities when shopping for local food. **Rank the top 6 priorities in the order you believe local food shoppers ranked them**.

- Economy: supporting farm businesses
- *Health: improving my household's health and well-being*
- People: connecting with and supporting farmers/farm workers
- *Price: the food is reasonably priced/affordable*
- Taste: the food has a good flavor/tastes good
- *Transparency: knowing where and how my food was grown*

Considerations when buying food



Top considerations when purchasing **non-local** food



Top considerations when purchasing **local** food

Asap

Nationally, Knowing Where Food Comes, IFIC 2025

Six in ten Americans say it is important to know where their food comes from, up 8 points from 2017.

Knowing where their food comes from is followed by local availability (54%) and bioengineering (50%) as purchase factors. The importance of buying food produced with animal welfare in mind (-3%) and farming technologies that preserve natural resources (-3%) have declined since last year. Knowing the food's origin (+8%) and sharing values with the manufacturer (+5%) have grown in importance since 2017. The emphasis on recyclable packaging (-7%) has decreased the most since 2022.

Food Production-Related Purchase Decision Factors



IFIC, 2025 Survey of 3000 US Adults March-May, 2025

Other National Trends, IFIC 2025

Reminder in WNC - 39% said Transparency and 24% said Environment as Factors they Consider

In 2025, **59%** of Americans said it is very (22%) or somewhat important (37%) that their food is produced in an environmentally sustainable way, up from **53%** in 2021.

Source: The IFIC Food & Health Survey asked Americans how important it was that the food they purchase is produced in an environmentally sustainable (2018-2021) way.

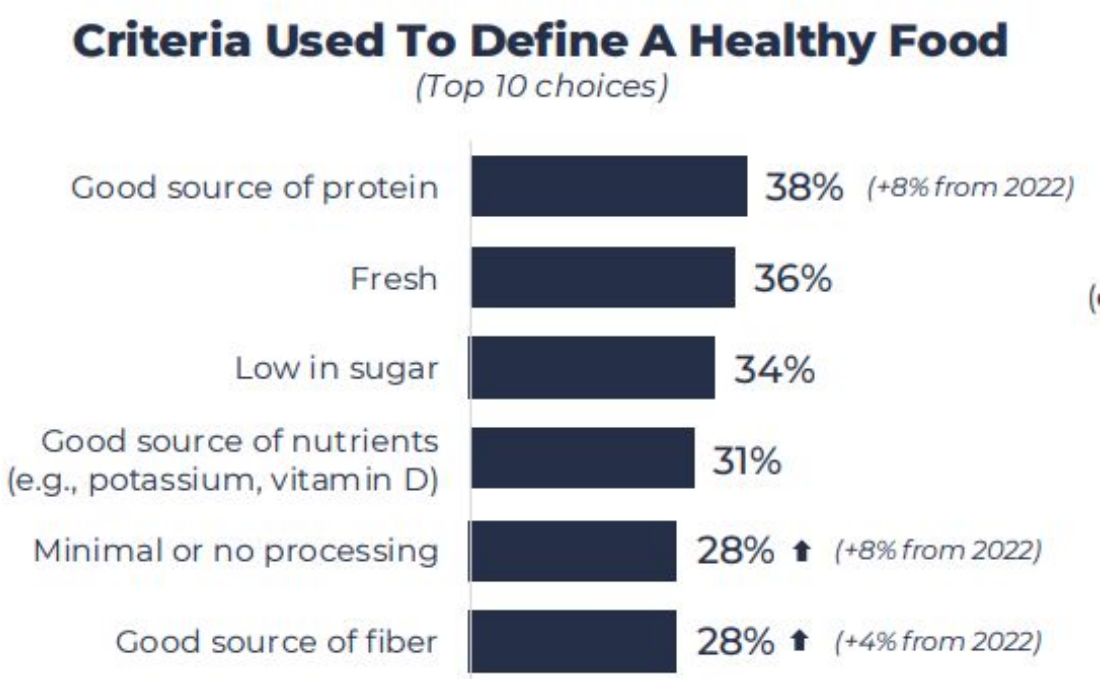
Key Takeaways/Recommendations

- Connection to people (supporting farmers) was the #1 reason consumers in WNC buy local
- In addition, recent national trends show people want to know information about where their food comes from & how the food is grown

  Recommendation:

  - *Connect with your customers on a personal level - tell your farm story, share what's important to you, build relationships*
  - *Share your farming practices, growing practices with consumers*

Nationally, Health & Wellness Continue to be Powerful Drivers of Fresh Food Purchases



SUGGESTED CITATION:
International Food Information Council. 2025 IFIC Food & Health Survey: The Full Report. January 2026. [https://ific.org/research/2025-food-health-survey]

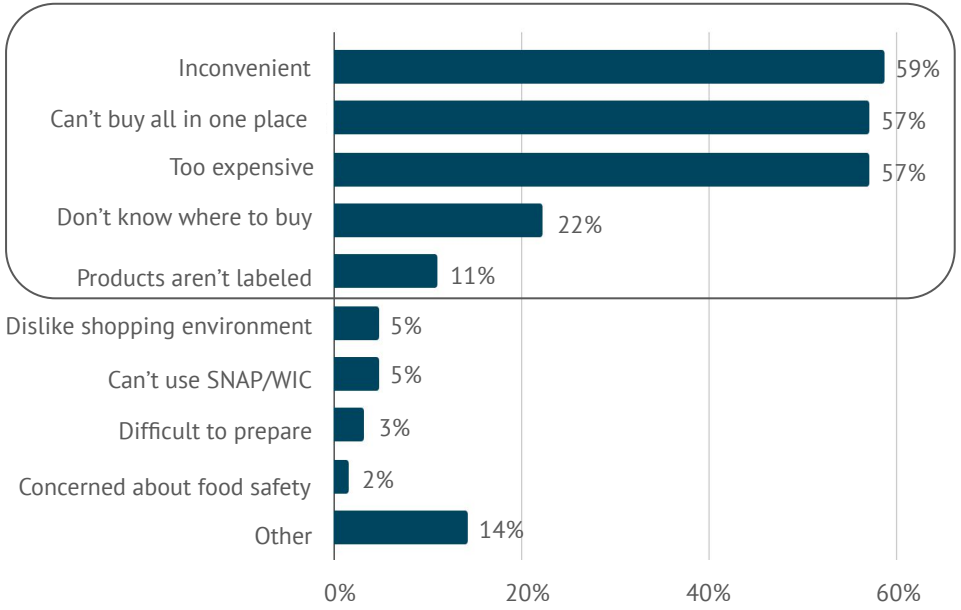
Key Takeaways/Recommendations

- Health, convenience, and taste were top priorities for all shoppers – in your engagements & marketing materials (newsletters, social media)

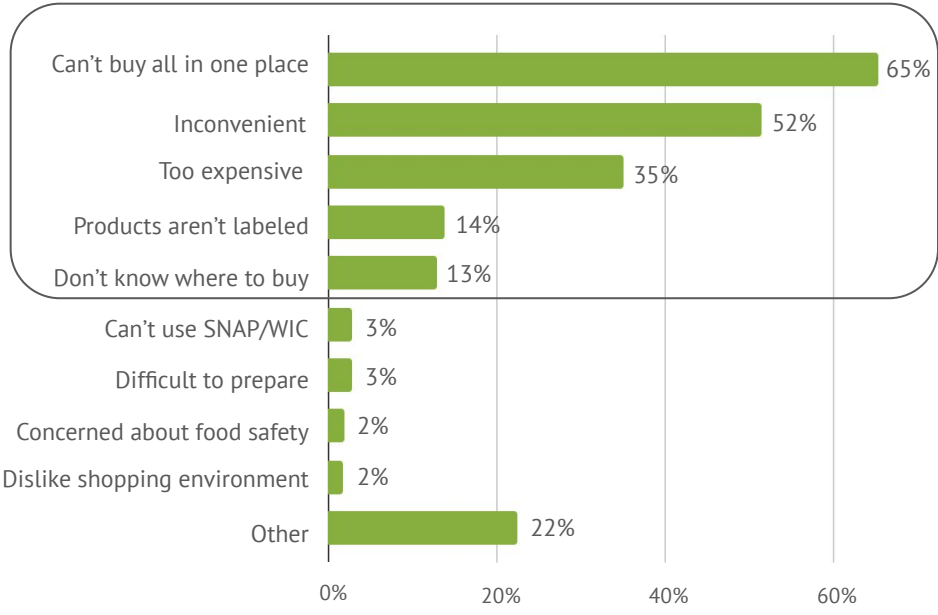
  Recommendation:

  - *Share recipes or cooking tips, offer taste tests, highlight flavors of your products*
  - *Highlight "healthy" aspects including freshness, low in added sugars and salt, good source of nutrients, low artificial ingredients, minimal processing*

WNC: Similar barriers reported on buying local



Typical food shoppers



Local food shoppers

Price & Labeling Audit

Why Buy Local Ancillary Study

Buncombe County, Fall 2025

Acknowledgement: Sunshyne Shirley
UNCA SARE R&E Student Intern

Jessica Ruiz

Asap
Local Food
Strong Farms
Healthy Communities

Objectives

Primary Objectives:

- Capture the price of key household food items found at farmers markets and their comparable item at retail stores
- Assess average price to determine if consumers' perception of prices being higher at the farmers market is accurate

Secondary Objective:

- Assess labeling practices by vendors (e.g. price, name/variety of product, growing practices)

Methods

Nutrition & Environment Measurement Survey (NEMS)

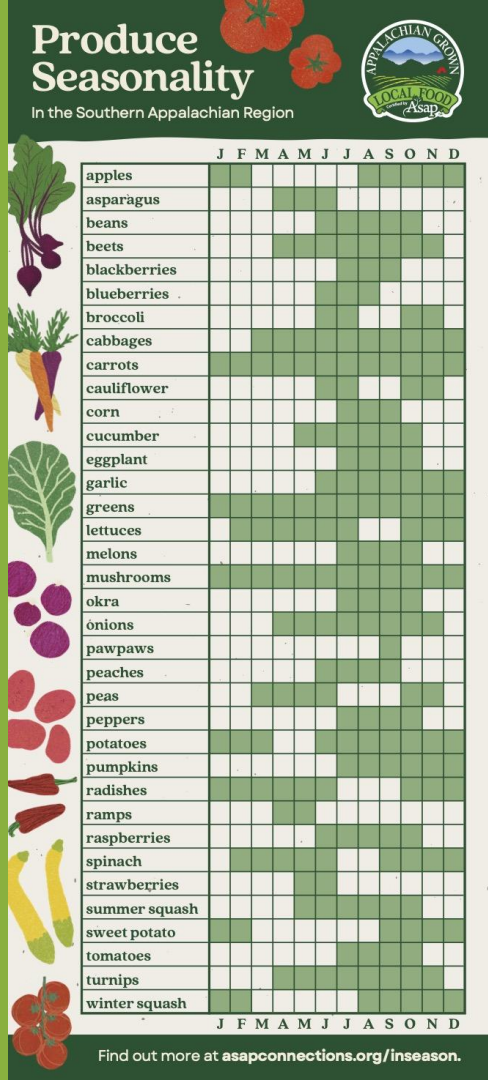
USDA Thrifty Food Basket Categories - item price recorded by unit

- **Typical household size chosen, additional units if provided (bulk discount, ex. apples priced per ¼ peck, ½ peck, peck vs by lb.)**
- **Regular item; no sale prices (common in grocery stores)**
- **Retail stores - chose comparable growing practices and/or labeled local**

Example:

Bell pepper, green; one piece $2 each

Bell pepper, green; small 5 oz green container of peppers, $3 a pound



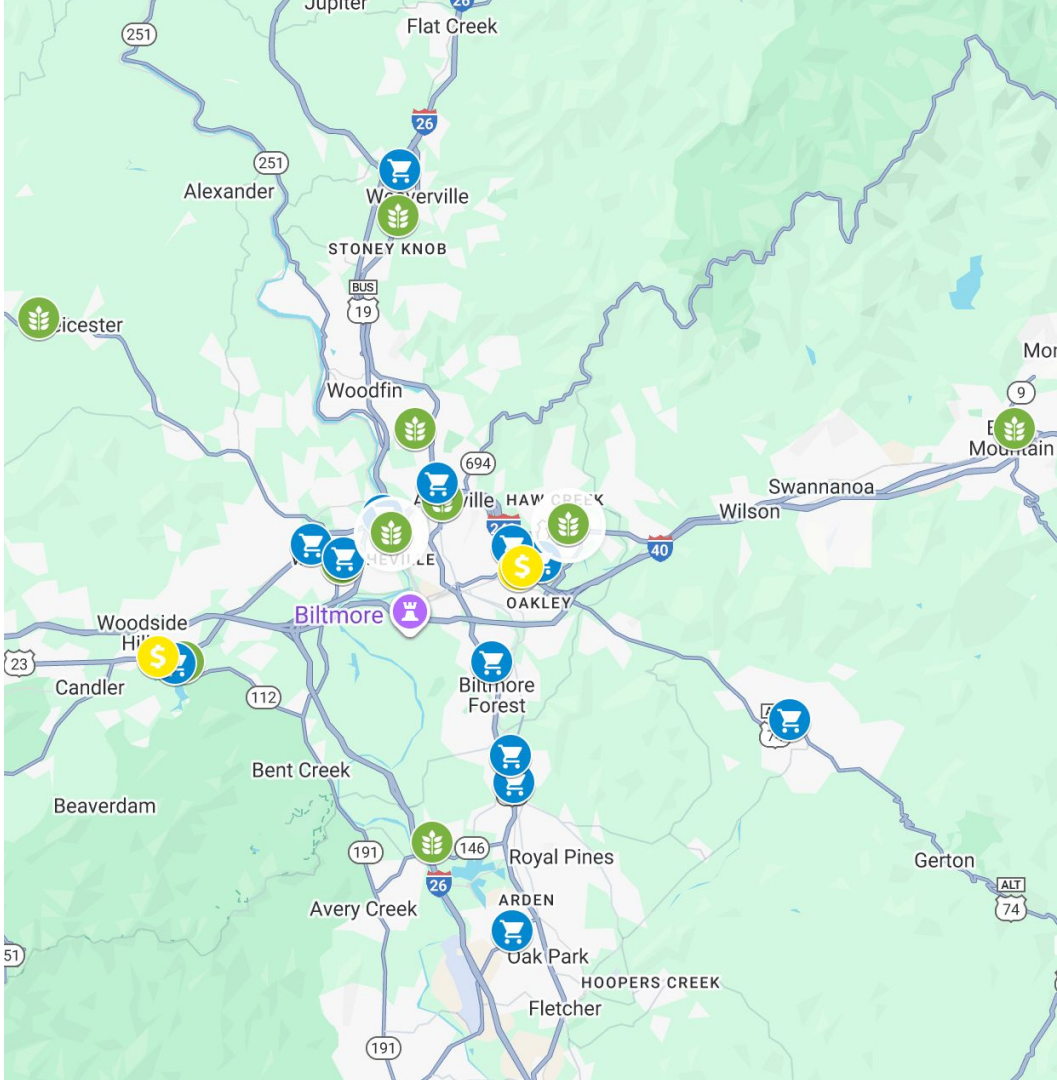
Buncombe County Food Audit Sites

- Sampled audit sites between Sept 23, 2025 and Oct 22, 2025:
  1) All Buncombe County Farmers Markets (*n*=10)
  2) Retail stores that sold food nearby the Farmers Markets (*n*=13), e.g. West Asheville Tailgate Market & West Asheville Ingles
- Retail store types:
  - Regular grocery (Ingles, Publix) + Trader Joes + natural food stores (Whole Foods, Earth Fare)
  - Supercenters (Walmart)

Stores and Markets

- ALDI (Patton Ave)
- ALDI (Swannanoa River Rd)
- Earth Fare
- Food Lion (Fairview)
- Ingles (Candler)
- Ingles (Hendersonville Rd)
- Ingles (West AVL)
- Publix (Weaverville)
- Publix (Hendersonville Rd)
- Trader Joe's
- Walmart (Arden)
- Walmart (Hendersonville Rd)
- Whole Foods (Tunnel Rd)

- Asheville City Market
- Black Mountain TM
- North Asheville TM
- West Asheville Tailgate Market
- Leicester Farmers Market
- RAD Farmers Market
- Weaverville Tailgate Market
- Biltmore Park Farmers Market
- Enka-Candler Tailgate Market
- East Asheville Tailgate Market
- Dollar General Market
- Dollar Tree
- Dollar General



Sample Data Collection Sheet

Date of Audit: _____/_____/_____ Auditor: _____ Venue: _____

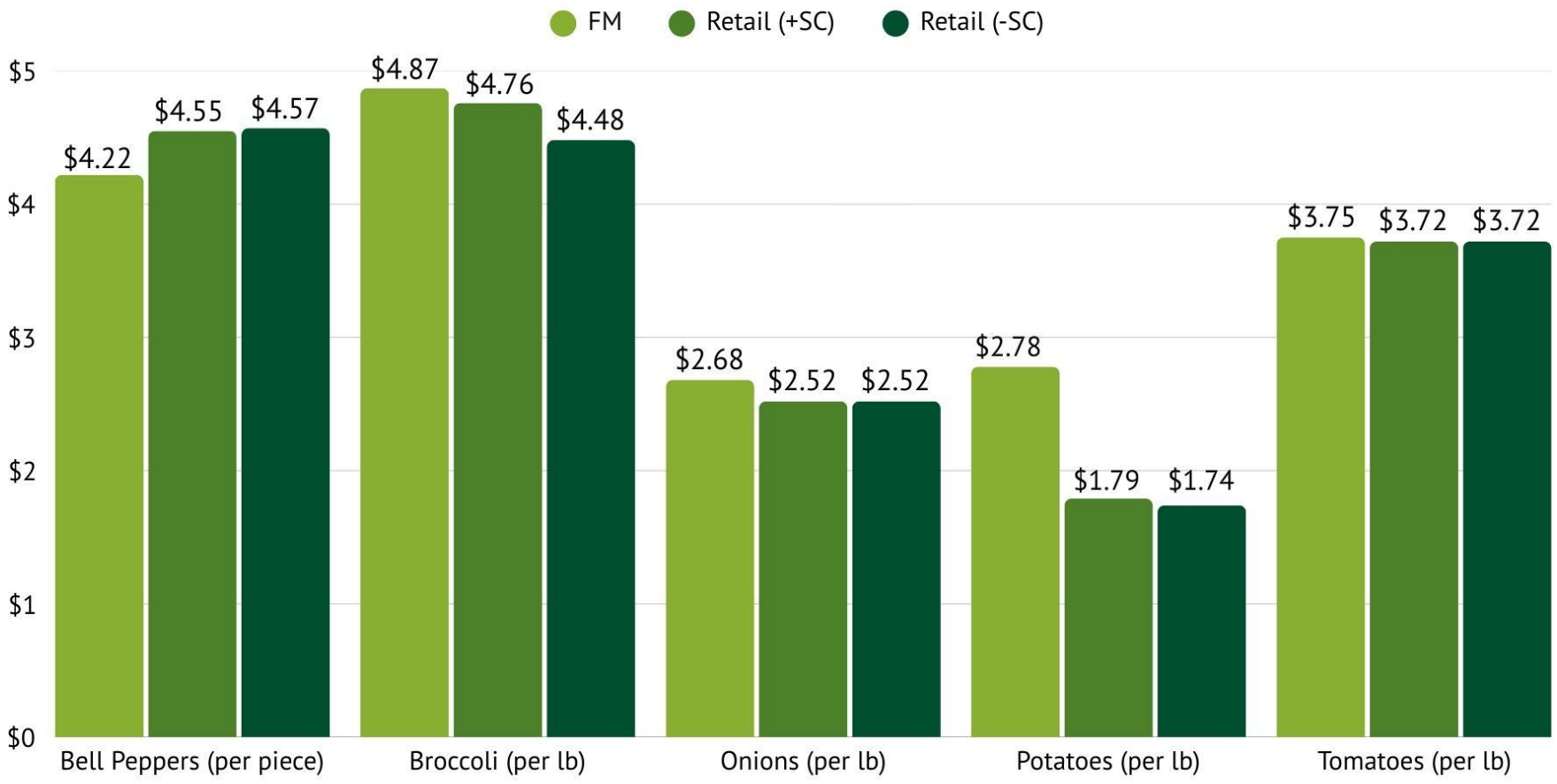
Physical Address/Location _____ Type of Food Store _____ # of Store Cash Registers _____

# of Food Vendors at Farmers Market _____

Fruits & Vegetables

Produce (Incl. Varietal Name)	Price and Unit Size	Vendor Name/ Supplier	Growing Practice(s)	Growing practices clearly listed?	Product name clearly listed?	Prices clearly listed?	Notes
Apples Variety: _____ Variety: _____	$. per _____ $. per _____			___ Yes ___ No ___ Yes ___ No	___ Yes ___ No ___ Yes ___ No	___ Yes ___ No ___ Yes ___ No	
Apples Variety: _____ Variety: _____	$. per _____ $. per _____			___ Yes ___ No ___ Yes ___ No	___ Yes ___ No ___ Yes ___ No	___ Yes ___ No ___ Yes ___ No	
Bell Peppers	$. per _____			___ Yes ___ No	___ Yes ___ No	___ Yes ___ No	
Bell Peppers	$. per _____			___ Yes ___ No	___ Yes ___ No	___ Yes ___ No	
Broccoli	$. per _____			___ Yes ___ No	___ Yes ___ No	___ Yes ___ No	
Broccoli	$. per _____			___ Yes ___ No	___ Yes ___ No	___ Yes ___ No	

Results


FM
Retail (+SC)
Retail (-SC)
$5
$4
$3
$2
$1
$0
$4.22
$4.55
$4.57
$4.87
$4.76
$4.48
$2.68
$2.52
$2.52
$2.78
$1.79
$1.74
$3.75
$3.72
$3.72
Bell Peppers (per piece)
Broccoli (per lb)
Onions (per lb)
Potatoes (per lb)
Tomatoes (per lb)

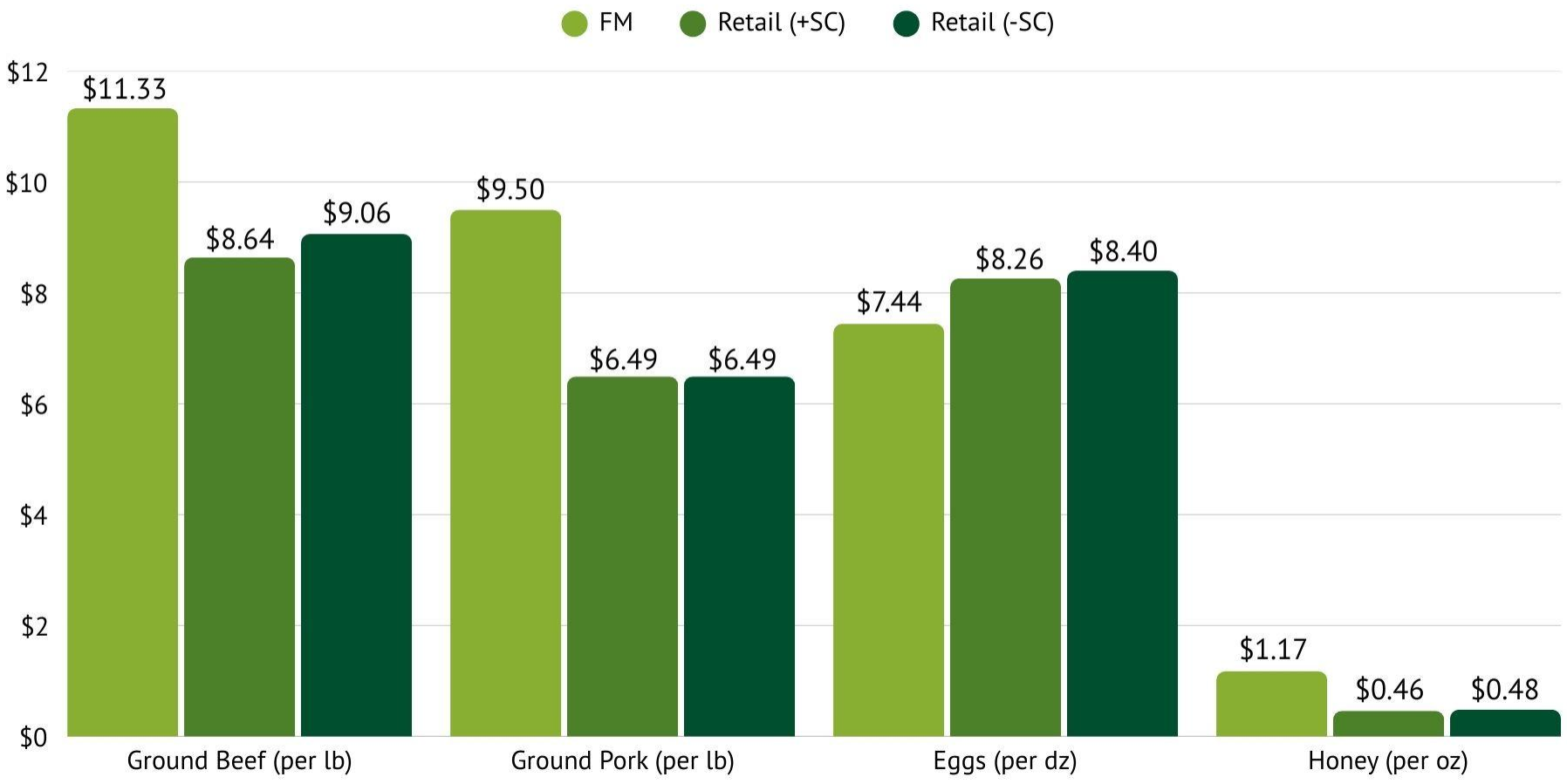
Results



Although farmers market apples were slightly more expensive on average, they are an example of how you can get a bulk discount at a farmers market.

- Prices from example farmers market vendor:
  - $8 per 1/4 peck
  - $15 per 1/2 peck
  - $20 per peck
  - $3.50 per pound
- 1/4 peck of Fujis weighed 4.39 pounds
  - Bag of Fujis would cost approximately $15 if priced by pound, but customer only paid $8
- Peck of another variety of apples weighed 8.5 pounds
  - Would have cost $30 if priced by pound, only cost $20

Results


FM
Retail (+SC)
Retail (-SC)
$12
$10
$8
$6
$4
$2
$0
$11.33
$8.64
$9.06
$9.50
$6.49
$6.49
$7.44
$8.26
$8.40
$1.17
$0.46
$0.48
Ground Beef (per lb)
Ground Pork (per lb)
Eggs (per dz)
Honey (per oz)

Secondary Analysis: Labeling

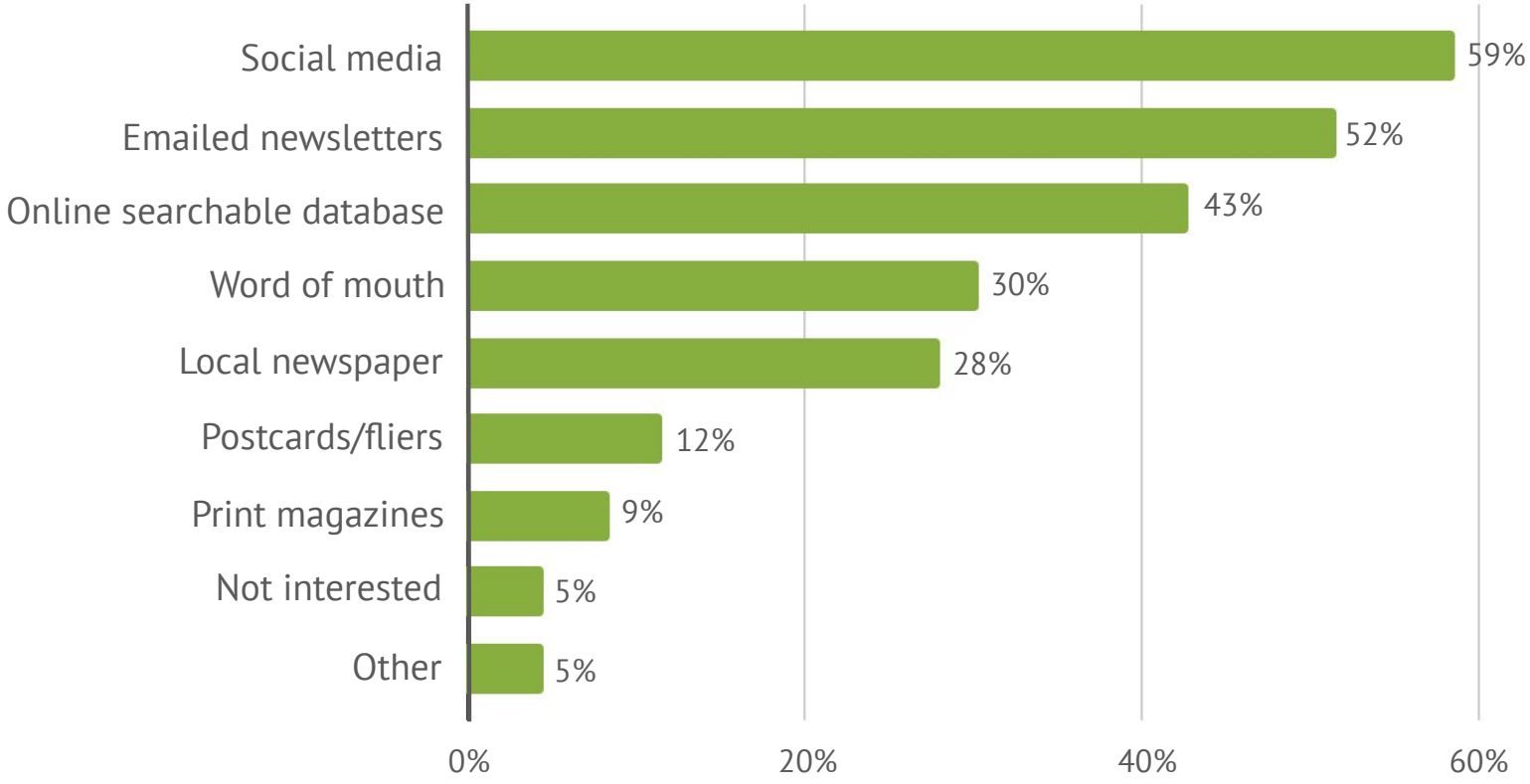
	Farmers Market	Retail
Price Listed		
Product Name/Variety Listed		
Growing Practices Listed		

Key Takeaways/Recommendations

- *For consumers:*
  - Fairly comparable prices for most products (exception of meats), however, other values that the consumer is connecting with by purchasing local food from farmers/producers
- *For farmers/farmers market managers:*
  - Even more important for market signage, farm history & story, connections with consumers, and product labeling (varietal names, price, growing practices)

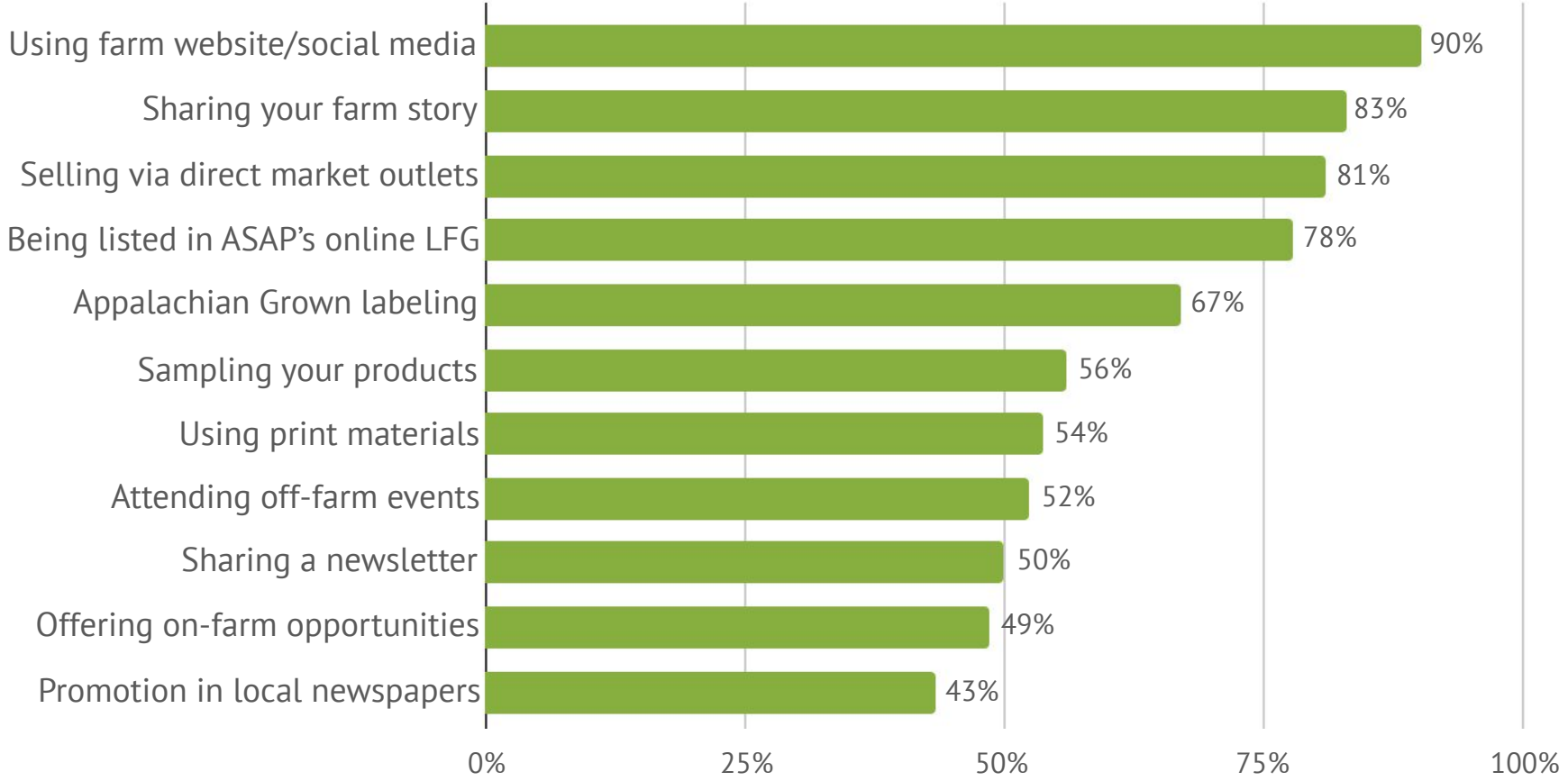
Where are Local Food Shoppers Getting Information?

Why Buy Local: Where are Consumers Getting Local Food Information?



Q: Please rate the usefulness of the following strategies for finding and building relationships with individual customers in 2025.

	Very useful	Somewhat useful	Not at all useful	N/A, I didn't use this strategy
Selling through direct market outlets (farmers markets, CSA pick ups, farm stands) (*n*=252)	66.67% n=168	16.27% n=41	1.59% n=4	15.48% n=39
Using farm website and/or social media (*n*=253)	58.10% n=147	32.02% n=81	2.37% n=6	7.51% n=19
Sharing your farm story (*n*=253)	44.66% n=113	36.36% n=92	1.19% n=3	17.79% n=45
Sampling your products (*n*=250)	32.00% n=80	24.00% n=60	2.00% n=5	42.00% n=105
Offering on-farm opportunities (u-pick, farm tours, lodging, events, etc.) (*n*=253)	28.46% n=72	20.16% n=51	2.37% n=6	49.01% n=124
Labeling your products as Appalachian Grown (*n*=252)	44.66% n=68	40.08% n=101	5.56% n=14	27.38% n=69
Being listed in the online Local Food Guide (*n*=252)	22.22% n=56	55.56% n=140	11.90% n=30	10.32% n=26



Percentage of AG farmers who found the following strategies "very" or "somewhat useful" (2025 Appalachian Grown Producer survey)

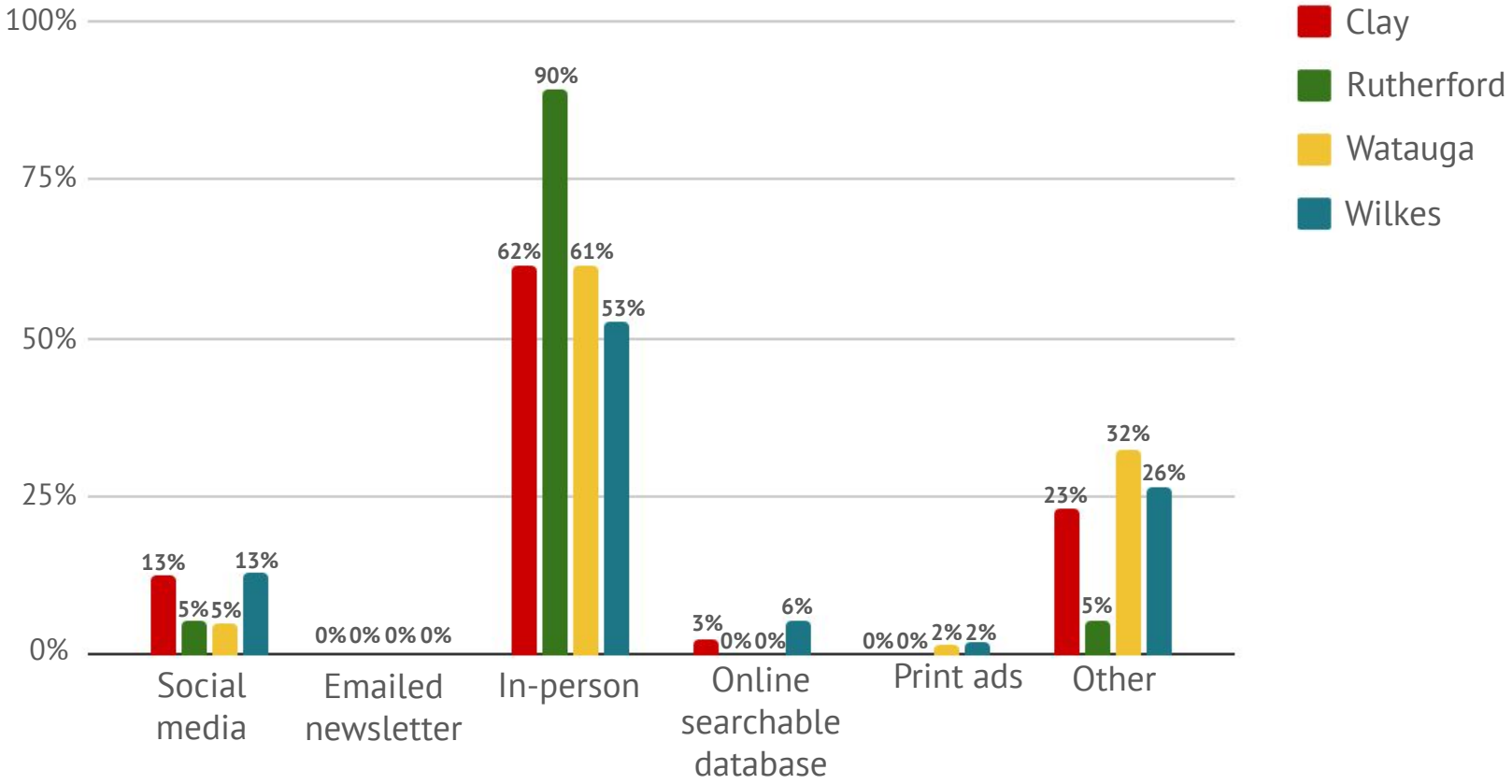
Direct Marketing Strategies

SARE Objective 2:

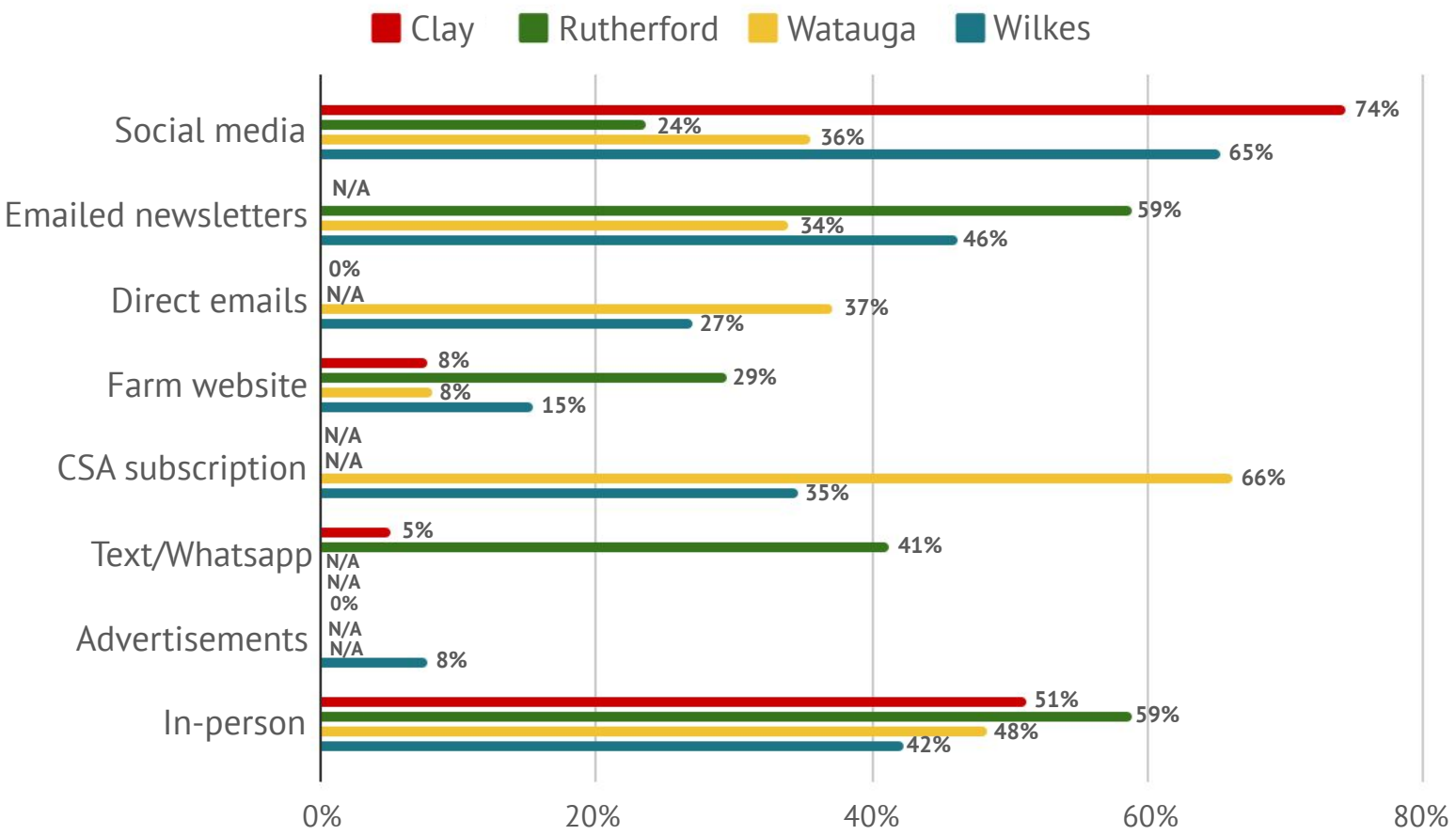
- Assess farmers' direct marketing strategies
- Assess and adapt education materials and create resources to share best practices

- Four partner farms in WNC (Clay, Rutherford, Watauga, and Wilkes Counties)
  - Variety of market outlets (farmers markets, CSAs, farm stands, food hubs, restaurants, etc.)
  - Customized marketing surveys distributed to their customer bases

Results



Responses to "How did you first hear about X Farm?"



Responses to "What types of communication do you receive from X Farm?"

“Their holistic and organic practices, personal relationship with the owners and workers, hard-working, honest and kind people - **[I] want to support them and our community**. I want to eat well, fresh and local. They provide that at the market and to restaurants in the area.” **-** *ATG customer*

“We feel buying from [them] gives us a **better relationship and understanding of where our meat is coming from.** [The farm] **fosters a sense of community** with those who also purchase from them and with the owners and their family.” - *Rutherford Co. farm customer*

“The connections I've made with the wonderful growers and the…**authentic presentation and wholesomeness of the farmers** is what enticed me. Also, I truly believe it is the **best produce I've ever tasted**.” **-** *Wilkes Co. farm customer*

Select responses to “Why do you buy from this farm instead of, or in addition to, other farms?”

Mentimeter

Scan the QR code or visit www.mentimeter.com and enter the code: 8457 5768

Holly Whitesides
Against the Grain Farm



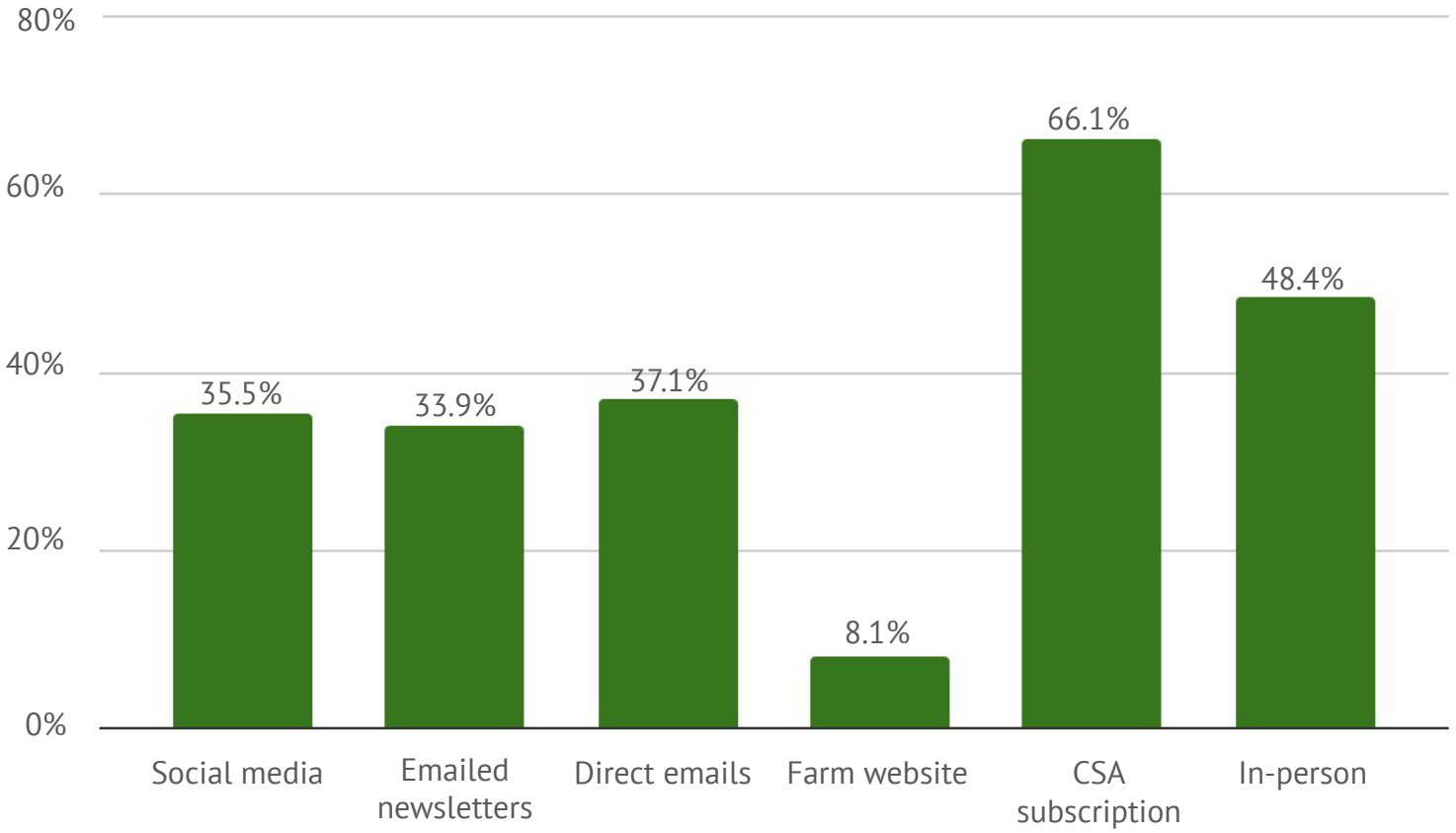


Market Channels

- Restaurants
- *Farmers Market*
- *CSA*
- Regional Food Hubs



Communication with Customers



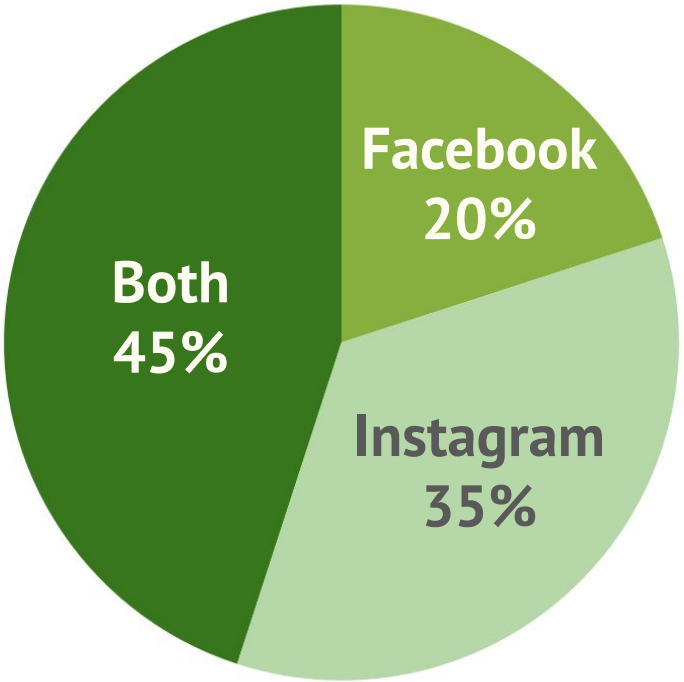
What types of communication do you receive from Against the Grain?

Decisions we made

- Lean more into regular newsletters
  - ASAP newsletter workshop
- Be more intentional with social media
  - Will share specifics next
- Resources for sending better emails
  - Growing for Market podcast
- Don’t spend a lot of time on the website

Social Media

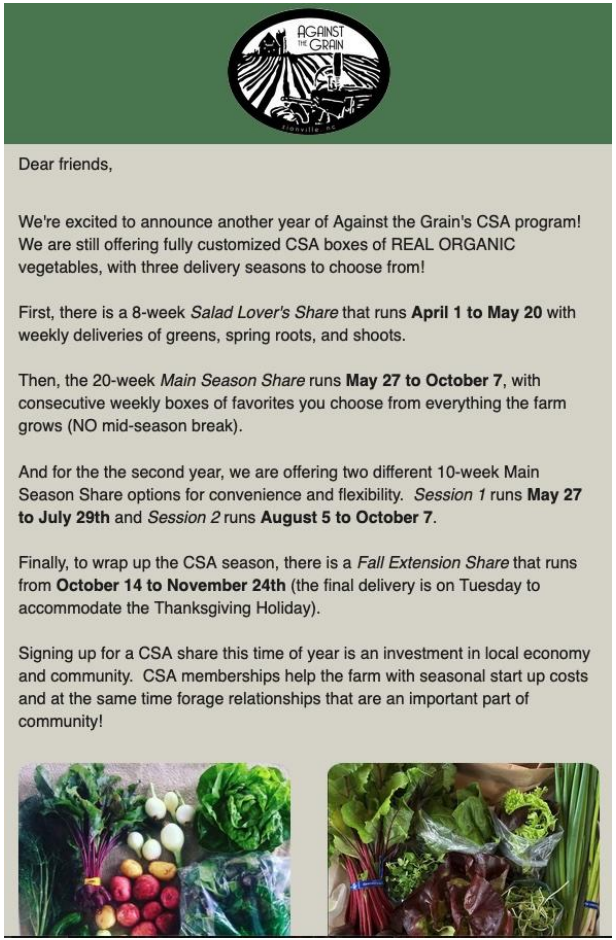
- SOP kept in shared drive
- Gives context for “voice”
- Whole team “what’s app” thread for photos and story ideas
- Three posts per week at 1pm
  - live posts & scheduled on buffer
- Check in about social media in management team meetings



What social media platform(s) do you use to find information about Against the Grain?

CSA Week IG Campaign





Dear friends,

We're excited to announce another year of Against the Grain's CSA program! We are still offering fully customized CSA boxes of REAL ORGANIC vegetables, with three delivery seasons to choose from!

First, there is a 8-week *Salad Lover's Share* that runs **April 1 to May 20** with weekly deliveries of greens, spring roots, and shoots.

Then, the 20-week *Main Season Share* runs **May 27 to October 7**, with consecutive weekly boxes of favorites you choose from everything the farm grows (NO mid-season break).

And for the the second year, we are offering two different 10-week Main Season Share options for convenience and flexibility. *Session 1* runs **May 27 to July 29th** and *Session 2* runs **August 5 to October 7**.

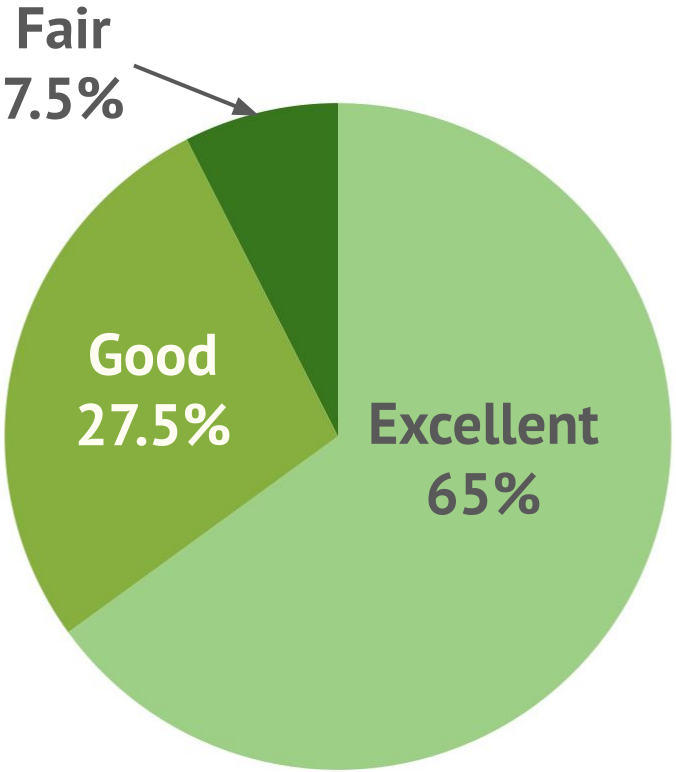
Finally, to wrap up the CSA season, there is a *Fall Extension Share* that runs from **October 14 to November 24th** (the final delivery is on Tuesday to accommodate the Thanksgiving Holiday).

Signing up for a CSA share this time of year is an investment in local economy and community. CSA memberships help the farm with seasonal start up costs and at the same time forage relationships that are an important part of community!

Newsletters

- Color palette - coolors.com
- Mailchimp
- Auto posts on IG
- Goal in 2026: send bi-monthly
- Standard format
  - Updates from farm
  - Stories or highlights
  - recipes

CSA



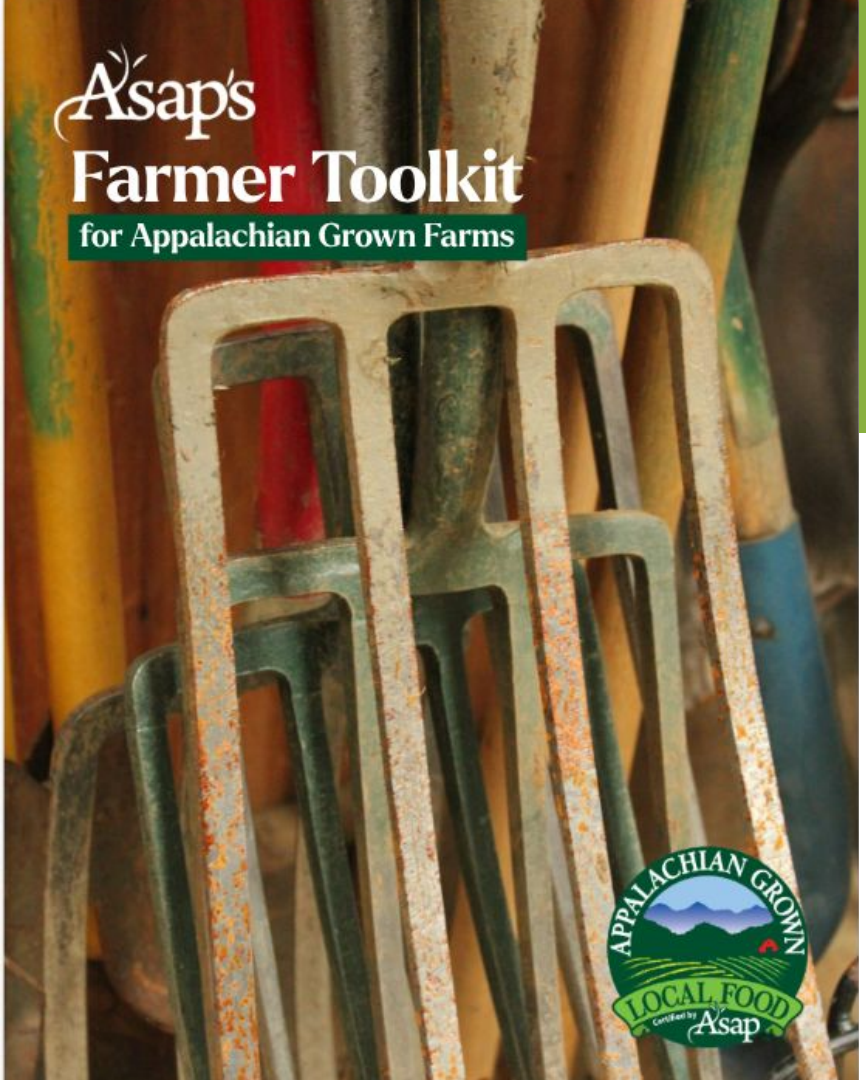
How would you rate your experience with [Against the Grain's] CSA website/software?

- On average, survey respondents have been CSA members for **3 years** (ranging from this being their first year to over a decade)
- 92.5% rated their experience with our CSA software, CSAWare, as **excellent** or **good**.
- The **freshness/quality/ taste** of the produce was listed as the favorite part of their CSA membership by 48.7% of respondents
- 33.3% said that **being able to customize their share** was their favorite part of their CSA membership

CSA Ware







https://asapconnections.org/farmer-resources/toolkit/

Branding and Marketing

- Marketing Your Farm
- Storytelling Toolkit
- Developing Your Farm Brand
- Social Media Guide for Farmers
- Press Releases: Guidelines and Template
- Photography Tips for the Farm
- Working with a Graphic Designer
- Making the Most of Your *Local Food Guide* Listing


Asap
Local Food
Strong Farms
Healthy Communities
Questions? Thank you!

Where are customers shopping?

