Connecting with Customers' Values

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SARE
Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education

Consumer Research Background

ASAP research project funded by a 3 year USDA SARE grant

- Goal: to examine and improve the feedback loop between consumer values and farmer's marketing strategies in WNC
  - What do consumers value?
  - How do consumers engage with educational and promotional resources?
  - How do farmers communicate their values and offerings?
  - How can ASAP improve our resources to reduce barriers and improve farmer/consumer connections?

Research Objective 1:
Assess what drives consumer demand for local food

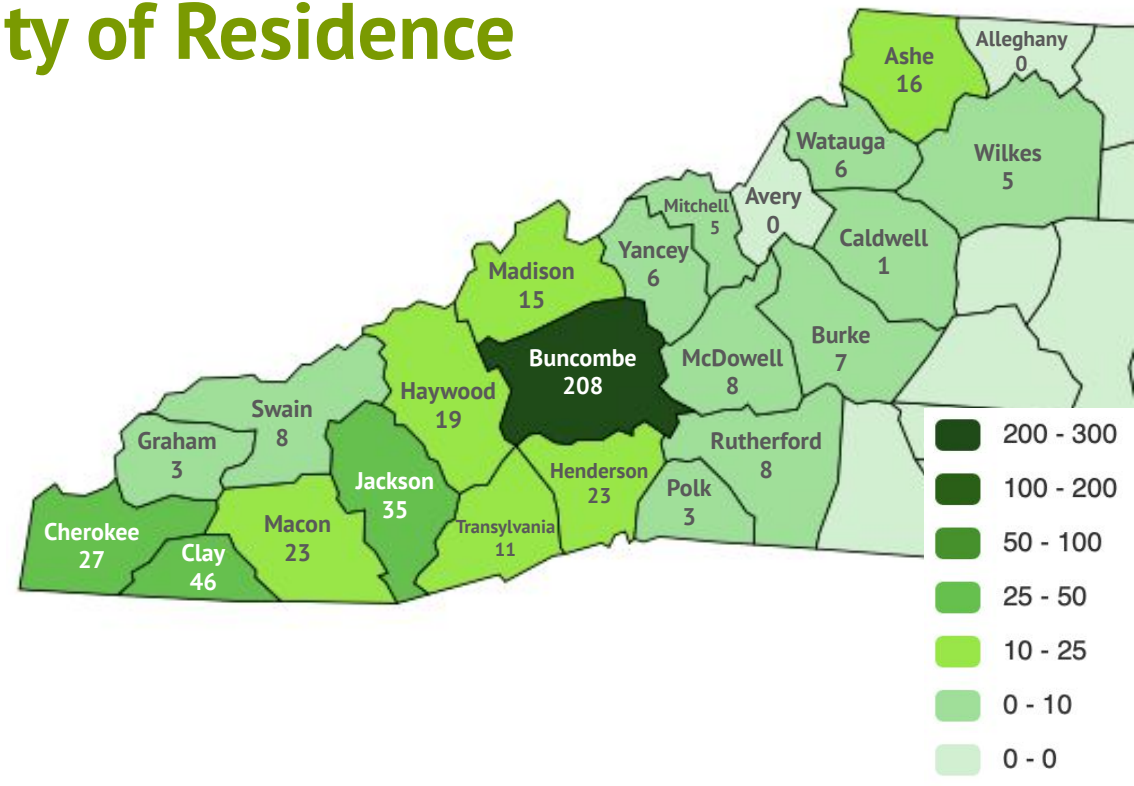
- A consumer survey, "How do you shop for food?" ran from April to October 2024
  - Disseminated widely
  - Closed early due to Hurricane Helene
  - Total responses: **553**
  - Goals: to get feedback representative of the community (geographically, demographically, mix of folks who regularly buy local and more "typical" shoppers)

Demographics

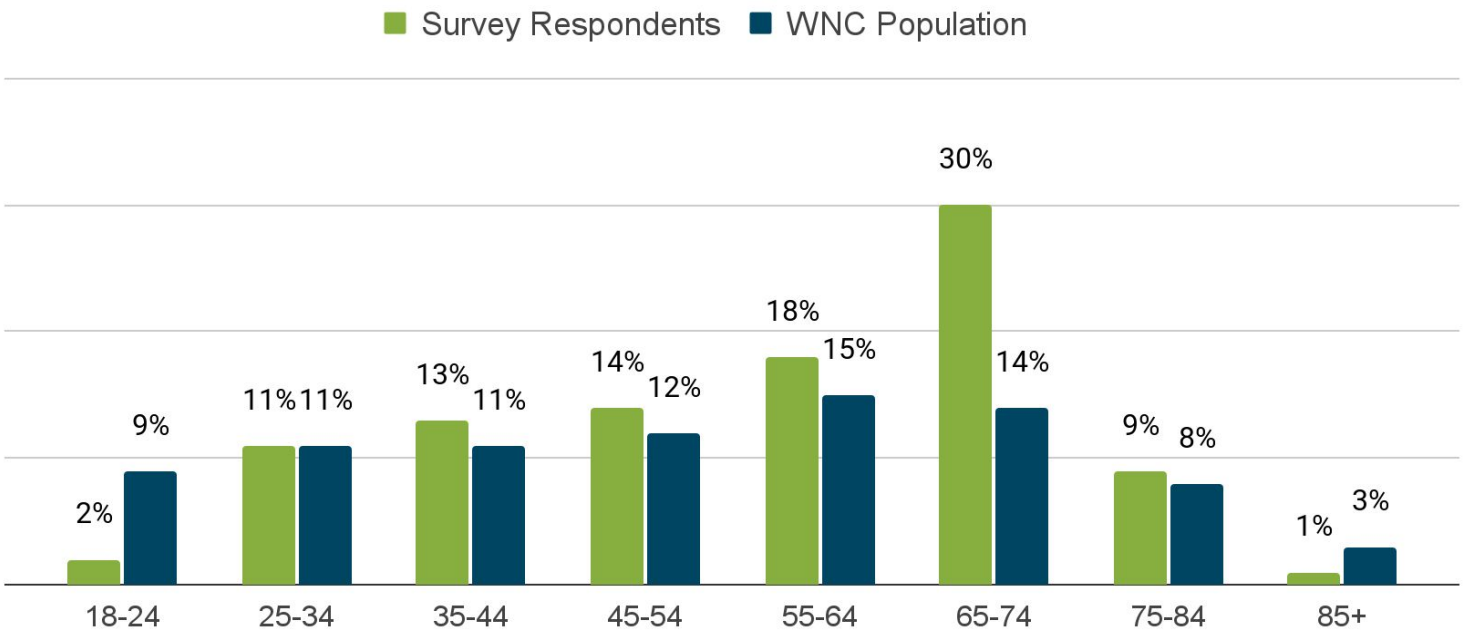
Demographics
County of Residence

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

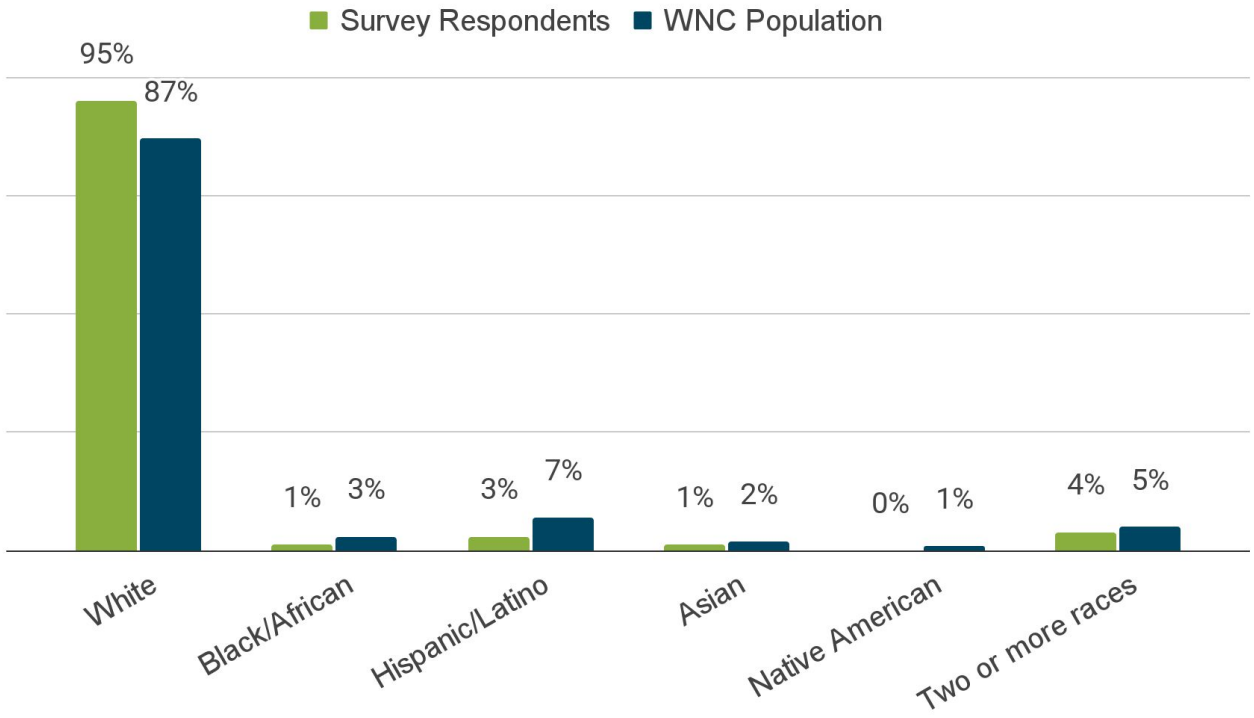
- Length of residence in WNC:
  - Less than 1 year: 4%
  - **1 to 5 years: 24%**
  - 6 to 10 years: 16%
  - 11 to 20 years: 17%
  - **More than 20 years: 25%**
  - My entire life: 13%



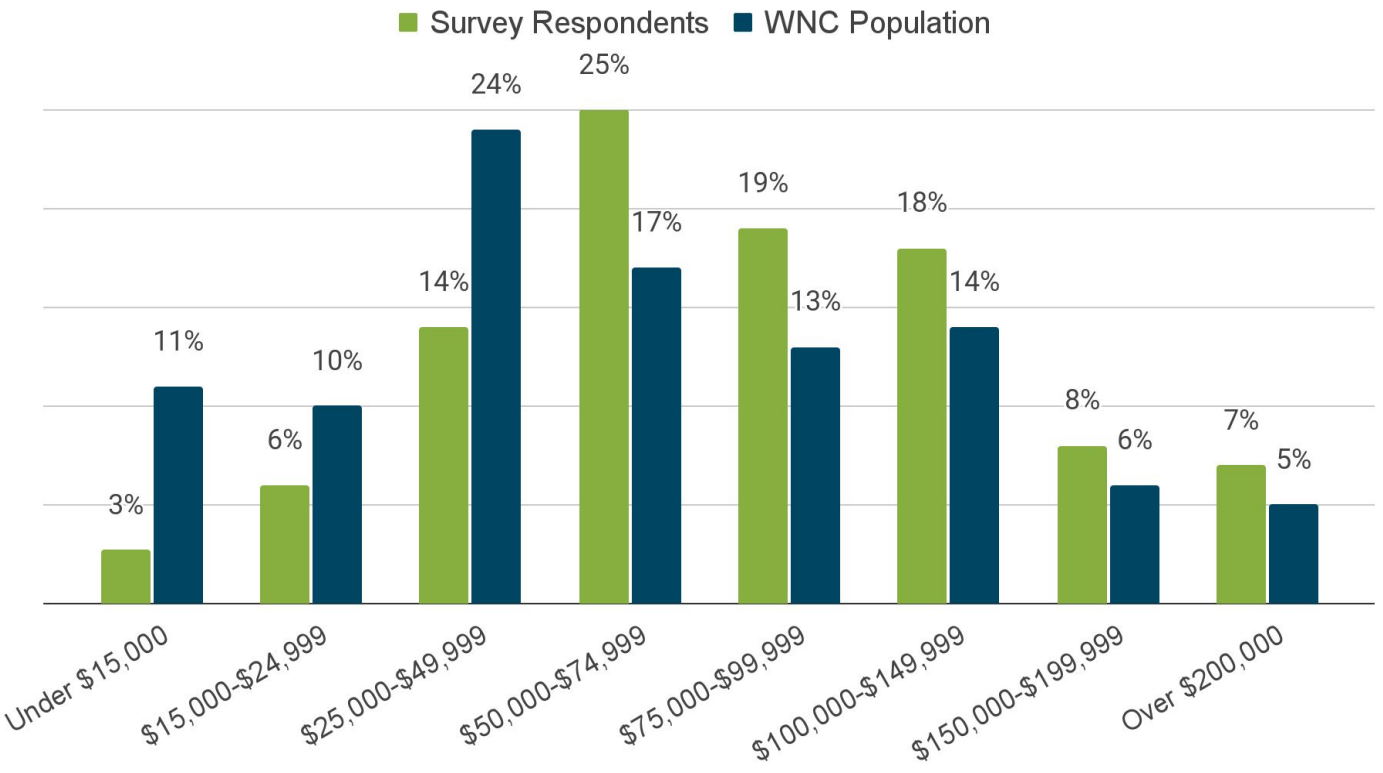
Age


Survey Respondents
WNC Population
2%
9%
11%
11%
13%
11%
14%
12%
18%
15%
30%
14%
9%
8%
1%
3%
18-24
25-34
35-44
45-54
55-64
65-74
75-84
85+

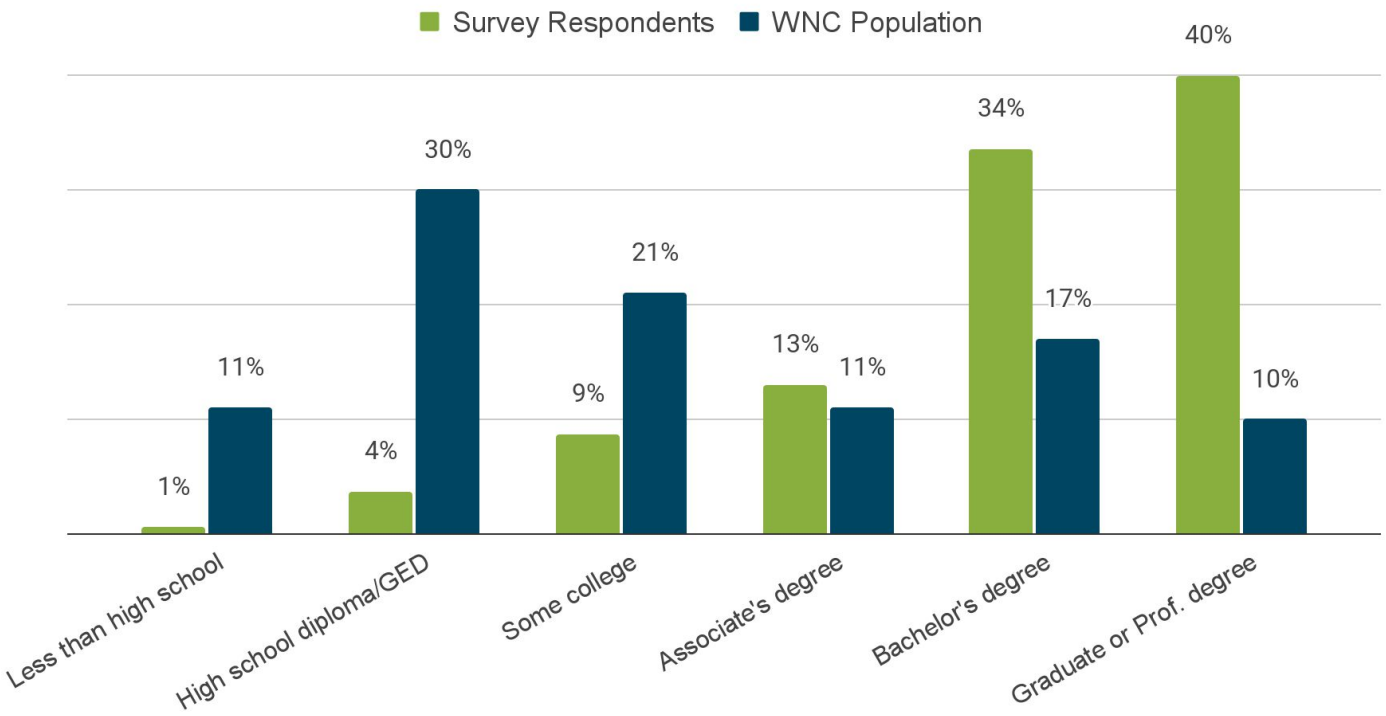
Race/Ethnicity



Household Income

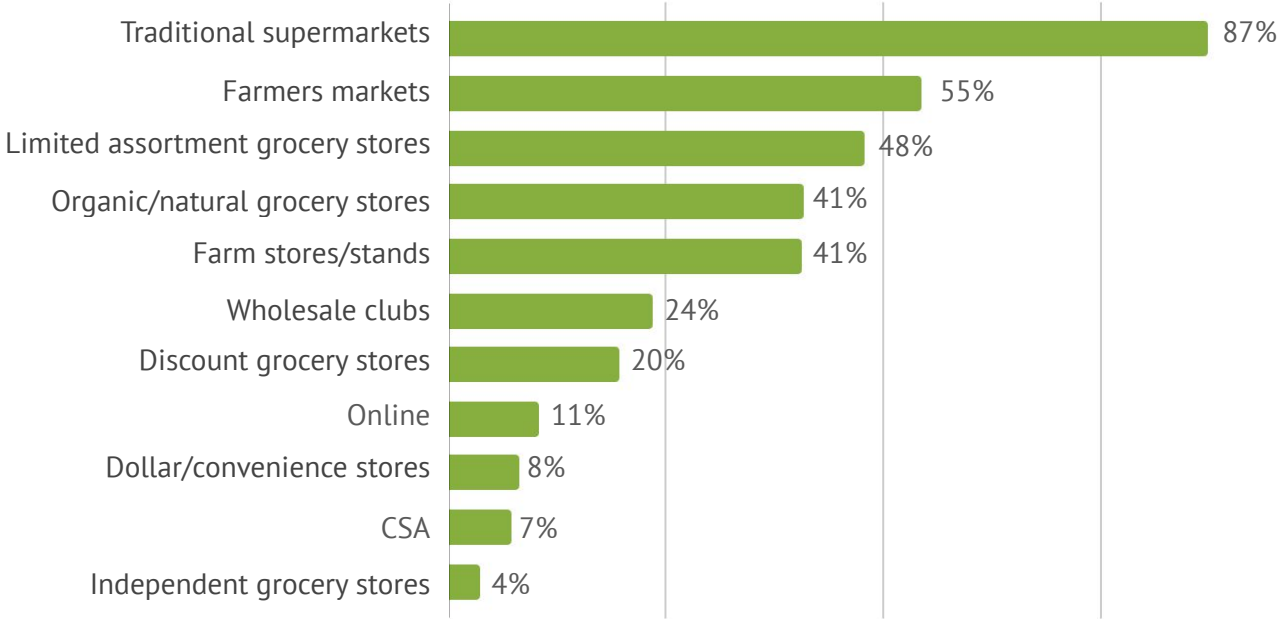


Educational Attainment



General Food Shopping Habits

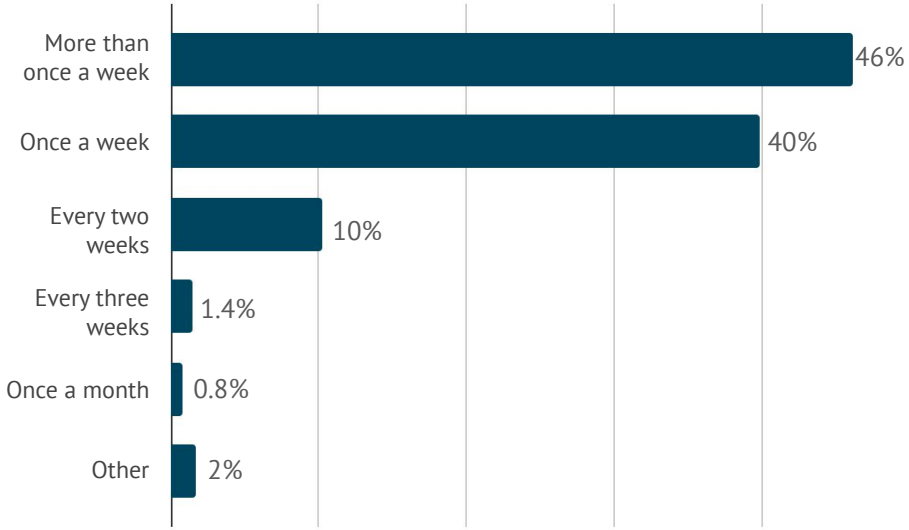
Where are customers shopping?



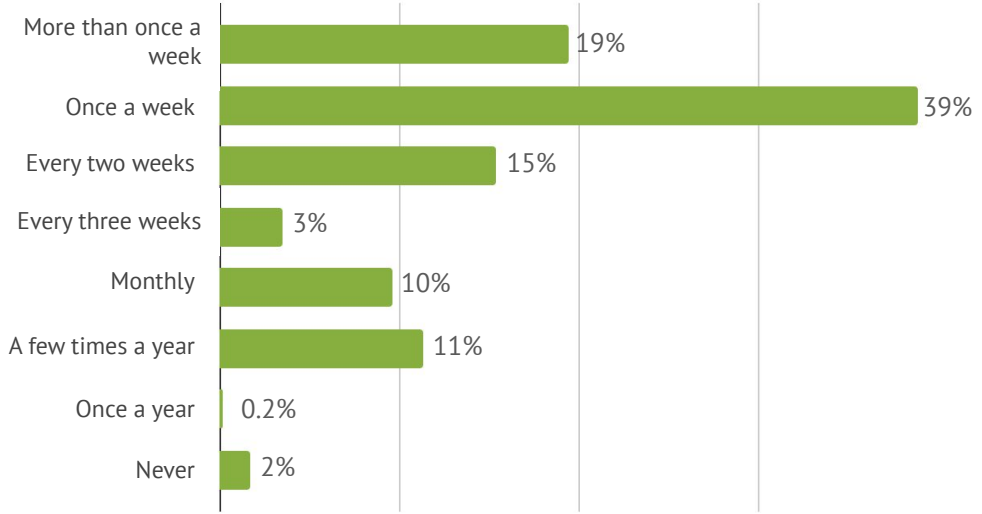
Household Monthly Grocery Bill

Household Size	Typical food shoppers	Local food shoppers	All respondents
	Overall average: $479	Overall average: $560.48	Overall average: $549.28
1 person	$213	$338	$320.14
2 people	$450.63	$531.67	$521.65
3 people	$531.82	$642.16	$624.57
4+ people	$777.89	$859.38	$848.09

Food Shopping Frequency



General food shopping frequency



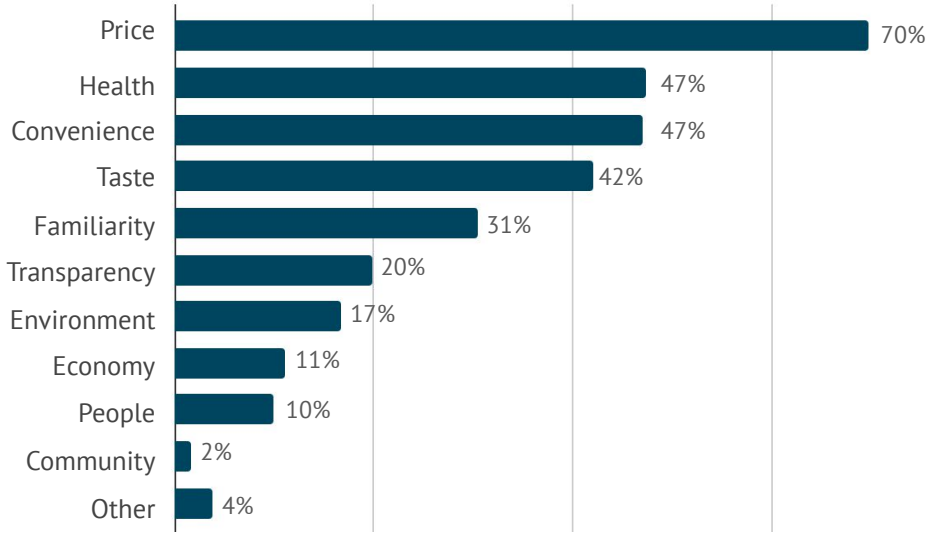
Local food shopping frequency

Local Food Shopping: Priorities and Barriers

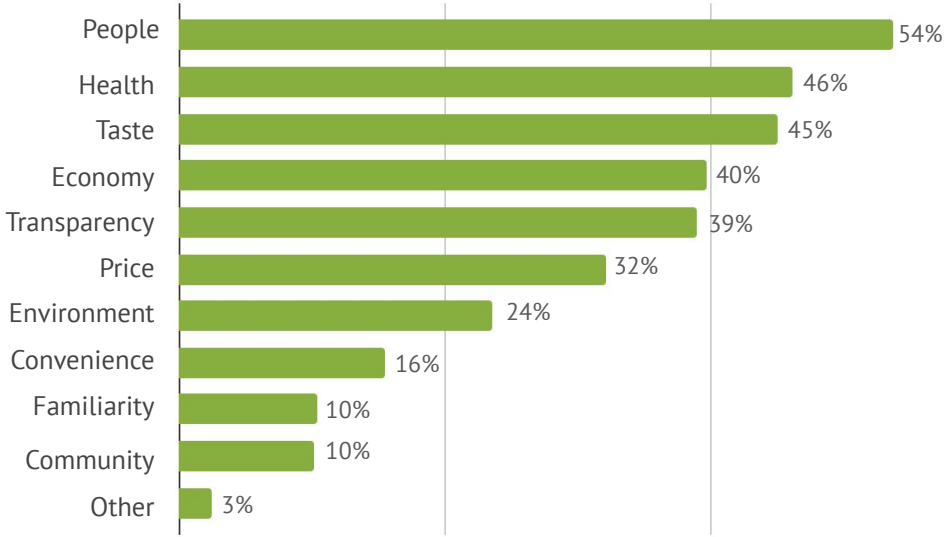
Demographics

- Compared to typical food shoppers, local food shoppers…
  - …have a smaller average household size (2 vs. 3 household members)
  - …are more formally educated (74% have a Bachelor's/four-year degree vs. 68% of typical food shoppers who have a Bachelor's/four-year degree)
  - …are less racially/ethnically diverse (higher percentage of White respondents and lower percentages of Black/African American and Native American/Alaska Native respondents)

Priorities



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



Top considerations when purchasing **local** food

Asap

"A few reasons: chiefly, I label myself as somewhat of a food enthusiast and hobby chef, and I love cooking with local ingredients, seasonally. Secondly, because I can afford the time and costs to support local food economies and I think ***it's my duty to support people who are good stewards of the land I love: WNC.****"*

"The purity of the food is upheld. It feels safer for my mind and body. ***I trust my local farmers.****"*

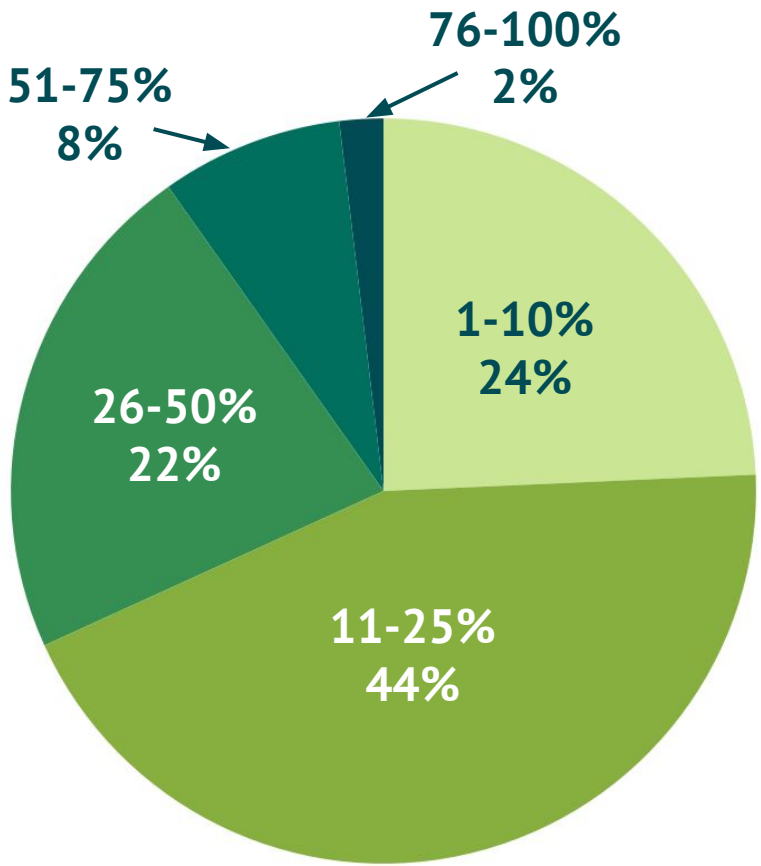
"It makes me feel good on levels of body mind and soul. ***Seriously****. The food's way often better - fresher, in season and so on. I love looking the farmer in the eye and thanking him/her. Lower carbon footprint."*

Select responses to "In your own words, why does your household buy local?"

Key Takeaways/Recommendations

- Connection to people (farmers) is the #1 reason people buy local.
  - *Recommendation: Connect with your customers on a personal level - tell your farm story, share what's important to you, build relationships*
- Health, convenience, and taste were top priorities for all shoppers
  - *Recommendation: highlight health benefits of local food*
  - *Recommendation: share recipes or cooking tips, offer taste tests, highlight unique flavors of your products*

Percent Spent on Local

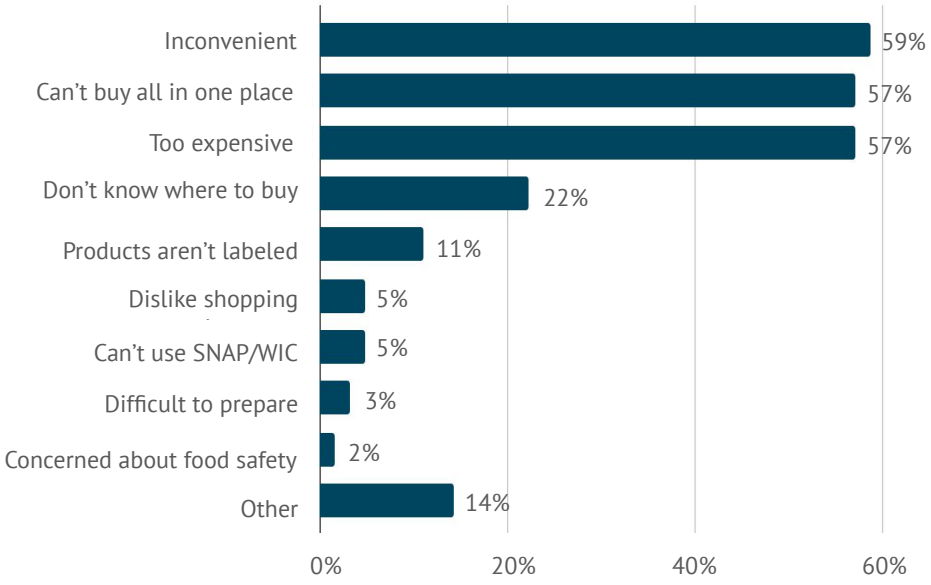


- **87%** of local food shoppers **want to buy more local food**
- **74%** of typical food shoppers **want to buy local food**

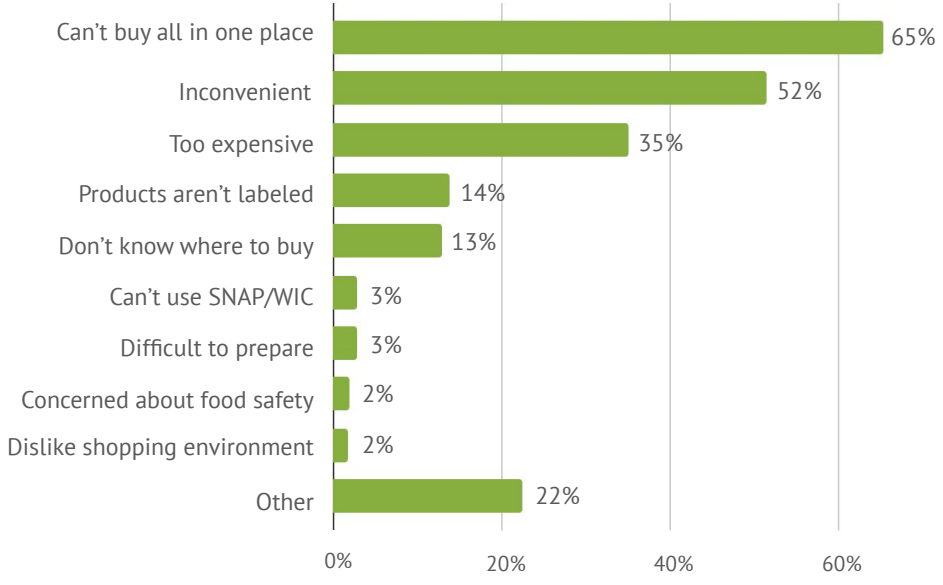
Key Takeaways/Recommendations

- Over two-thirds of local food shoppers spend less that 25% of their monthly food budget on local food.
  - *Farmer Recommendation: Invest more in marketing strategies that encourage existing customers to buy more rather than strategies to attract new customers.*
  - *Ag Support Agency Recommendation: Invest in consumer education (how, where, and why to buy local) that resonates with both existing and potential customers. Test strategies for attracting new local food shoppers.*

Barriers



Typical food shoppers



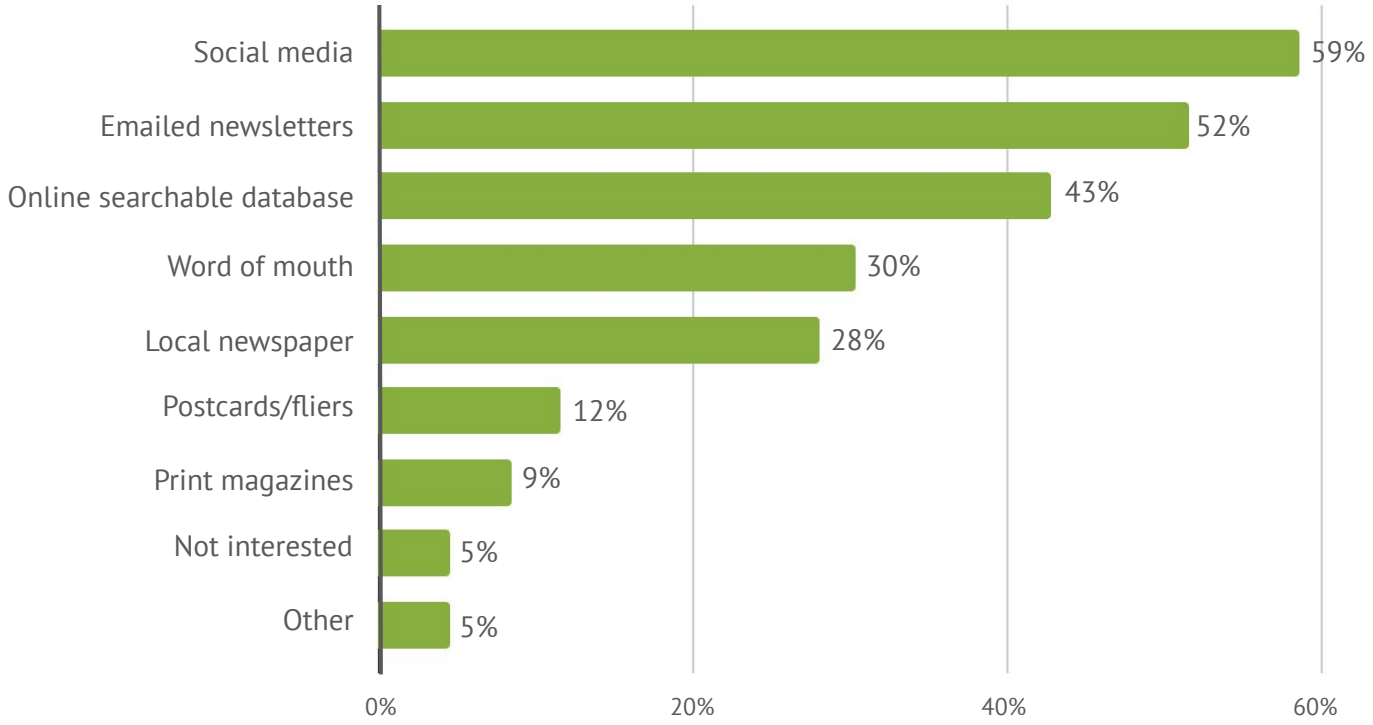
Local food shoppers

Key Takeaways/Recommendations

- The primary barriers to buying local are complicated, systemic challenges and generally out of farmer's control
  - *Farmer Recommendations: label your products with product names and prices, prioritize convenience for shoppers wherever possible*
  - *Ag Support Agency Recommendations: invest in consumer education (how, where, and why to buy local), support incentive programs (Produce Prescription, Double SNAP), support local procurement by wholesale and intermediate markets.*

Local Food Information

Local Food Information Preferences



Key Takeaways/Recommendations

- People want information digitally
  - *Recommendation: embrace social media (I know, I know) and e-newsletters*

Wrap Up

- Stay tuned for a full report of this data on our website

- Objectives 2 and 3 of our research are ongoing
  - Assess and test farmers' direct marketing strategies
  - Assess and adapt consumer education materials and create resources to share best practices

Salvador and Alyssa Moreno
Moreno Family Farm
SMM Farm

Who We Are and Our Multiple Personalities

SMM is a conventional ~50 acre farm
Grow general annual crops and focuses on farm store and wholesale
MFF is a no spray ~30 acre farm
Grow more specialty perennial crops and focuses on farmers market and restaurant sales
Both farms have similar customer bases but different priorities

- Marketing Strategies

- Recommendations for Connecting



Questions?