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Community Supported Agriculture Program Consumer Preferences for Local and Organic Foods

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Introduction

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs started in the United States in the 1980s. The basic concept of the CSA program is to form partnerships between consumers and farmers where consumers pay for farm products (or shares) in advance and farmers commit to supplying a sufficient quantity, quality, and variety of products across the season. The number of CSAs in the U.S. has grown substantially in the last decade. Local Harvest currently has 4,000 CSA programs in their database (Local Harvest, 2012), while more than 6,000 farms participate in CSAs in the U.S. (Adam, 2006). CSAs provide many benefits, such as contributing to a sustainable local economy, connecting farms to the urban and suburban communities, providing a feeling of control for families over food products consumed, and providing households with fresh, high quality produce.

One of many features of CSA programs is the availability of organic produce. These products are certified free of petroleum based chemicals used for fertilizer, pest, and weed control (Starr et al., 2003). Additionally, many consumers prefer knowing the origin of their food and are interested in supporting local farmers (Curtis and Cowee, 2011). In this fact sheet we provide an overview of CSA consumer demographics, as well as consumer willingness to pay (WTP) and preferences for local and organic foods. The data used in this study come from an online survey of CSA program participants in Nevada, Idaho, and Utah in the fall of 2011.

Survey Respondent Demographics

A total of 175 CSA participants completed the survey. The majority were Caucasian females, married, with an average age of 44 years (see Table 1). The respondents identified themselves as their household's primary food purchaser (90.4%). The average annual household income was above $105,000, and the average household size was 3.3 members. CSA respondents were well educated, holding a graduate degree or higher (52%) and were employed fulltime (54.7%).

Table 1: Survey Sample Statistics

Description	Mean/Percentage
Primary food purchaser	90.4%
Household income	More than $105,000
Household size	3.3 members
Age	44.41 years
Female	84.9%
Graduate degree or higher	52%

Of the respondents who participated in CSAs, 72.5% acknowledged that they also attended famers' markets. Additional food related programs that appealed to the participants included food preparation ideas/recipes (68.2%), canning and preserving (53%), and farm visits/tours (50.3%). The respondents participated in recycling and home gardening (89.7% and 84.2% respectively). They live an average of 7.25 miles from their primary grocery outlet and spend approximately $131 per week on produce. The average number of meals prepared at home in a week was 17.08 meals, broken down as follows:

- 6.34 meals for breakfast
- 4.97 meals for lunch
- 6.04 meals for dinner

The 81.33% of meals consumed by these consumers at home is well above the U.S. average of 48% (ERS, 2010).

Importance of Production Practices and Local Origin

Participants were asked to rate the importance of local production and special production methods such as natural and organic. Figure 1 below shows the results. For the CSA participant respondents, products produced in their home state was most important (34.8%), followed by U.S. products. Organic production was preferred to natural, with 24.8% of respondents selecting organic.

Respondents were tested on their knowledge of organic production methods. The survey provided statements and respondents were asked to identify each as true or false. Sample questions included *"Conventional production always includes synthetic fertilizers and pesticides"* and *"Conventional vegetable production leads to environmental degradation."* The highest test score was 83.97% and the lowest test score was 27.39%. These results suggest that CSA's members somewhat understand organic production practices.

Willingness to Pay for Fresh Produce

This section of the survey provided price levels of $1, $1.50, $2, $3, and $4 for green peppers, cucumbers, apples, and yellow squash per pound. Respondents were asked to provide the quantity (in pounds) for products they would purchase given their income level, tastes, and preferences. The complete results for yellow squash are shown in Figure 2. The figure shows that at $1/lb, 98.8% of participants are willing to purchase yellow squash and at $4/lb, only 81.5% are willing to purchase the squash.

Table 2 illustrates the weighted average price respondents were willing to pay for green peppers, cucumbers, apples, and yellow squash.

Table 2: Weighted Average Pricing

Item	$/lb
Green peppers	$1.88
Cucumbers	$1.86
Apples	$1.85
Yellow squash	$1.96

Additionally, the CSA member survey shows that respondents spent on average $25.99 per week for CSA baskets, not noted that they may not continue the membership if CSA pricing rises at a higher rate than farmers' market pricing.

Price Premiums for Local and Organic Foods

The survey asked participants to choose among differing pricing and production systems for seven produce items (peaches, tomatoes, eggplants, cucumbers, green peppers, cantaloupe, and yellow squash). Differences existed in product origin and production practices (such as conventionally grown and organically grown). The respondents were asked to indicate which product they were likely to purchase given the information provided. Table 3 illustrates the price premiums by percentage for local and organic items over the conventionally produced product of unknown origin. If the respondents valued produce from their home state, then they were willing to pay more for locally grown produce. The second column indicates the price premiums when respondents valued organic production practices (willing to pay a premium for organic products regardless of product origin).

Table 3: Price Premium (by Percent)

Produce	Local	Organic
Peaches	64.2%	32.8%
Tomatoes	62.7%	33.6%
Eggplant	55.2%	17.9%
Cucumbers	58.2%	40.3%
Green peppers	49.3%	26.1%
Cantaloupe	79.1%	25.4%
Yellow squash	56.7%	26.9%

Overall, CSA program participants were willing to pay higher premiums for locally grown produce over organic produce of unknown origin. This is consistent with the results of a prior survey question shown in Figure 1.

Conclusions

The purpose of this publication was to examine CSA member propensity to purchase and pay premiums local and organic produce. Data were collected through an online survey of 175 CSA members in Nevada, Idaho and Utah. CSA survey respondents were highly educated, had high income levels and consumed the majority of meals inside the home.

The results of this study indicate that CSA members are more concerned about food origin than specific production techniques. This outcome may be due to respondent organic production knowledge levels. Producers involved in CSA programs or considering starting CSA programs will want to examine the costs and benefits of organic certification. This study shows that local origin may be more important to CSA consumers in general than organic production methods. Consumer information and marketing materials outlining farm production methods such as food safety measures, and environmental and animal stewardship practices may also be beneficial.

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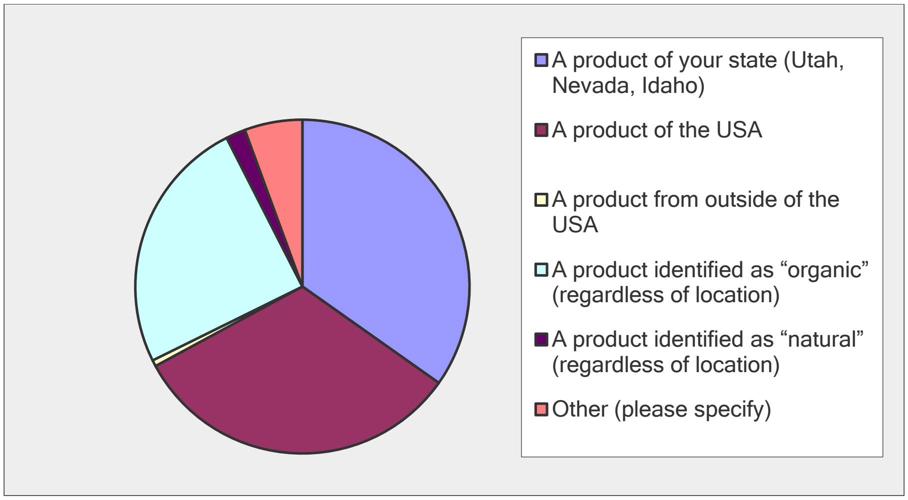

Figure 1. Preferences for Product Origin and Production Method

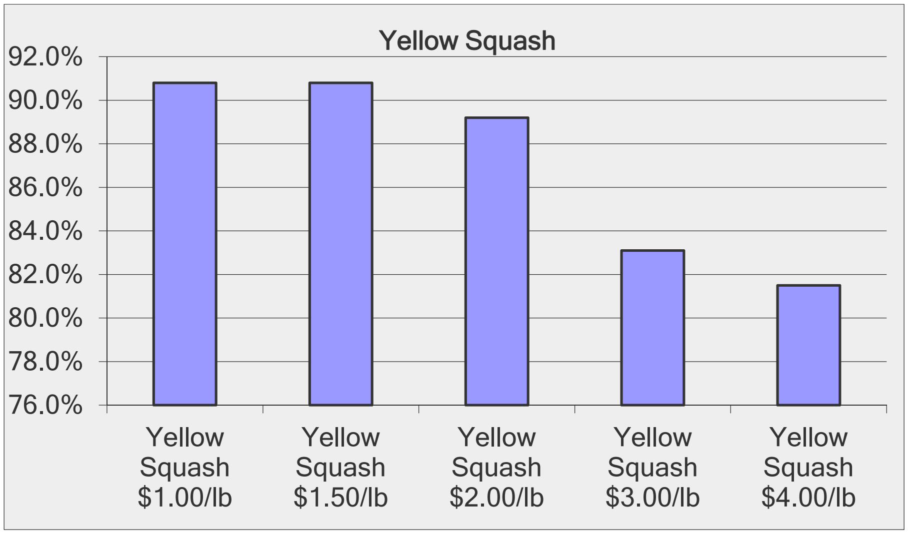

Figure 2. Percentage Willing to Purchase across Price Levels

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