



'Locally grown' food sounds great, but what does it mean?

By Julie Schmit, USA TODAY



Virginia farmer Rod Parker can walk into a grocery store 10 miles from his farm, 40 miles from it and even 100 miles from it and see his fresh produce marketed as "locally grown."

Some retailers even consider "locally grown" to be something produced a day's drive from the store, he says. Meanwhile, "I'm sure consumers think it's grown right down the road," says the owner of Parker Farms.

Nationwide, retailers from Wal-Mart to Whole Foods are increasingly devoting more shelf space to "locally grown" products including such things as fresh produce and Thanksgiving turkeys. Whole Foods, for one, now spends almost 22% of its produce budget on locally grown products, up from 15% four years ago, it says.

The "locally grown" label is part of retailers' push to tap into consumer desires for fresh and safe products that support small, local farmers and help the environment because they're not trucked so far. At least one consumer survey has showed that whether something is locally grown is now more important than whether it is organic (which many local products are not).

But retailers may have far broader definitions of "local" than consumers do. And while freshness is more likely if food isn't trucked so far, food-safety experts say there's no evidence that locally grown products are safer, especially because small producers often lack the food-safety audits more common among big producers.

"There's a feeling that if it's local, it's safer. I consider that a myth," says Christine Bruhn, food-marketing specialist at the University of California-Davis.

Just how do some retailers define locally grown?

- Wal-Mart, the nation's biggest retailer, considers anything local if it's grown in the same state as it's sold, even if that's a state as big as Texas and the food comes from a farm half the size of Manhattan, as in the case of the 7,000-acre Ham Produce in North Carolina.
- Whole Foods, the biggest retailer of natural and organic foods, considers local to be anything produced within seven hours of one of its stores. The retailer says most local producers are within 200 miles of a store.

- Seattle's PCC Natural Markets considers local to be anything from Washington, Oregon and southern British Columbia.

What's marketed as local in one state or region may also be available nationwide.

In July, Wal-Mart pledged to source more local fruits and vegetables and noted, in a press release, that 20% of the fresh produce in its supercenters in the summer was already local, making Wal-Mart the "nation's largest purchaser of local produce."

For a Florida store, that 20% would include any citrus grown in Florida even if it's also sold nationwide, says Wal-Mart spokeswoman Caren Epstein.

"They're not defrauding people, but counting a product that is nationally shipped as local doesn't seem to be within the meaning of locally grown," says Jim Prevor, editor of *Produce Business* and author of the online *Perishable Pundit*.

Prevor also says that 1,000-acre farms may surprise consumers who equate "local" with "a 3-acre blueberry farm." Wal-Mart declined further comment.

Joanne Palmer, a retired music teacher who shopped at a Wal-Mart in American Canyon, Calif., likes locally grown. "It's a real good thing to spare the Earth in terms of gas and trucks," she says. "But I wouldn't say that all of California would be considered local."

Defining the market

There are no regulations specifying what locally grown means, as there are with organic products.

To be labeled organic, foods sold in the U.S. must meet production standards set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

One standard? No toxic synthetic pesticides or fertilizers for at least three years on a field growing an organic crop.

"Local" products are not necessarily pesticide-free.

When consumer researcher The Hartman Group surveyed consumers, it found that 50% defined local as within 100 miles; 37% said within the same state, says Hartman President Laurie Demeritt.

The survey also showed that 52% said it was important for them to buy local goods whenever possible; vs. 23% who said the same for organic. Consumers also tend to think of local products — namely fruits and vegetables — as fresher because they're grown "close to home" and to generally come from small farmers, Demeritt says.

That's a definition shared by Dick Swank, owner of the 300-acre Swank Farms of Hollister, Calif., 80 miles south of San Francisco. Swank grows tomatoes, corn, cherries and other produce. The farm sells its produce at farmers' markets and small stores within a two-hour drive and to a dozen Costco stores in the Bay Area and Central Valley.

Swank says 90% of his produce is sold within 24 hours of being picked. None goes through distribution centers, which can add hours to deliveries. Last year, he says he sold tomatoes to Wal-Mart which went to a distribution center before being sold in Nevada.

"You can't buy local if everything goes through a distribution center," Swank says.

Saving on freight

Farmer Parker says it's harder for big retailers to buy locally because they need large volumes, and it's easier to deal with a few large producers than many smaller ones.

The extra work for retailers pays off when freight costs are high and the cost to truck fruits or vegetables across country rises significantly.

"There's a significant savings in freight that drives the local deal," Parker says.

Still, locally grown products may not be cheaper, given that smaller growers lack the economies of scale of bigger growers. "There is not a tremendous savings to buy product locally," says Dave Corsi, vice president of produce and floral for Wegmans Food Markets, a grocer with 71 stores in the East.

Wegmans has sourced local produce for more than 20 years. Most of its local producers are within 100 miles of a store and work fewer than 100 acres, Corsi says. They also deliver to stores, not to distribution centers.

About food safety

While consumers may think locally grown food is safer, food safety experts say that's not clear.

Most food-borne illnesses don't get noticed because not enough people get sick to alert officials that an outbreak is underway. Undetected outbreaks are more likely with "local" products delivered in small quantities and sold in a small area, says Robert Brackett, senior vice president of the Grocery Manufacturers Association.

Small producers are also less likely than big ones to have had food-safety audits, which grocers often demand of big suppliers, says Matt Regusci, head of business development for PrimusLabs.com, a leading produce food-safety auditor.

South Carolina's Titan Farms, one of Wal-Mart's local growers, with 3,750 acres, links its website to a 13-page food-safety Primus audit that covers such things as whether there's evidence of insects on produce and whether Titan has enough bathrooms for workers.

Whole Foods requires third-party food-safety audits for its national produce suppliers and anyone producing ready-to-eat salad products, including packaged leafy greens and packaged fruit, says Karen Christensen, global produce coordinator.

But not all other local growers must have audits, she says. "Any place we perceive there's a risk, obviously we're going to require it."

Wegmans started requiring food-safety audits for large, national suppliers two years ago. It started special training for its local producers, which number about 800, last year. This year,

those that produce leafy greens need food-safety audits or they'll be dropped as suppliers, Corsi says. Next year, the same will be required of local growers of tomatoes, melons, herbs and green onions.

"We're trying to create a baseline that at least everybody meets," Corsi says.

Swank Farms has never had an independent third-party safety audit, Swank says. The buyer for Costco inspected the operation, he adds. Swank also trains workers on good hygiene and hires the same families to harvest products each year, he says.

Primus' Regusci says many small producers have good food-safety practices but haven't purchased audits, which can cost hundreds of dollars.

"The vast majority of food safety is common sense," Regusci says. "Are there a few small idiots out there messing things up for everybody? Yes. But there are big idiots out there messing things up, too."

'Local' food growth hits express lane

By Julie Schmit

Despite the vagaries around what's local and what's not, it's a hot marketing concept.

Through August, Swank Farms' farmers' market sales were up 60% over last year, vs. 28% growth the year before, says owner Dick Swank in Hollister, Calif.

Products by Koch's Turkey Farm of Tamaqua, Pa., are promoted as locally grown in Whole Foods stores in the Mid-Atlantic region. In that region, sales growth this year is about twice what it is elsewhere, says Duane Koch, Koch's vice president.

At a Whole Foods store in Walnut Creek, Calif., recently, a sign noted that there were 122 locally grown items, vs. 243 organic ones.

Locally grown "is the new organic," says Tanios Viviani, president of Fresh Express, based in Salinas, Calif. The nation's leading maker of bagged salads processes 1.2 billion pounds of lettuce and spinach a year. Its products are grown in California, Arizona, Colorado and Mexico.

Even though Fresh Express sells nationwide, it's seeking to tap the local market. It's testing fields in Florida, Ohio, New Jersey, Michigan and eastern Canada for future production. The goal: cut transportation costs by growing closer to stores and offer local varieties to consumers, such as collard greens in the Southeast.

"We see (local) as a huge opportunity," says Viviani.