

# Defining a strategy for local foods in Vermont

*Results from the 2006 Vermonter Poll*

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## **Introduction**

Vermont's "Local Foods" movement has been gaining momentum in recent years. Communities, consumers, and producers are increasingly promoting the concept of local foods as a way to support family farms, create local food security, reduce environmental impacts, promote healthy eating habits, and foster social bonds (Wilkins, 2005). As reported in the Christian Science Monitor

## Methods and Data

This study uses data taken from the 2006 Vermonter Poll, conducted by the University of Vermont's Center for Rural Studies. The Vermonter Poll is an annual phone survey of randomly selected Vermont households. The sample consisted of 656 Vermont residents who were 18 years of age or older. The average age of respondents was 53 years. The sample was 43 percent male. The median income and education categories were \$50,001-65,000 and associates/technical degree, respectively. The mean household size was 2.7 individuals, with 33% of the households including children. Results were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS), Version 12. Parameters and intra-variable relationships were considered significant at the 95% Confidence Level.

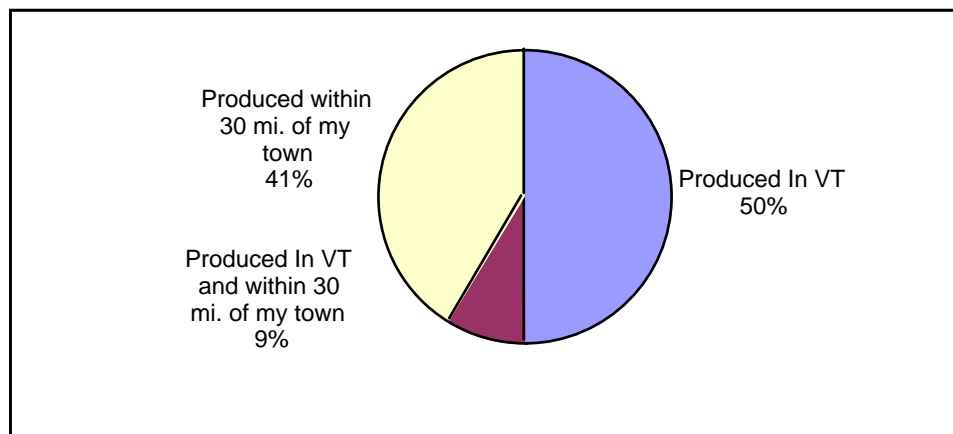
Averages and confidence interval were determined for key variables. Chi Square tests were completed to determine if there was a relationship between demographic variables and factors behind food purchasing decisions. ANOVA tests were used to analyze relationships between demographic variables and household expenditures on fruits and vegetables. Lambda and Pearson's coefficients were used to determine the strength of any significant relationship. Independent Sample T-Tests were utilized to determine if those basing their food purchasing on health and flavor rationales purchased more fruits and vegetables than consumers who prioritize convenience and cost, as well as the differences in fruit and vegetable spending among households with above and below median income, and respondents with and without a college education. An open ended question on local food strategies was quantified by clustering similar responses and determining cluster frequencies.

## Analysis and Results

### *Public perception of focal food*

Respondents were asked to choose a definition of local food. As reported in Figure 1, 50% defined it as food produced within Vermont. 41% defined as food produced within 30 miles of their town,. 9% defined it as food produced within Vermont and within 30 miles of their town.

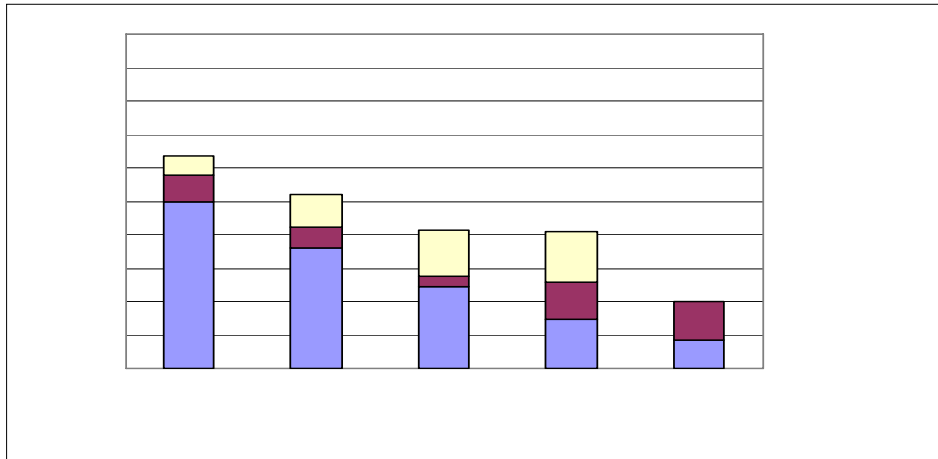
*Figure 1. Respondents perceptions on the appropriate definition of local food (n= 601)*



***Factors behind consumer food purchasing decisions***

Respondents were asked to choose the most important factor they consider when purchasing food for a meal. Figure 2 shows that 22% choose cost, 8% chose convenience, 14% chose flavor, and 55% chose health. Respondents choices were significantly related to income levels ( $p < .001$ ), and education levels ( $p < .001$ ) with higher income and higher educated households caring less about cost. No relationship was found between family size, gender of respondent, or geography and responses on food purchasing decisions.

*Figure 2. Factors behind food purchasing decisions across income categories*

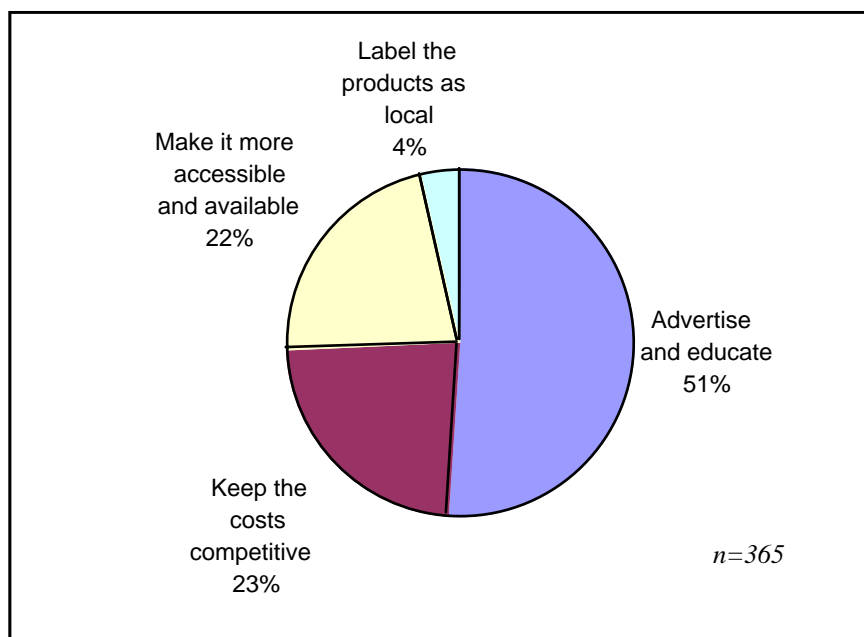




### *Perceptions of local food strategies*

Respondents were asked what they believed was the best way to encourage people to buy local food. Responses were clustered into general categories of similar responses, presented in Figure 4. The vast majority of responses were clustered into four categories: “advertise and educate” (51%), “keep the costs competitive” (23%), “make local food more accessible”(22%), and “label local products” (4%).

Figure 4. Respondent recommended strategies for encouraging local food consumption



### **Discussion and Conclusions**

#### *Advertising and consumer education strategies*

Strikingly, advertising and educational strategies were recommended by almost 50% of respondents as the best way to encourage people to buy local food. This would suggest that efforts such as the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets (VAAFMM) ’s Buy Local program, which provides “Seal of Quality labels, and distributes bumper stickers and other promotional materials, should be continued and expanded. Research results also indicate that with over 50% of respondents basing food purchasing decisions on health concerns, advertisements and educational efforts should highlight the healthy aspects of eating locally. For example, fruits and vegetables produced for local markets are often grown with significantly less pesticides or chemical dyes to retain colors.

Clearly, there is no consensus on the definition of local food. While the Vermont Department of Agriculture defines local food as “*originating within 30 miles of the place where they are sold, measured directly, point to point* (VAAFMM, 2006).” only 41% of respondents agreed with this definition. However, the VAAFMM also allows sellers to use the term local “*in conjunction with a specific geographic location, such as "local to New England," as long as the specific geographic location appears as prominently as the term "local" and the representation of origin is accurate*

(VAAF, 2006).” Given the lack of consensus on the definition of local, this additional rule is clearly important. Labels describing the exact location the food was produced, would allow consumers to make informed decisions and identify their food with a specific place, fostering a sense of place.

### *Accessibility and marketing*

The significant relationships found between demographic factors of income, levels of education, and number of kids in the family and variables related to food purchasing decisions and expenditures can help policy makers find the “low hanging fruit.” It appears that programs that seek to make local food **conveniently** available in professional settings, institutes of