FROM THE FARM TO THE PLATE: DISCOURSE AND PERCEPTIONS OF LOCAL FOOD IN HUMBOLDT COUNTY, CA

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By

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ABSTRACT

From the Farm to the Plate: Discourse and Perceptions of Local Food in Humboldt County, CA

There are many obstacles involving access to local food that hinder the expansion of local food systems. One obstacle that is discussed in current literature is the perception that local food is more expensive than global food and therefore inaccessible to those who cannot afford it. I explore the extent to which this perception is a barrier to the expansion and growth of the local food system in one small agriculturally oriented community in northern California. Those individuals unfamiliar with the local food system often rely on more familiar outlets of the global food systems such as corporate grocers. This research focuses on the discourse surrounding local food in Humboldt County, California, and reveals the negative perceptions that discourage people from buying local food over other available options.

With its expansive local food system Humboldt County is an exceptional research area for studying how and why a local food system operates, and what barriers there are in an area that has an extensive local food supply. A constructivist framework embedded within grounded theory was used to reveal the perceptions of the community. I conducted surveys and semi-structured interviews with Humboldt County residents, composed a literature analysis of academic studies regarding local food, and created a local food price
analysis. This study revealed that the obstacles to the expansion of the local food system in Humboldt County include issues of price, accessibility, and inconvenience. The benefits of local food were also explored and include increased flavor and freshness of produce, healthy food, and support for local economies. This regional study of the common perceptions and realities of the local food systems in Humboldt County could serve as a framework for other regions or counties interested in finding out if perceptions of food (in terms of price and accessibility) can affect involvement in local food markets. This thesis can be a useful framework for future researchers that wish to uncover the discourse surrounding local food markets in similar areas, and has the potential to be used to combat any negative myths that may be keeping community members from buying locally, therefore serving as a prelude to increasing local economies by promoting local food systems.

*Keywords: Local Food Systems, Farmer’s Market, Humboldt County, California, Discourse Analysis, Food Accessibility*
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Food politics is an increasingly important topic in the academic realm and popular media alike. Increased food consciousness has led consumers to question the practices of large industrial agribusiness. Consumer preferences drastically influence what is bought and sold in a consumer-driven food market. However, as the literature on the topic notes, the global food industry is often environmentally unsound and can create an abundance of environmental problems associated with poor farming practices and long-distance food transportation. In this thesis I suggest that local food systems can serve as an alternative to the global food industry in order to help ease the environmental destruction often caused by global food systems.

For the purposes of this research I will define local food as any food that is detached from the global agricultural system and corporate agribusiness. Local food will also be referred to as alternative food in this research, and although the scale of local food varies greatly, in this research it will be defined as products produced in Oregon and Northern California. Philosophically, local food encompasses the idea of small-scale farming and limited travel for food products, as well as the consumer’s desire to know where their produce comes from. I define global food, by contrast, as any food source that is imported or exported, travels a long distance to get to the final market (usually hundreds or thousands of miles), and is often owned by corporate agribusiness or large-scale enterprises.
This thesis examines the perceptions of local food that continue to create barriers to the expansion of alternative food markets in Humboldt County, California. Humboldt County, California is currently part of an expansive local food system. This local food movement is supported by the abundance of small-scale farms, local food stores and cooperatives, and seasonal farmer’s markets in the region. Humboldt County’s’ strong local food systems sets the stage for research on community perceptions of local food, and allowed me to explore the problems that create a barrier to local food growth in a booming local food area.

The following section uses academic literature to describe the local and alternative food movements, and to discuss how consumer preference influences these markets. The benefits and constraints of alternative markets are also discussed in the literature review section. Using grounded theory as a methodological foundation along with surveys and interviews in the community of Humboldt County, California, I was able to study community perceptions of local food in the North Coast region and supplement information found in the literature review with empirical research. The results and discussion section reveals the results of the surveys and interviews and helps to further explain the barriers and benefits of local food markets. Lastly, recommendations for further academic research on this topic are given in order to help investigate underlying barriers to alternative food expansion in Humboldt County and surrounding areas.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Food has quickly become a topic of discussion and debate, and has gained popularity in U.S. popular culture, infiltrating media, academics, and local communities. The popularity of Michael Pollen’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and the bourgeoning popularity of other mainstream authors and activists such as Alice Waters have created general conversation around the politics of food. Other popular media surrounding local food, such as the documentary *Food, Inc.*, the Food Network’s *Food Revolution* and “eat local” challenges on television shows featuring celebrity chef Jamie Oliver have also found themselves on the forefront of mainstream popular culture. These pop culture references highlight the increasing number of challenges posed to a global food market based on complicated trade routes and expansive agribusiness institutions. It is widely noted that the average meal in the United States travels 1,500 miles from farm to fork (DeWeerdt, 2009, unkn.). Food markets removed from the globalized food system, often referred to as local food, can help eliminate some of the problems that come with the extensive transportation and poor farming practices of large-scale global agriculture.

This section explores the mainstream environmental rhetoric surrounding local food and the relationship between farmer and consumer portrayed in both government programs and academic literature. The benefits of local food, including the dynamics whereby consumer preference influences the popular discourse on local food (frequently
framed in terms of local food as safer, healthier, environmentally beneficial, and socially just), will also be explored. Alternatively, barriers to the local food system are also analyzed. The positive and negative discourse circulating throughout regions can affect the way in which local and alternative food is perceived, therefore having a significant affect on the expansion of the alternative food system. Exploring these topics in this literature review is important because the local food movement has been relatively understudied compared to other food topics such as organic food. Analyzing this discourse can help illuminate the barriers to local food progression and can serve as the first step in creating a more sustainable food system.

Mainstream Environmental Food Politics

The problems associated with agricultural production can be devastating to natural environments as well as human communities. The historical, cultural, and political foundations that agricultural policies are built upon need to be examined in order to develop solutions to the widely publicized problems of the environment, food access, hunger and malnutrition worldwide. Democratic control of food systems is also important in ensuring solutions to these food-based problems. “A central concern of citizens’ movements, both North and South, is creating democratic control over the food system to ensure sustainable and safe production and equitable distribution and access to food (Shiva, 2000, 117). As discussed below, increases in local food markets show that citizens can actively participate in creating new institutions that challenge current global agribusiness and the discrimination that comes along with oppressive policy (Allen,
Local food markets, although detached from the supply and demand sequence of the global food industry, still rely on consumer demand for local products to grow and expand.

Citizens’ movements can also harbor environmental justice initiatives that combat the primary focus on racial discrimination and instead focus on other causes of unequal power and privilege. Gottlieb and Fisher state, “environmental justice and community food security represent parallel though largely separate movements whose linkage would help establish a new community development, environmental, and empowerment-based discourse” (1996, unkn.). It is therefore possible that environmental justice movements can partner with food justice movements to help expand programs aimed at solving various types of discrimination.

Environmental justice movements may help shape the discussion pertaining to food justice throughout the United States and internationally that advocate for equal distribution of food and resources. Environmental justice movements are understood as a branch of the mainstream environmental movement. While mainstream environmental movements work fluidly with environmental security rhetoric to create the myth of food and resource scarcity worldwide (Lappé et. al, 1998, 8-9), environmental justice movements actually argue that the improper distribution of food is the main cause for hunger in developing countries and the United States. Betsy Hartmann, an advocate for environmental justice movements, argues that people go hungry in a land of plenty because of a failure to distribute land, money, and food, and that this is mainly a product of the current global food system (Hartmann, 1995, 17). Mainstream environmental
discourse would disagree with this argument because mainstream environmental movements are defined by a neo-Malthusian ideal in which environmental problems are a direct product of overpopulation and over-consumption. This causational argument is a direct claim of neo-liberal capitalism. Overpopulation leads to the creation of scarcity of resources, which in turn creates environmental destruction and unequal distribution. Neo-liberal capitalism views hunger and environmental degradation as linked problems arising from this neo-Malthusian framework. The environmental scarcity discourse (Homer-Dixon, 1999, 15) then goes one step further, arguing, that the scarcity of resources not only causes environmental destruction but hunger worldwide. From this perspective, the solution to these linked problems is thus based in increased militarization and protectionism instead of better systems for the distribution of food and resources.

Although touted as fact by academics such as Kaplan (1994) and Ehrlich (1993), mainstream environmental and scarcity rhetoric leaves out a key ingredient of the “environmental destruction pie” namely, the possibility of maldistribution. Mainstream environmental and scarcity rhetoric also creates distinct differences between the developed and developing worlds. This “othering” of developing countries and their citizens allows for the easy and quite ‘naturalized’ placement of blame on them for environmental problems. Problems of environmental degradation are thus neatly dismissed as being caused by overpopulation in the developing world rather than over-consumption in the developed world. In a similar way, the “othering” practices of environmental scarcity and neo-Malthusian analysis frames the problem of hunger as a consequence of overpopulation and too little food. In other words, “hunger is attributed to
demographic trends, climatic variations, intrafamilial distributions of power and income, storage and transportation inadequacies, technological shortcomings of all manner, macroeconomic issues, and so on” (Shields, 1995, 2). Although the mainstream environmental movement agrees that there is an immediate need for solutions to hunger, environmental justice movements go one step further to try and appropriately fill that need by supporting movements that act to re-distribute food to hungry areas.

As identified above, the problem of hunger is not a product of overpopulation but instead created by a severe lack of access to food resources. The establishment and use of local and alternative food systems addresses the real social and economic roots of hunger, and can help alleviate social and environmental problems that come with increased demand on global agricultural markets. Local food advocates contend that farming does not have to produce its food by degrading the environment. Rather, by integrating farming and food production in a local context, local food systems become more prominent within communities (Pretty, 2001, 1). Global food production often increases pollution, chemicals, and energy waste into the environment, and the reduction of these environmental ills is an adequate reason to promote the need for local food systems within our communities (Halweil, 2002, 21).

Contemporary global patterns of food production are heavily dependent on formal and informal subsidies throughout the system. As Mamen observes, “the trade-based food system has been heavily subsidized by the public, which has paid for most or all of the transport, energy, water, and research infrastructures the entire systems depends on” (2004, 11). Smaller-scale farmers do not receive the same subsidies as industrial farmers.
Consequently, establishing and maintaining a farm as a small farmer is difficult and often much less cost-effective than large-scale farming.

**Defining Local**

The below discussion explores the alternative and often local food systems that stand in direct contrast with global food and industrial farming. But what does local mean? There are a variety of definitions for the word “local” in regard to local food systems. Popular media frequently defines “local food” as food produced within 100 miles of the place where it is sold (Pollen, 2007, unkn). Others define local as a place within two hours drive. Still others define local food more broadly, as food produced within the state or even the country.

While many local food producers emphasize organic production, local and organic production are not necessarily connected. Organic standards differ from local food because of varying legal parameters that must be met in order for the produce or commodity to be labeled as organic. And while the U.S. Department of Agriculture has attempted to standardize requirements for organic labeling across the United States, there is no unified definition of local food. Rather, local food means different things to different consumers, depending on where they live, the availability of produce in a region, and length of the growing season. Nevertheless, local food often starts at home with backyard gardens, and then expands outward to encompass the community, county, state, or surrounding region. Specifically in Humboldt County, during the growing season local food may be defined as within the county, while during the winter months the
definition of local could be expanded to close regions outside of the county that have a more hospitable climate for agriculture.

The demand for these alternative foods in the United States has drastically increased over the past decade. For example, in the United States, the number of farmers markets increased from 1,755 in 1994 to 3,100 in 2002, an increase of nearly 77 percent in just eight years (Zepeda and Leviten-Reid, 2004, 1). According to Zepeda and Leviten-Reid, there is often a disconnect between the food people eat and where the food is produced, and people do not know where their food comes from. Local food advocates push for a closer relationship between consumer and food producer. Analyzing the popular discourse of local food in the United States can help local food advocates understand the barriers that are keeping the local food movement from progressing, and also keeping these relationships between farmer and consumer from reaching their full potential.

**Relationships Between Farmer and Consumer**

Although consumer preference and community activism shape the global food system, perceptions about the relationships between food production and consumption are increasingly opaque in global systems. Blay-Palmer and Donald note that food markets are the foundational groundwork that sets the stage for relationships between consumers and the food that they consume (2008, 134). But in reality the relationship between global food and the consumer is often distant. Berry states that most consumers believe that food comes from farms, but most do not know where the farms are or what
kind of farms the food comes from (Berry, 1990, 26). As Berry explains, “the industrial eater no longer knows or images the connections between eating and the land.” (1990, 27). Consumers of large, name brand, processed foods would not be able to say where their food came from, or where the ingredients of processed food were produced.

Local food emphasizes direct connections between producer and consumer. As Deweerdt states “interacting directly with the farmer who grows her food creates a ‘standard of trust’” (2009, unkn). This consumer to producer relationship is stronger in a localized food system where farms are often in driving distance to consumers’ place of residence. Recently the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched the “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” initiative with the goal of strengthening relationships between consumer and farmers nation-wide. This initiative can be seen as a response to the growing consumer request for local food and strong farmer to consumer relationships. This initiative claims to support local farmers, strengthen rural communities, promote healthy eating, and protect national resources (USDA website). The initiatives’ mission statement supports the idea that there is a significant distance between American consumers and the farmers who grow their food. In order to bridge this gap, the USDA under the Know Your Farmer initiative seeks to “marshal resources from across USDA to help create the link between local production and local consumption” (USDA website).

While the USDA’s Know Your Farmer initiative celebrates the importance of local food production, the USDA’s overall focus remains squarely on expansion of the globalized food system. The USDA, for example, supports and subsidizes large-scale
agribusiness and supports large scale farming, offering large-scale farming for global markets an unfair advantage over small-scale producers (Levidow and Carr, 2000, 260). Examining the USDA’s budget summary for 2011 reveals that out of the USDA’s 149 billion dollar budget, 2.3 billion dollars will be used to increase global food security for the U.S., while only 3.8 million dollars was allotted to the Know Your Farmer initiative to support small-scale farmers and local markets (USDA budget summary, 2011).

The USDA’s initiative has also encountered critiques from large-scale farmers who believe this program will simply appeal to a current trend in food buying. Hagstrom states that “some big farm lobbyists have privately dismissed is initiative as a somewhat silly administration appeal to rich, liberal consumers known as “foodies” and to the nation’s smallest farmers, who were more likely to have voted for Obama” (2009, 1). This statement highlights the interesting double-edged sword of consumer sovereignty as the foundation for the type of local food movements envisioned by the USDA program.

The previous quote alludes to the idea that local food has often been characterized as the domain of “yuppie,” elitist, and specialty foods that only a few consumers can afford.

While the Know Your Farmer initiative represents an improvement in traditional USDA practices, its viability and success will likely be measured in terms of how successful the program is in making local food more profitable for the farmers who grow it and more affordable for the consumers who buy it. The USDA’s initiative is just one example of the many projects created to promote local food on a national level. However, as Dowler and Caraher state, “the current plethora of food projects, while being promoted as a way of meeting the needs of low-income groups, in fact are not realizing their full
potential to act as a means of advocacy” (Dowler and Caraher, 2003, 61). Few projects, in other words, actually address the limited access to alternative food systems and the dichotomy of rich versus poor that is magnified by unequal access to these markets (Dowler and Caraher, 2003, 61). With dominating power over United States agriculture, the USDA has the ability to create a necessary change in local food progression and food access for low-income groups.

Benefits of Local Food

Consumer Perceptions

Local foods claimed benefits are driving health and environment conscious consumers to seek alternatives to the industrial agriculture system whose products dominate grocery-store shelves. It is also linked to the localization efforts of people who believe that rising transport costs and reaction to globalization will trigger a shortening of economic links and greater reliance on local and regional economies. (DeWeerdt, 2009, unkn)

The quote above directly points to the current demand for local food markets that help to alleviate environmental pressures cause by industrial agriculture. The positive perceptions that surround local and alternative food systems, and that helps alternative food gain credit among an expansive global food system, often define local food as higher quality, more healthy, or specialty foods (Blay-Palmer and Donald, 2008, 1). “If you're a consumer interested in greener food, the local food economy is currently a good place to find it” (DeWeerdt, 2009, unkn.). The popular thread among consumers is that “that they are looking for something different from more mainstream agro-industrial producers or retailers” (Blay-Palmer and Donald, 2008, 1). In many ways, consumer
choices drive the market for environmentally sound food practices that are safe and reliable. Consumer discourse in the United States indicates that consumers also want a guarantee that the food they consume will be safe for consumption (Buonanno et al., 2001, 11). Consumer preference differs based on historic, political, and environmental factors and, in many instances, is a result of the general regulatory failures that have caused nation-wide illness from food. These food safety failures have undermined public confidence in regulatory policies on food. The push and support by the consumers towards safer and alternative food systems helps to progress the local food movement. As long as consumer’s demands for quality and safe food continue to grow, alternative food systems will spread across the globe.

Environmental and Social Benefits

The current trend towards a localized food system can be linked to many perceived benefits that surround local and organic food. Most literature agrees that more localized food creates environmental benefits that stem from the reduction of carbon emissions. A 2001 study found that, “the conventional food distribution system used 4 to 17 times more fuel and emitted 5 to 17 times more CO$_2$ than the local and regional (the latter of which roughly meant Iowa-wide) systems” (DeWeerdt, 2009, unkn.). These findings, however, are contested. While local food systems are often characterized as being more environmentally- friendly and sustainable, it is difficult to determine if local food is ‘greener’ or more sustainable than global food because there are no universal parameters that guide local food production.
Another study in New Zealand correlates with this discussion that questions the sustainability of local food over imported food. This study takes into account transportation issues that hinder the sustainability of many imported and exported products. The term “food miles” can be applied here and generally refers to “the number of miles (kilometers) a product has to be transported from the farmer/grower to various stages of production until it reaches the supermarket and finally the plate of the consumer” (Saunders et al, 2006, 1). The study compared the energy efficiency and sustainability of exported products from both New Zealand and the United Kingdom to the European Union. The study found that in the case of dairy, sheep-meat, and apples, New Zealand is, in fact, more energy efficient than the UK, even when taking into account New Zealand’s greater transportation needs. This example further solidifies the idea that local food systems, although known to lower transportation costs, are not always as sustainable or as energy efficient as compared to transported products.

Although important to the success and sustainability of the local food movement, the definition of local food is not the central problem in determining if alternative food systems are sustainable. As the New Zealand study above explains, the farming practices for small-scale farmers significantly impact both environmental health and the health and working conditions of farm employees. DeWeerdt states that “purchasing an apple isn’t just about the greenhouse gas emissions involved in producing and transporting the fruit, it’s also about how those apples were farmed, how the farm workers were treated- broad array of ecological, social, and economic factors that add up to sustainability” (DeWeerdt, 2009, unkn). Unfortunately the health of farm workers is another cost of the
global food market that is not taken into account when claiming that global food is cheaper than alternative food (Kimbrell, 2002, 17).

It is widely held that global or industrial food is cheaper than local, organic food. As with the problem of food miles, however, the real cost of consumers’ food choices depends on all sorts of factors, many of which are treated as externalities in the production process. Kimbrell (2002), for example, notes that the environmental, health, and safety implications of conventional farming practices can be quite high. Global food networks are highly dependent on chemical inputs in the form of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers, and the transportation of the food from sites of production to consumption is dependent on oil. Indeed,

It should be evident that the long-distance travel of food-sometimes more than 10,000 miles from the production location to your home-reduces freshness. Clearly, the longer the distance of the food transport, the more time it will take to get from the farm to the retailer. As a result, added preservatives that are often used to control and maintain freshness may have a negative effect on taste and nutritional value. Transporting food across the country also has an adverse effect on the environment and increases fuel consumption and waste (DeWeerdt, 2009, unkn).

The hidden environmental and economic costs of industrial food can be immense and the quality of food is often overlooked. Local food out-competes global agribusiness in travel time and freshness. A tomato picked before it is ripe may come to the grocery store looking red and fresh, however being picked early to ensure freshness and travel time changes the quality of the fruit. Produce from local farms is often picked the day of purchase, meaning that freshness and quality are defined by different standards between local and global food systems (Pollen, 2007, unkn).
Smaller farms are often able to produce higher quality food because of their improved quality oversight capabilities. The sheer volume of food produced on large farms means that farmers cannot inspect all food harvested. Still, small local farmers face their own problems. But campaigns promoting local and alternative food aim to lessen these problems by focusing on the benefits of a locally grown, organic, and small-scale farm.

**Barriers to the Local Food System**

**Environmental Barriers**

“If you send it halfway around the world before it is eaten,” he mused, “an organic food still may be ‘good’ for the consumer, but is it ‘good’ for the food system?” (Cloud, 2007, unkn.)

Much of the alternative food literature focuses on the organic food. However, it is important to understand that the popular discourse surrounding organic food often does not include discussions about the environmental damages that come from transportation of these foods, or the social oppression that low-income groups may feel from inability to access these markets. Organic food that is transported across the country is in no way exempt from the problems that come with energy use. Even organic food --part of the alternative food system--can create environmental problems that are most often associated with large-scale traditional agriculture (Manning, 2006, 32). Local food, although not always labeled organic, can combat these problems by significantly cutting the energy used in transportation.
Unfortunately, another drawback to the local food system is the issue of seasonality and regionality. Most climates allow for one, and sometimes two, growing seasons. Very few regions in the United States boast climates permitting year-round growing seasons. Consequently, “in many areas, the climate is such that eating local, seasonal, field-grown produce would be a pretty bleak proposition for much of the year. Large concentrations of people live in areas not suited to growing certain staple crops; it’s one thing to forego bananas, but quite another to give up wheat” (Deweerdt, 2009, unkn.). This creates a challenge for local food based on regionality. The United States imports a large amount of food based on the seasonality and availability of the common produce consumed by citizens year-round.

The challenges posed by seasonality bring to the forefront economic issues as well. It is often more cost-efficient to import popular produce from foreign countries than to produce that food in the United States during the off-season. “The United States generally imports a greater amount of products that either cannot be economically produced in this country or are in short supply due to seasonal demands” (Farenga and Ness, 2010, 52).

Community knowledge plays an important role when it comes to eating seasonally in the United States. Many consumers do not have knowledge of what produce is in season during specific times of the year, which greatly affects their ability to buy seasonal produce. Even with the knowledge to buy seasonal produce, the sacrifice that consumers would have to make to buy only in-season local produce may pose a problem to reducing the United States reliance on imported non-seasonal food.
Social Barriers to Local Food

Although local food generally enjoys a positive perception in the literature, there has been little consideration of the practical and applied reasons why people do not buy local food. The local food system is, of course, embedded in broader, hierarchical systems of power. In the context of food, these hierarchical systems often create a divide between people who can afford alternative foods and people who cannot. According to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in 2007 50 million more people were hungry than in 2006. “At the same time, unhealthy, heavily processed, American-style fast food has spread beyond our borders, eroding traditional ways of eating” (Walsh, 2008, unkn.). The slow food movement, created in Europe to help combat fast food and the global agribusiness system, promotes critical engagement with the daily food choices we make. Advocates for locally grown food are relaying the need for local food to be available for everyone in the eco-region. But the discourse surrounding the local food and organic food movement often displays consumer perceptions touting elitist values and create a dichotomy between the rich and the poor. Local and organic food consumers desire food that is nutritious and safe. In some cases, however, the consumption of local food can become a social signifier, lending itself to a prestigious food buying experience (Zepeda and Leviten-Reid, 2004, 2). Social and political awareness also played a large role in consumer preference for local food over global food systems along with input into the local economy and environmental awareness (Zepeda and Leviten-Reid, 2004, 3). The relative easiness of access can also influence food choices. As Zepeda and Leviten-Reid
notes, “not all consumers patronize farmers’ markets; the most common reasons given are distance from the consumer’s home and inconvenience of the location” (Zepeda and Leviten-Reid, 2004, 2).

Consumer preference is normally centered on the choices and behaviors of middle-income level consumers, which causes problems in understanding consumer preference for local food. Despite the tendency for literature to generalize consumers, the literature mentions central themes that hinder low-income consumers from buying local. Inconvenient location (Zepeda and Leviten-Reid, 2004, 2) and price are major barriers to becoming a participant in the local food system (Dowler and Caraher, 2003, 59). Being able to afford local food is not just limited to price but also to taking the time to buy local foods at markets that might be foreign to a consumer (Zepeda and Leviten-Reid, 2004, 3). “To get access to a healthy diet can necessitate the expense (in time as well as money) of travel by car or public transport. Thus the price of transport is an additional or externalized cost” (Dowler and Caraher, 2003, 59).

The dichotomy between the rich and poor that is created within the local food movement is further explained by the various critiques of the local food movement itself. Many critics state that both the price and discourse surrounding organic food is disproportionately for only the rich, “yuppie” crowd. In regard to class, this dichotomy not only suggests that ‘good’ food is out of the economic and cultural reach of non-elites, but it also fails to bring to scrutiny the labor conditions under which such food is produced. Not only does the discourse surrounding organic and alternative food create the falsification of elitist followers, it also creates a dichotomy of those who can afford
healthy food and those who cannot. In this way, food choices become a marker of social identity. “Historians of food have also noted that as taste has become a performance of class, gender and nationality, the body has become a potent symbol of such difference, a way in which one’s taste is displayed” (Guthman, 2003, 52). This concept shows how putting alternative food on a pedestal leads to social injustice, and therefore further creates a gap between rich and poor.

Another critique of the local or alternative food movement is more genderized in nature. This critique states that creating a stereotypical view of global food as being the ugly antithesis of the local food movement also creates a stereotype of the working-woman who must buy global to feed their families. Guthman states that the inequality stems from the idea that “fast food serves women who work outside the home who are then blamed for depending on it to manage family and work” (2003, 56). The discourse surrounding global food as being “bad” creates a gendered dichotomy of rich and poor. In Western culture, where women are often portrayed as the homemakers responsible for household food choices, it becomes the responsibility of the woman to make “responsible” choices. This stance places blame on the woman for not being able to have the time, money, or knowledge to buy from the ‘better’ local food market. Women who participate in programs such as welfare or WIC are also oppressed because of their inability to have access to the local food system considering that their WIC check for General Mills cereal cannot buy them farmers’ market oats. By utilizing the local food system as the ‘end all’ to environmental and health problems surrounding food, a gendered oppression that creates the poor woman as a ‘bad’ homemaker is created.
This idea that only the wealthy few can afford to follow a movement such as the local food movement leads to social injustice, which only further allows for the dominant social paradigm of power, privilege, and oppression to continue. “Eating organic salad mix connoted a political action in its own right, legitimizing a practice that few could afford. But the subtle conflation of aesthetic reflexivity (that of the gastronome) with political reflexivity added an extra ingredient of desire. It is surely telling that organic farmers themselves began to refer to salad mix as ‘yuppie chow’” (Guthman, 2003, 54). Even the simple discourse behind the idea of ‘organic’ food leads to an unjust, unaffordable product that contrasts with the fast food movement in almost every way, but does little to empower classes that have previously been oppressed. Instead of providing healthy food for all classes of society, the discourse behind the local food movement can create even more oppression. It is in the hope of local food supporters that local food will be available for all social classes in local food regions so that no one will go hungry in those areas. Local food advocates need to not only address the progression of the local food system, but the ability of all socioeconomic groups to access that market. After all, more availability to the local food market will increase the progression and participation in local food systems.

**Political Barriers**
Although consumer preferences drive the global food system, perceptions about the relationships between food production and consumption are increasingly opaque in global systems of food production. One of these problems is the regulation of local food in a market full of global food parameters. Although consumer interests in the United States often point to a preference of local food, standards for local foods do not exist in the United States to the extent that they do in European markets (Zepeda and Leviten-Reid and Leviten-Reid, 2004, 1). One solution to this problem is to have a two-tiered system of regulations in which the “global food producers and markets have stricter controls, and there is a simpler set of locally determined regulations for small-scale farmers and traders” (Norberg-Hodge, 2002, 109). Community-based minimum standards for local production and retailing of local food would be regulated more in-depth by community-based accountability (Norberg-Hodge, 2002, 110). In other words, consumers would require safe food from their farmers, and consumers would also be able to pinpoint where their food comes from, which would make farmer-consumer accountability even more efficient.

The high costs of water, land, and production of small-scale farms presents another barrier to establishing a strong local food market. Compared to large-scale agriculture, which relies on government subsidies for the necessary elements of running large farms, small-scale local producers are usually not entitled to these benefits. Wallinga states “for thirty-five years, U.S. agriculture has operated under a “cheap food” policy that spurred production of a few commodity crops, not fruit or vegetables, and thus
of the calories from them” (2010, unkn). Government subsidies for commodity crops produced by large-scale agriculture not only hinder the local food movement and small-scale farmers but also lead to key national problems such as low nutrition and childhood obesity. For example, the large amount of subsidies the USDA uses to support greater corn production has led, in part, to the creation and proliferation of high-fructose corn syrup sweetened drinks, which are a major cause of both adult and childhood obesity (Bray et al., 2004, unkn). Of course, the relationship between subsidies and obesity in the United States is complex. Many factors relating to agricultural production on a large-scale global level influence what is affordable for the consumer, in-turn, affecting what the consumer purchases and feeds their families. As one author concluded, “any way you look at it, the number of factors involved makes it hard to encapsulate the relationship between farm support and obesity in a neat cause-and-effect equation” (Fields, 2004, 21).

Although some literature argues that eliminating subsidies will only serve as a quick fix to childhood obesity and other health problems (Wallinga, 2010, unkn), most literature agrees that subsidies for large-scale agriculture do act as a barrier for expanding small-scale and local farms.

Essentially, localized food systems act to decentralize the global food system, which many authors suggest is one of the solutions for the increasingly evident environmental, social, and political problems that come with global food (DeWeerdt, 2009, unkn.). The argument for decentralized food systems, however, does not address a potential problem of the movement that asks ‘who will overtake the current global food structures’? For example, DeWeerdt asks, “Who will own the regional processing plants?
Who will work there? How can farmers be assured of a fair price for their commodities?” (2009, unkn.) These are political issues that will need to be addressed if local food is going to be chosen as the alternative to the global food system. Regulation, policy, and political factors will be a large portion of the governmental decision to promote local food projects and remove themselves from global food affairs.

Conclusion

According to its advocates, local food can help close the gap between farmer and consumer, and can recreate relationships that have been lost in a global market. The development of local food markets can be attributed to consumer preference for alternative foods that are often labeled as healthy, specialty, or better for the environment. Expansive local food systems, especially in a progressive food region, must still overcome barriers to equal access to local food for everyone. Dowler and Caraher state that few projects actually address the issues associated with the difficulty low-income consumers have in gaining access to local food markets (2003, 63). Very few projects also address the dichotomy of rich versus poor that alternative food systems create, which often further the hierarchical structures creating food injustice (Dowler and Caraher, 2003, 61). Labeling local food as the solution to our agricultural-environmental problems still oppresses poor communities, especially females in those communities who cannot afford to buy local. Local food can be seen as expensive or inaccessible to these communities, and the alternative food movement and its promotional programs could
benefit from advocating for local food that is available for all socioeconomic classes and all groups of people.

Government programs aimed at promoting small-scale farmers and environmentally sound farming practices can act as the missing link needed to help low-income communities gain access to alternative food. The farmer to consumer relationship is one of the popular draws to the local food movement and has spurred this government reaction to help promote local farmers. The USDA’s Know Your Farmer Know Your Food initiative is one such program that claims to help recreate the relationship between farmer and consumer by promoting local farmers. It is still unclear, however, if this program will press for equality in the local food markets by helping to make local food more accessible to all groups of people. In the future these programs could help the alternative food movement and local economies by becoming advocates of local food for all people. This change could facilitate a ‘food revolution’ in which local, safe, and nutritious food is available for all status of people, and in which the environmental problems created from the limited relationship between consumer and global farmer can be reduced.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Located in Northern California, Humboldt County is characterized by a productive growing season and is home to an expansive local food system. Home to 129,623 residents (2009 Census), Humboldt County is also known for its alluring coastline of Redwood trees and cool climate rainforest. Arcata, California is home to Humboldt State University and is located just minutes away from the Arcata Bay. With most of the year harboring rain in this region, plant and agricultural growth is very productive. During the growing season over 100 small-scale farms sell a variety of locally grown or raised commodities. The North Coast Growers Association is one of the first four certified farmer’s markets in California. Certified markets were established to promote direct marketing from the field to the consumer (NCGA, 2010, unkn). This means that farmers can only sell produce or commodities that they have personally grown. Certified markets ensure that the consumer buys a locally grown product that is not picked before it is ripe and then shipped thousands of miles over the globe (NCGA, 2010, unkn). Humboldt Farms also suggests that by selling produce directly from the producer to the consumer the consumer is getting the freshest produce and commodities in the area. The Humboldt County Farmer’s Market, run by the North Coast Growers Association (NCGA), is home to one of the oldest certified farmers markets in California, the Arcata Farmers Market (Redwood Info, 2010 unkn). The Arcata Farmers Market, where my interviews were conducted, offers a variety of produce, plants, and community associated vendors, music, and entertainment.
Humboldt County is also home to the California Alliance for Family Farmers (CAFF) campaign “Buy Fresh Buy Local” (CAFF, 2010, unkn). The program was designed to strengthen regional markets for family and small-scale farms. The “Buy Fresh Buy Local” stickers can be seen frequently throughout this region. This campaign is geared at increasing the visibility of local products in food markets, opening new local markets, and educating consumers about the benefits of buying local (CAFF, 2010, unkn). The success of this campaign in Humboldt County, expressed by high volumes of community participation in local food activities and events, is a telltale sign of the progressive local food movement already situated in the region.

Local food movements in the region also promote the idea of sustainability and environmental stewardship with many farmers in the Arcata farmer’s market often claiming that they do not use pesticides, fertilizers, or chemicals in their farming. As mentioned above, local food does not follow the legal standards that certified organic food must follow. The lack of standards for local food does leave room for concern about the actual sustainability of this system. Local food does not always have to be void of chemicals, fertilizers, pesticides, or growth hormones. However, local food is shown to be sustainable when discussing the issue of food transportation. In fact, most produce in the United States is picked green and shipped 1,500 miles before being sold (Pirog, 2001, 28). Products that are imported internationally take even longer to transport and make it to a place on grocery store shelves. This example shows that although local food may not always be pesticide or chemical free lowering fossil fuel and energy consumption from transportation can help lessen the tremendous stress on our environment.
Overall, the expansive local food system in Humboldt County can work together with statewide campaigns such as “Buy Fresh Buy Local” to help alleviate environmental stress that comes from industrial or global agriculture. The progressive local food system in Humboldt County is a convenient setting for local food research that includes exploring community perceptions towards local food. Considering that Humboldt County already has a well-established local food system the underlying foundational barriers to the greater expansion of local food in this region can be determined, and it will be possible to interrogate how community perceptions of local food shape local food systems.

The establishment and use of local and regional food systems is one tactic that may alleviate many environmental problems caused by global agricultural production. Farming does not have to produce food by degrading the environment, and one method of lessening that degradation is by making local food systems more prominent within communities (Pretty, 2001). Pollution, chemicals, and energy waste are adequate reasons to promote the need for local food systems within our communities, and those are only a small fraction of the environmental problems associated with food production on a global level (Halweil, 2002, 21). With the increasing problems associated with agricultural production, the world’s food systems are in need of an even greater change.

The perceived barriers surrounding local food act to hinder the expansion of this alternative food system. I will demonstrate that perceptions of local food which were problematic included issues of price, physical accessibility to places that sell local food, and issues of being unaware of how to become an active member in the system itself.
Through my research I uncovered how much people know about their global and local food systems and what perceptions they have of these systems. I also explored whether local food is perceived as more expensive or inaccessible than global food, and through a brief price analysis examined whether local food actually is more expensive.

The greater epistemological framework of a constructivist approach influences each area of my research. “The goal of research is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Creswell, 2003, 8). I also used grounded theory to execute my constructivist epistemological framework. Creswell explains that constructivist grounded theory sheds light on hierarchies of power, communication, access, and opportunity (2007, 65). By using this framework I can aim to make my research progressive and change-oriented, and create information that has meaning and need within the community of Humboldt County. Based on my chosen epistemological frameworks and methodologies I used a mixed-methods approach to my research including both surveys and semi-standardized interviews as my research methods. Along with these methods I compiled a short price comparison of common foods bought at the farmers’ market and grocery stores to have an actual price analysis between organic, local, and global produce.

I conducted 16, two-page, semi-standard interviews that consisted of a set of questions about consumer buying preferences and consumer knowledge about local food. The interviews occurred at the Humboldt County farmer’s market in Arcata, California and were 30 to 45 minutes in duration. These interviews were conducted in the months of June, July, August, and September of 2010. Although the interviews were structured with
interview questions, many participants in these interviews were able to progress from the questions and discuss other relevant issues regarding local food. These interviews did not factor into my actual data but were used to cross-reference and supplement the surveys that I conducted.

I also conducted 177, two-page surveys to assess the general level of knowledge about the local food system within the community. Consumer preference, shopping habits, and demographic data were also recorded on these surveys. The surveys were conducted in front of several grocery stores in the greater Eureka-Arcata area of Humboldt County. The grocery stores in which the surveys were conducted were: Rays in Arcata, Safeway in Arcata, Murphy’s in Blue Lake, Eureka Natural Foods, Eureka Co-op, and the Murphy’s in Sunnybrae. Both Ray’s and Safeway carry more industrial produce while the North Coast Co-op, Eureka Natural Foods, and Murphy’s are known to carry local produce. The stores were chosen because of their accessibility, willingness to participate in the research, and in order to include a greater demographic variability, including important differences between small and large towns and more liberal and conservative towns. During the course of this study qualitative and quantitative research was used in coordination with grounded theory to generate major themes from the research findings, which are discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section I discuss the key findings from the surveys that were distributed outside the various food markets and supported by the interview responses. The results revealed some interesting trends that highlight the food and shopping preferences of the participants of this study. The general distribution of answers for the survey questions and demographic categorizations for the questions are displayed in pie graph and charts. The demographic categorizations for these findings include sex, ethnicity, income, education, age, and the location in which the survey was taken. Major findings will be discussed in this section. Results that are not discussed in detail in this section, including demographic data, did not show significant findings or major trends. This section first discusses survey questions related to shopping habits, then goes on to discuss consumer preferences regarding local food. The benefits and constraints of local food in the region are also displayed within the consumer preference section.
Shopping Habits

**Figure 1:** Primary Location for Food Purchases

The first question of the survey inquires about the shopping preferences and habits of consumers in Humboldt County. Participants were able to list more than one store as the place they primarily purchase their food. Out of the 177 consumers who participated in the study, 19 percent of participants bought most of their food purchases at the North Coast Co-op which sells a large variety of local food, while 16 percent of the consumers shop at Safeway, a store known for carrying more global products and produce. Two of the other large chain stores in the area, Ray’s and Murphy’s had 13 percent of survey participants shop at their stores. Community members who participated in interviews at the Arcata farmer’s market also expressed that the North Coast Co-op and Safeway were major places for them to buy their groceries and produce. Although
store preferences were relatively evenly distributed, the North Coast Co-op was the most popular choice overall. This finding may point to the success of local food markets and alternative food systems in Humboldt County.
Figure 2: Primary Location for Food Purchases by Ethnicity

Participants involved in the surveys answered a range of demographic data in order to explore differences in local food perceptions and shopping preference among varying demographic groups. The demographic criteria used explored sex, ethnicity, income, education, age, and store location in which the survey was taken. Figure 2 shows the differences in shopping preference for the ethnicities identified as “white” and “non-white.” White participants are identified as having mainly European decent while the ethnicity identified as “non-white” comprised all other ethnicities that do not identify as being primarily of European decent. It is important to note that respondents self-identified themselves as “white” or “non-white.” The size of the sample required me to group all respondents that identified themselves as “non-white” into one category in order to show appropriate contrast between ethnicities.
The survey data suggest that white respondents were more likely to identify the North Coast Co-op (37%) as their primary source of groceries. Other popular locations for whites included, Safeway (27%), Eureka Natural Foods (22%), and Murphy’s (21%). Comparatively, non-whites were far less likely to shop at the Co-op, with only 8 percent identifying the North Coast Co-op as the store in which they buy most of their food and produce. The difference between shopping preferences between the two groups could reflect the high population of white identified community members in the Humboldt County area. As discussed earlier in the literature review, many scholars have noted that local and alternative food systems have been regarded as having white elitist followers. The negative discourse surrounding local food may be emulated in this particular finding, and may be hindering ethnicities that do not identify “white” from shopping these markets.
Participants were also asked if they ever purchase food from local food markets such as the farmer’s markets, co-ops, or local CSA’s. As mentioned earlier, Humboldt County has been part of a strong local food movement. This movement is indicated by the finding that 89 percent of the participants of this study have or do currently shop at local food sources, including farmer’s markets, co-op’s and CSA’s, while only 11 percent of participants said they have not. The findings of this question contrast with another question (discussed below) that asked if the participants have knowledge of the local food system where only 74 percent of participants said “yes.” These answers suggest that although participants may regularly shop within the local food system, they still may not have extensive knowledge of these systems. These findings also suggest that the bigger
problem associated with purchasing locally may be that there is a lack of knowledge about the entire local food systems and how to access it. Also, as discussed previously in the literature review, not having parameters to define local food may be an impediment to spreading and encouraging local markets.

Demographic data for ethnicity revealed that 91 percent of respondents that identified as “white” said “yes” they do purchase from local food markets, while only 81.5 percent of respondents that identified as “non-white” answered “yes” to the same question. Similarly 18.5 percent of participants who identified as “non-white” answered “no” they do not purchase food at these local food markets while only 9 percent of participants identified as “white” answered no to the same question. This finding again emphasizes the problematic construction of alternative food markets as spaces of whiteness.

The surveys also found that 31 percent of respondents shop at the North Coast Co-op, while 27 percent of respondents shop at the farmers market. Demographic criteria also showed that the North Coast Co-op and the farmers market are the most popular markets to shop for ethnicities labeled as “white” with 56 percent of white participants shopping at the North Coast Co-op and 49 percent of participants shopping at the farmers market.
Figure 4: Frequency of Shopping Local Markets by Age

Over half the respondents indicated that they shopped at local food markets “most of the time,” while 34 percent of participants answered that they only “sometimes” shopped at local food markets. The most significant findings regarding the frequency of purchasing food from local food markets is depicted in the demographic criteria for age. Age group “50-69” was the most prevalent age group to answer that they most frequently shopped at local food markets “most of the time” (64%). Age group “70 and over” was the least prevalent age group to answer that they shop local food “most of the time” with (33%). Out of the participants who answered that they “sometimes” shop the local food market, 44 percent of participants were “70 and over,” while 22 percent of the age group “70 and over” answered that they “rarely” shop at the local food markets they identified in the previous question. The age group “70 and over” has shown in this survey to be the group that most frequently answers “no” to having local food knowledge. This finding
again suggests that the underlying problem to consumer access to local food markets may be a general lack of knowledge of these markets.

**Perceptions of Local Food**

Identifying what is important to consumers regarding the food that they purchase is important for linking alternative food markets to consumer preferences. Of the survey participants, 32 percent of respondents said that “flavor/freshness” is important to them regarding the food that they purchase and consume. This answer complements responses (discussed later in this section) that stated that respondents purchase food from local food markets because they produce a higher quality product. Participants also answered that “healthy” (14%) and “organic” (14%) food were important regarding the food that they purchase. Participants also said (14%), however, that “price” was important to them regarding their food. It is important to note that respondents were able to list multiple responses to the questions that asked what is important to them regarding the food that they purchase and consume.
Respondents were asked to identify the most important consideration they make when purchasing food. Their most common responses were, “flavor/freshness” (32%) “organic,” (14%) “healthy,” (14%) and “price” (14%). These percentages correspond to the previous questions answers and show that these three responses are the most popular parameters that are considered when purchasing food. However, the data also indicate that men and women approach their food purchases in slightly different ways, as Figure 5 illustrates. More specifically, men were more likely to list “flavor/freshness” (33%) as the most important to them regarding the food that they purchase and consume, while only 23 percent of women answered the same. Women were more likely to consider whether or not food was “organic” (19%) or “healthy” (17%) than men. “Price” or expense was
another prevalent answer with 14 percent of men and 9 percent of women answering that it was important to them regarding their food purchases and consumption.

Participants were asked if they have knowledge of Humboldt County’s alternative food system. Out of the 177 participant answers, 74 percent of participants indicated that they did have knowledge of the local food system, while 23 percent of the participants said they did not have knowledge of the local food system in Humboldt County. Participants involved in the interviews at the Arcata Farmer’s Market also expressed that they did have knowledge of the local food system in Humboldt County and were familiar with purchasing food from the surrounding-area local food markets. These interview respondents all said yes when asked if they have knowledge of the local food system, and could be a reflection of the interviews location at the Farmer’s Market that sells local produce, meats, and products.

Survey respondents were also asked to identify what imagery, thoughts, or concepts come to mind when they think about “local food.” Essentially this question was designed to help create a definition of local food based on the perceptions of the participants of this study. The most common descriptions of local food offered by survey respondents were “location” (22%), “freshness/flavor/taste” (18%), and “safe,” (14%). Other common answers included, “supporting local farms/economies” (14%) and “environmentally sound/sustainable farming” (8%). Participants in the more extended interviews at the Arcata farmers market generally offered similar assessments, with most expressing sentiments like supporting local farms and economies, supporting environmentally sustainable framing, and buying quality food.
Figure 6: Local Food Boundaries

Given that location was a popular defining feature of local food, survey respondents were asked to identify how close food has to be grown or prepared to be labeled as “local food.” Respondents were evenly split between those who considered only food grown within the county to be local (45%), and those who felt that food grown in neighboring counties could also be considered local (42%). This definition closely parallels the definition of local within the context of the Arcata farmers’ market, which limits participation to Humboldt county farmers.

Interview participants from the farmer’s market also answered this question and were given the chance to express their personal definition of local. Some responses received were that local food is “within a 50 mile radius,” “within the county,”
“bioregional and relatively close enough,” “100 miles at the most,” “Humboldt County,” “west coast grown and hopefully in California,” “within walking or biking distance,” “within a 25 miles radius,” “within a days drive,” and “hopefully not flown in a plane to get here.” As the interview participants expressed, the definition for local food is not easily articulated. However, based on the surveys, it is commonly understood that the closer the proximity of the farm to the market, the more “local” a product actually is.
Figure 7: Local Food Boundaries by Ethnicity

Demographic data for the question “how close does food have to be grown or prepared to be local” revealed sharp differences between ethnicities identified as “white” and “non-white.” Respondents self-identifying as white were more likely to define “local” more narrowly, with 47 percent answering that food had to be grown or prepared “within the county” to be called local food, and 42 percent defining local as grown within surrounding counties. Comparatively, only 22 percent of the ethnicity identified as “non-white” said that food had to be grown or prepared within the county, and 21 percent stating that food had to be grown or prepared “within surrounding counties” to be considered local food. In general, all the answers for ethnicities that identified as “non-white” were evenly disbursed with roughly 20 percent of participants answering for each
question. The majority of answers by ethnicities that identified as “white” stated that food had to be either grown “within the county” or “within the surrounding counties” to be considered local. This shows that in this study the two identified ethnicity groups have different perceptions and possibly definitions about what local food is and what parameters define local food. Again, these differing perceptions of local food may be associated with the high number of “white” identified respondents that took the surveys, or they could reflect the earlier discussion of the creation of white spaces within alternative food markets. Constructed white spaces could be responsible for the creation of barriers to close localized food systems, therefore possibly expanding “non-white” respondent definitions of local food to outside the county.

Another survey question asks about the consumers’ preference to buy local food, regardless of constraints that may be hindering respondents’ current participation in the local food system. This question also hints at the availability of local food markets to participants in the study. Participants who previously answered that they do not buy local food but stated here that they would like to buy local may hint at the unavailability or inaccessibility of current local food markets that may include a lack of transportation to these markets, location of farmer’s markets and other local outlets, income, and knowledge, to name a few. A remarkable 97 percent of participants who answered the survey remarked that they would buy local food if there were no barriers stopping them from purchasing at these local food markets, while only 3 percent of the participants said they would not buy local food even if they could. These findings further reiterate that there are major accessibility problems with shopping local food markets.
Benefits of Local Food

Figure 8: Benefits of Shopping Local Food Markets

Consumer perception of the benefits of local food is important when discussing why the expansion of alternative markets is so important. Figure 5 above depicts the most popular reasons listed for general food purchases. Respondents were most likely to list that “flavor/freshness” (32%) was the most popular reason why they purchase food, while also stating that “organic,” (14%) “healthy,” (14%) and “price” (14%) were important reasons for to consider. Compared to their general considerations when purchasing food (discussed in Figure 5 above), respondents were more likely to consider the need to support local farms and the local economy (33%). Other common reasons for buying local food included better “flavor/freshness/taste” (22%), and “healthy” (13%). Participants were also asked a similar question about local food purchases that yielded
similar results in which 29 percent of respondents answered that they buy local food to “support local farms and economies,” while 23 percent of participants answered that they buy local food because of the better “flavor and taste.” Respondents also said that they buy local food over global food because it is “healthy” (13%), and “organic” (10%). These results show that some of the most popular answers listed for reasons why food is purchased (for example, flavor/freshness and healthy) do correlate with the benefits listed by respondents of shopping within local systems.
Revealing the problems with the local food system is the first step in solving those problems to further expand local food markets. Figure 9 depicts the reasons that the participants of the study do not buy local, in other words, what hinders the participants from buying local food and therefore hinders the local food system from expanding even further. The most commonly identified reason for not buying more local food was cost, with 37 percent of respondents indicating that they believed local food was “too expensive.” Many interview participants expressed a similar sentiment, explaining that the cost of food was the main reason why they did not buy local produce. Interestingly,
the second most common response offered for why consumers did not purchase local food was because they grew their own food (22%). Although listed as an answer to why respondents do not buy local food, this answer is actually not a barrier to local food but is a means of local food production in itself. Other common responses included, “limited variety” and “limited availability” of foods in local markets (16%) and the “inconvenience” of local food markets (13%).
The demographic data for education showed interesting differences in the explanation offered for not buying local food. Respondents with at least some postgraduate education were far more likely to list the price of local food as a reason to not shopping locally, with 51 percent of respondents with a graduate degree listing price as the main obstacle to local food markets, compared to just 37 percent of respondents with a bachelor’s degree, and 28 percent with less than a bachelor’s degree. However, 32 percent of the “high school/some college” group declined to state why they did not buy local food. Given the perceived status of local food as a status or positional good (discussed earlier in the literature review), there may have been some pressure not to list price as a barrier.

These findings correlate with academically noted consumer perceptions that local food is more expensive than industrial agricultural produce and with the literature review.
discussion mentioned earlier that explains the externalized costs of industrial agricultural products. The discussion defined environmental and social problems as an outcropping of these destructive hidden costs and these findings express participant’s perceptions that industrial food still may be cheaper than local food.

Another survey question also inquired about the constraints of the local food system in Humboldt County. Again, 28 percent of participants feel that one of the biggest problems with shopping the local food system is that it is “expensive,” while the limited scope of products, either directly expressed as the “limited variety or availability” (15%) or the “seasonality” (9%) of local foods was also identified as a barrier. Interestingly, 14 percent of respondents felt that there were “no problems” with shopping the local food system. This answer, along with previous answers that show a shopping preference towards local food markets could mean that many consumers in Humboldt County feel that local food is the best option for food and produce and that there is no reason to shop outside of the local market. Overall, the most prevalent answers in response to questions regarding the constraints of local food are expense, limited variety, and limited availability. These answers support the critiques of local food that state that price and availability are two key barriers to the growth of this alternative market.
Respondents were also asked to identify their main reason for buying at larger chain supermarkets. Not surprisingly, the most common reasons included lower cost (35%), convenience (28%), and availability of different foods (14%). Interestingly, 11 percent of participants, however, answered that there was “no reason” that they would choose a global food store such as Safeway, Murphy’s, or Ray’s over a local food choice. In other words, 11 percent of participants felt that there was no good reason to shop at a large corporate supermarket over a local food market. This answer could also hint at the local food activism and support for alternatives systems within Humboldt County in which consumers feel that there is never a reason to shop corporate grocery stores when local food is available.
Produce Price Analysis for Food Markets in Humboldt County

I conducted a price analysis of 5 selected stores in Humboldt County to show the differences in price between local, organic, and industrial produce. In order to determine whether or not consumer perceptions of the higher price of local food were grounded in reality, several spot price comparisons were made between the Arcata farmer’s market and local supermarkets in the area. Table 1 below shows the prices for a select few fruits and vegetables that are common amongst shoppers both at local and global food markets. These prices were observed in September of 2010, and show an “at-a-glance” view of the prices for produce that was grown either locally (within the county and surrounding county) and globally (out of state or out of county). The chart also shows differences between food that is USDA approved as organic and food that is not.
Table 1: Price Analysis of Local, Organic, and Industrial Produce

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Produce</th>
<th>Arcata Farmer’s Market</th>
<th>Safeway Arcata</th>
<th>Safeway Arcata-Organic</th>
<th>Murphy’s Blue Lake (organic)</th>
<th>Murphy’s Sunnybrae</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tomatoes</td>
<td>$2-$3/pound</td>
<td>$1.99/pound</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>$5.99/pound</td>
<td>$1.69/pound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kale</td>
<td>$2/pound</td>
<td>$1.99/pound</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>$1.99/pound</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gala Apples</td>
<td>$2.50/pound</td>
<td>$1.99/pound</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>$4.99/pound</td>
<td>$1.49/pound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuji</td>
<td>$2.50/pound</td>
<td>$1.99/pound</td>
<td>$2.49/pound</td>
<td>$4.99/pound</td>
<td>$1.69/pound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broccoli</td>
<td>$2.50/pound</td>
<td>$.67/pound</td>
<td>$2.49/pound</td>
<td>$1.99/pound</td>
<td>$1.59/pound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter Squash</td>
<td>$1-$1.50/pound</td>
<td>$.79/pound</td>
<td>$2.49/pound</td>
<td>$.69/pound</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bell Peppers</td>
<td>$2-$3/pound</td>
<td>$2.99/pound</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>$4.99/pound</td>
<td>$2.59/pound</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The comparisons in produce for each store shows that there are definite differences in prices among local, organic, and global food. As Table 1 illustrates, produce labeled as organic was more expensive than produce that was not. For example, organic Fuji apples from Murphy’s Market in Blue Lake, CA cost $4.99 per pound and organic apples from Safeway were $2.49 per pound, while non-organic Fuji apples at Murphy’s Market in Sunnybrae were $1.69 per pound and non-organic Fuji apples from Safeway in Arcata were $1.99 per pound. Fuji apples from the farmer’s market that were not labeled as organic but were farmer professed to be organic were $2.50 per pound. Interview participants from the farmer’s market stated that they believed almost all
Arcata farmer’s market growers to be organic, even if not USDA certified. Organic tomatoes, kale, Gala apples, and orange and yellow peppers were not available from Safeway, while kale and winter squash were not available from Murphy’s in Sunnybrae.

Examining the table shows that overall organic produce is generally more expensive than non-organic produce. Non-organic produce is less expensive than organic produce but it is not always less expensive than local produce. This chart does show that global produce from Safeway in Arcata is cheaper than both organic and local produce from the farmer’s market. However, some of the food from Murphy’s in Sunnybrae, Murphy’s in Blue Lake, and the Arcata farmer’s market, although not certified organic by the USDA claims to still be grown with organic practices. The prices on non-certified organic local produce from Murphy’s in Sunnybrae are slightly cheaper than even the global produce from Safeway in Arcata. In general, however, produce from the Arcata farmer’s market, although cheaper than certified organic produce, was more expensive than non-certified local food sold in stores and produce sold in global food markets.

Participants at the farmer’s market in Arcata who answered interview questions perceived the farmer’s market produce to be more expensive than other produce found in grocery stores. However multiple interview participants expressed that they believe that the growers at farmer’s market or local farmers in general are organic, this suggests that there is trust in the local farmers, and shows the community willingness to support local food to help support the local economy. These answers support the price analysis that shows that in general, the farmer’s market produce is more expensive than grocery store produce, except for organic produce, which is even more expensive than the farmer’s
market. It is important to remember, however, that sales, seasonality, and competition constantly have the ability to change the prices of produce between stores. This constant changing of prices could change the outcomes of a price analysis for the same stores using the same produce if it was observed during a different season, or even month. Further price analysis should be carried out weekly throughout the seasons to determine if the information in this analysis holds true for differences in variables.

Throughout the course of my research I found that the barriers to the expansion of the local food system in Humboldt County, California include consumer perceptions that local food is expensive, inaccessible, and more inconvenient than the global food market. These findings are supported by the earlier discussion of consumer perceptions of local food (discussed in the literature review). The barriers to local food explored in the literature review portray local food as expensive, elitist, and often unavailable to “non-white” ethnicities. My findings also portrayed the differences in local food perception and purchasing between ethnicities, which may directly relate to the discussion of the creation of white spaces in local food systems that makes local food inaccessible. My research data also supports the literature that discusses specific benefits of local food to include supporting local economies and better quality food. My research found that the benefits of local food included supporting local farms and economies, being healthier than conventional global food, and being of a higher quality and flavor than global food. My research also explored the respondents’ definition of local food and found that no one definition for local food can be determined, and that local food is individually perceived.
The next section will provide the concluding remarks of this local food study and give recommendations for further research on alternative food systems.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the course of this research I explored if and why Humboldt County community members buy local food over global food, and what these members feel the major problems with local food markets are. I directed my research towards uncovering consumer perceptions of local food and found that the perceptions of local food noted by academics in food literature are also mirrored in Humboldt County. I hope that the problems with local food systems expressed in this research can aid in further research that eventually eliminate or alleviate these major barriers to the expansion of local food in the North Coast region, California, and one day the nation. The development of alternative food systems also has the potential to help alleviate environmental problems associated with food production.

Although I have sought out a definition for local food throughout this research, no one definition for local food can be determined as local food is an individually perceived element of a community that often exacerbates strong feelings on politics, health, and lifestyle choices. In fact, it may be easier to define local food by what it is not: local food is not global food that has traveled thousands of miles to get to our plates. Rather, local food is food that is grown within close proximity to our communities, houses, and kitchens. Local food, although not easily defined, is perceived as a beneficial element to the community of Humboldt County and often used as a trademark for expressing community support and togetherness in this region.
A larger study held in Humboldt County, California would be beneficial for exploring the benefits of and barriers to the areas’ local food system. Time restrictions were a barrier to creating a larger study for this thesis that utilized more of the community. A larger study, however, could more easily generalize the perceptions of the community to help reveal perceptions about alternative food markets. I would also recommend that larger studies similar to this thesis be conducted in other areas of California and the nation in order to compare the perceptions and responses of participants for similarities and differences based on region.

As discussed earlier, the academic literature on local food perception supports my research findings that reveal local food as expensive, inaccessible, and unavailable. The benefits to local food found in my research are also supported by academic literature that identifies local food as being healthy, flavorful food. My literature review discussed consumer preferences for local food to also include environmental advocacy for “greener” farming practices, however my research found that buying local food to help promote environmentally sustainable agriculture was actually quite low on the list of reasons to buy local. Local food is often marketed as an environmental alternative to the poor farming practices of industrial agriculture. However, as my research found, the most popular reason for consumers to purchase local food was to support the local farms and economy.

Local food, although removed from the industrial agricultural sector, is still driven by supply and demand curves and consumer preferences. It is with this
understanding that local food marketing strategies should take into account the reasons why consumers purchase local food. Instead of marketing local food to consumers in Humboldt County on the basis of purchasing from environmentally friendly food systems, marketing strategies in the region should shift their advertisements to include the consumer identified reason for purchasing locally, supporting the local economy. Although similar studies in other regions would be necessary to find out if supporting local economies is a popular reason for purchasing local food elsewhere, it may prove beneficial to local food campaigns outside the region to shift their marketing strategy. Linking local food marketing campaigns with consumer preferences for buying locally to support the local economy may be the necessary step in further promoting and sustaining the growth of the alternative food market. It is possible that the best way to expand local food is to focus on what the community needs. My research has proven that here in Humboldt County consumers prefer to support the regions local farmers, economies, and community.
APPENDIX A- Local Food Survey

1) Please list where you buy most of your produce and other food groceries?

☐ Safeway  ☐ Murphy’s  ☐ Ray’s  ☐ North Coast Co-op  ☐ Wildberries

☐ Eureka Natural Foods  ☐ Winco  ☐ Farmer’s Market  ☐ CSA

☐ Other (please specify) ________________________________

2) Do you have knowledge of the local food system here in Humboldt County?

Yes      No

3) Do you ever purchase food from the farmers markets, Co-ops, CSA’s?

☐ Yes      ☐ No

If so, which local food markets?

☐ Farmer’s Market  ☐ North Coast Co-op  ☐ CSA  ☐ Eureka Natural Foods

☐ Wildberries  ☐ Other (please specify) ________________________________

4) How often do you buy local food from these local food markets identified above?

☐ Most of the time  ☐ Sometimes  ☐ Rarely  ☐ Never

5) Please write what words, thoughts, concepts, or images come to mind when you hear the words “local food”?

6) What are the most important reasons you do buy local food? (Please list)

7) What are the most important reasons you do not buy local food? (Please list)
8) What do you feel the biggest problems with shopping within the local food system are? (Please list)

9) What do you feel the biggest benefits with shopping within the local food system are? (Please list)

10) How close does food have to be grown/prepared to be local? (Please Circle one)

☐ Within the County   ☐ Within the surrounding Counties   ☐ Within the State
☐ Within the Country

11) Would you like to buy local food if you could?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

12) Why would you choose Safeway, Murphy’s, Ray’s, etc over local food markets like the co-op, farmer’s market, or natural foods?

13) What is important to you regarding the food that you purchase and consume?

14) Please list any other thoughts you would like to express that came to mind during the course of this survey

Sex: ☐ Male   ☐ Female

Ethnic Background: __________________________________________________________

Yearly Income Level:

☐ less than $20,000   ☐ $20,000 – $50,000   ☐ $50,000 - $100,000   ☐ more than $100,000

Highest Level of Education Completed:

☐ High School   ☐ Some College   ☐ Bachelors Degree   ☐ Graduate Degree or Higher

Age ________
APPENDIX B- Interview Questions

1) Where do you buy most of your produce and other food groceries?

2) How often would you say you purchased food from these local food markets?

3) What are the most important reasons you do or do not buy local food?

4) Why would you choose a local food source over a global food market such as Safeway, Murphy’s, etc?

5) What words, thoughts, concepts, or images come to mind when I say the words “local food”?

6) What words, thoughts, concepts, or images come to mind when I say the words “global food”?

7) What is important to you regarding the food that you purchase and consume?

8) What do you feel the biggest problem with shopping within the local food system is?

9) How close does food have to be grown/prepared to be local?

10) Are there any other thoughts you would like to express that came to mind during the course of this interview?
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