

Michigan Farm to Institution Network—20% by 2020

Understanding How Michigan Institutions Define Local Food

WHAT IS “LOCAL?”

In Michigan, local food is of increasing interest to consumers and to institutions who serve them,^{1,2} but the definition of “local” food is often unclear and/or varies by institution. Consumers may also have very different ideas about what counts as local food.³ Staff members from the Michigan Farm to Institution Network (MFIN) wanted to get a better understanding of definitions currently in use by institutions across the state, to help us and our partners be more precise about what we mean when we talk about local food. Understanding existing criteria for local foods can also help us offer guidance to institutional food buyers and work with food vendors to develop a more consistent definition across the food system.

Through a simple electronic survey distributed to institutional food service buyers, we used a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions to try to capture definitions of local food, including complex definitions and definitions using multiple criteria. The survey focused on two primary questions:

- › Does your institution have an official definition in place for what is considered “local” food?
- › If not, do you have personal criteria you use to identify local food when making purchasing decisions?

After discarding responses from individuals unaffiliated with institutions, we had 78 responses to the survey. These responses included food buyers from:

- › 23 schools and school districts
- › 26 early childhood programs
- › 3 hospitals
- › 1 long-term care facility
- › 8 colleges or universities
- › 17 others representing a mix of grocery stores, nonprofits and community centers, residential child care institutions, food hubs, and incubator kitchens.

Of these 78 respondents, 86% said they currently purchase local foods. We assume, given the topic of this survey, that food buyers already purchasing local foods were more likely to respond. Therefore we cannot assume this percentage of local purchasing activity, or this survey sample overall, is representative of all institutions across the state. The sample also represents only a small fraction of the nearly twelve thousand institutions in Michigan, although the two largest respondent groups, schools/school districts and early childhood programs, do align with the two most numerous types of Michigan institutions.⁴

1 In 2014, over half (54%) of all Michigan school food service directors reported buying local food. Thompson, M. & Colasanti, K. (2015). Farm to School in Michigan: Statewide Response Shows Widespread Activity. Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems. Available from: foodsystems.msu.edu/resources/2014_megs_survey_brief.

2 Among institutions in the metro Detroit area surveyed in 2012, approximately half (41) of respondents received requests for local foods from their customers and the majority (77.5%) had purchased local foods in the last year. Matts, C. & Colasanti, K. (2014). Local Food Interest by Institutions in Southeast Michigan. Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems. Available from: foodsystems.msu.edu/resources/ffi-se-mi.

3 In a national survey of grocery shoppers in 2008, “over 70% of respondents considered a 50 mile radius as ‘local,’ while the 300 mile radius is more likely considered as ‘regional’ rather than ‘local’ by most consumers. This is an important delineation since 300 miles is often used as a boundary for ‘local’ by retailers as a realistic distance to procure enough volume and variety.” Thilmany, D. D., Nurse, G., & Onozaka, Y. (2010). Local food consumers: How motivations and perceptions translate to buying behavior. *Choices*, 25(1).

4 Colasanti, K. & Thompson, M. (2016). Cultivate Michigan 2016 Data Brief. Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems. Available from: foodsystems.msu.edu/resources/cultivate-michigan-2016-data-brief.

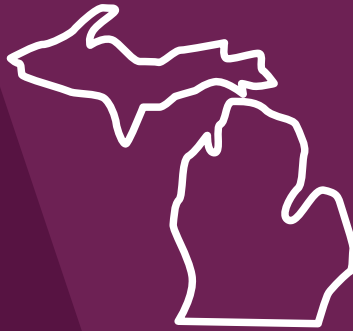
HERE IS WHAT WE LEARNED



MOST INSTITUTIONS HAVE A SPECIFIC DEFINITION IN MIND WHEN TALKING ABOUT LOCAL FOOD.

In total, 65 of 78 respondents (83%) have a specific definition of local they are using when making food purchasing decisions.

31 of 78 respondents (40%) said their institution has an official local definition, and 34 others (44%) said they have personal criteria they use for determining local.



THE MOST COMMONLY-USED DEFINITION IS FOOD GROWN OR RAISED IN THE STATE OF MICHIGAN.

50% of all institutional food buyers (39 of 78; 60% of those with a specific definition) use the state of Michigan as their definition or part of their definition.

- 25 respondents use the state of Michigan as their sole criterion.
- 14 others use it as one piece of a more complex or tiered definition.



TIERED SYSTEMS OR DEFINITIONS WITH A COMBINATION OF PRIORITIES ARE COMMON.

18 respondents (23%) use a multi-part definition.

"We use a tier process—combining price and availability with [a range that extends from] growers we know personally to the southeast region to the state."

"[We] prefer to buy direct from local farmers with direct contact or in the Northern Lakes foodshed. Then we prefer Michigan grown."

"Our first preference is grown and raised in Michigan products. But we also like to support local companies that don't necessarily have all local product in their products. So we have two criteria: first purchasing local and Michigan food and secondly supporting local and Michigan companies."

Methods

In summer 2016, MFIN staff conducted an electronic survey to gather information about local definitions in use by Michigan institutions. We asked that recipients complete the survey if they were a "food buyer or person who makes food purchasing decisions at an institution serving food." This brief questionnaire was conducted as a convenience sample, distributed via email to the MFIN membership database, institutional food service buyers/directors who had already joined the Cultivate Michigan campaign, listservs hosted by the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS), MFIN, CRFS and Michigan Good Food Facebook pages, MI Farm to School Grant recipients and MFIN leadership team and advisory committee members who were asked to pass it on through their own networks. The survey was open from May 10 to June 21, 2016.

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

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FOOD BUYERS WHO RESPONDED (18%) HAVE A LOCAL DEFINITION THAT INCLUDES FOOD GROWN OR RAISED WITHIN A SPECIFIC GEOGRAPHIC RADIUS OF THEIR SITE.

Distances ranged from 50 to 300 miles, with an average of 160 miles.

100 miles was the most common distance given, used by 6 of these 14.

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FOOD BUYERS USE A DEFINITION THAT INCLUDES A SPECIFIC COUNTY OR COUNTIES OR A SPECIFIC REGION WITHIN THE STATE OF MICHIGAN.

6



FOOD BUYERS CONSIDER "LOCAL" TO MEAN FOOD PROCURED FROM A FARMER OR PRODUCER WITH WHOM THEY HAVE DIRECT CONTACT.

4

FOOD BUYERS HAVE A DEFINITION ENCOMPASSING A MULTI-STATE REGION, EITHER THE GREAT LAKES OR MIDWEST.



CONCLUSIONS

Although we were able to reach only a small portion of the total number of institutions in Michigan, the survey results show many institutional food buyers do have a clear idea of what they consider "local food" and these definitions, while varied, share some common ground. This survey validates the definition of local food for the Cultivate Michigan campaign as food that is "grown, raised and processed in Michigan", which, from these responses, appears to be the most widely used definition. This was also the definition put forth by the Michigan Good Food Charter in 2010.⁵

Through Cultivate Michigan, MFIN's local food purchasing campaign, we seek to measure local food purchasing and track progress toward the Michigan Good Food Charter goal of 20% Michigan food in institutions by 2020. Having a better understanding of definitions in use will help to further this goal. While having a local definition is important, it is only a first step; institutions also need to be able to find and identify the local foods they want to buy from their vendors, which is not always easy to do. Even

when vendors have this information, institutional buyers often have difficulty gaining access to it. This survey data indicates that food vendors and distributors would likely meet the local food needs of a large majority of their clients by identifying products that are grown, raised and processed in Michigan. Ultimately, as food buyers and vendors coalesce around a shared understanding of "local", we hope to see local food become more available and easier to identify.

The Michigan Farm to Institution Network is co-coordinated by the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems and the Ecology Center, with support from MSU Extension. For more information, visit mifarmtoinstitution.org, cultivatemichigan.org or contact info@cultivatemichigan.org

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⁵ For more information on the Michigan Good Food Charter, see michiganfood.org.