

COMMENTARY ON COVID-19 AND THE FOOD SYSTEM

COVID-19 and consumer demand for local meat products in South Carolina

JAFSCD
Responds to
the COVID-19
Pandemic



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Introduction

The emergence of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the associated economic disruptions have challenged local food producers, distributors, retailers, and restaurants since March 2020. COVID-19 was a stress test for the U.S. local food supply chain, exposing vulnerabilities whose impacts have varied by region and sector. Some local producers saw sales fall in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions and consumer foot traffic changes (O’Hara, Woods, Dutton, & Stavely, 2021). In other areas, local food producers were able to pivot from collapsing market channels by finding opportunities elsewhere (Thilmany, Canales, Low, & Boys, 2020).

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Recent studies have shown that local foods have gained popularity over the last 12 months as consumers are buying more food to eat at home (USDA Economic Research Service, 2021). Surveys show that consumers are desiring to make more sustainable, local food purchases and are eating less fast food (Accenture, 2020; Daus, Clement, & Ding, 2020; Lalley, 2020). National brand purchases have slipped as consumers shifted their buying behaviors in response to these products being unavailable or sold out (C+R Research, n.d.), leading to hoarding (Lusk & McCluskey, 2020) and stockpiling behaviors that even caused a national freezer shortage (Tyko, 2020).

The demand increase for local foods includes local meats (Food Insight, 2021; Richards & Vassalos, 2020), and meat processing capacity continues to be a key issue for many states as they react to supply and demand shocks (Hobbs, 2021). At least 17 states have started funding programs to expand or upgrade their meat processing facilities (Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network [NMPAN], 2021). As of this writing, South Carolina has not implemented any funding program and is still experiencing a supply push from livestock producers (Richards, 2020a) as a reaction to increased consumer demand for local meat products (Richards, 2020b).

While the previously mentioned studies examined the impact of COVID-19 on local agriculture and food markets, there is little research assessing whether the observed changes in consumer behavior will persist after the crisis is over. The present commentary is an effort to add to this research.

Specifically, this commentary examines whether South Carolina consumers will continue to purchase local meats at the same rate as they did in 2020. Preliminary results suggest a majority of consumers will continue to buy the same amount of local meat products, but there is a possibility that demand could decrease after COVID-19 restrictions have ended.

Consumer Survey

One thousand and forty-eight (1,048) South Carolina consumers were surveyed in November 2020. Screening questions ensured that these consumers both ate meat and made household food-purchasing decisions. The survey was administered online through Qualtrics.¹ The survey questionnaire was pre-tested in October 2020 for wording, length, and accuracy. The definition of local meat used in this survey was as follows:

Local meat products, for the purpose of this survey, are those products that are farm raised in South Carolina within 200 miles of your home. Products are also considered local if they are produced in North Carolina and Georgia and are a short distance from the South Carolina border. Nonlocal meat are those meat products found at most food retailers (grocery stores) that are not labeled as being local.”

Results

The survey sample revealed that 741 (71%) of respondents had purchased local meat products within the last 12 months. These purchases were mostly consumed at home ($n=621$ or 84%), followed by restaurants ($n=379$ or 51%) and barbecues ($n=178$ or 24%). Question logic was used to segment participants in order to collect more detailed data concerning local meat purchases for consumption at home versus away from home.

COVID-19's Impacts on Local Meat Purchases for Home Consumption

Survey participants who purchased local meat products to eat at home were asked how their purchases changed due to COVID-19. The findings indicate that most consumers did not change their local meat

¹ Qualtrics is an online survey software provider used often in applied economics research.

consumption habits (58%), while 21.6% increased local meat consumption and 20.4% of consumers decreased or stopped consuming local meats (Table 1).

The 127 (20.4%) respondents who indicated they had decreased consumption of local meats were asked why they had made this change. Respondents indicated that they had concerns about leaving the house due to COVID-19 (32.7%), local meat products were in short supply or sold out (30.6%), they were buying less costly nonlocal meats (22.4%), or their freezers were full of nonlocal meat (14.3%). These reasons suggest that local meat purchases may have been higher if not for meat shortages and full freezers (Table 1).

Table 1. Local Meat Purchasing Behavior at Home During COVID-19

	Percent
How has COVID-19 Changed Your Local Meat Purchases for Home Consumption? (n=621)	
I have increased my consumption of local meat products	21.6%
I have not changed my consumption of local meat products	58.0%
I have decreased my consumption of local meat products	20.4%
(If Increased) How Much Have You Increased Your Local Meat Consumption? (n=134)	
I have increased my consumption over 100%	17.2%
I have increased consumption by 75% to 100%	24.6%
I have increased consumption by 50% to 74%	27.6%
I have increased consumption by 25% to 49%	17.2%
I have increased consumption by 1% to 24%	13.4%
(If Decreased) How Much Have You Decreased Your Local Meat Consumption? (n=127)	
I have decreased my consumption by 100% (stopped)	21.4%
I have decreased my consumption by 75% to 99%	10.3%
I have decreased my consumption by 50% to 74%	20.6%
I have decreased my consumption by 25% to 49%	27.8%
I have decreased my consumption by 1% to 24%	19.8%
(If Decreased) Why Have You Decreased Your Local Meat Consumption Due to COVID-19? (n=127)	
I was concerned about leaving the house to buy local meat products	32.7%
Local meat products were in short supply or sold out	30.6%
I started buying less costly nonlocal meat products	22.4%
I had stockpiled nonlocal meat products in my freezer already	14.3%

Source: Survey results (Richards, 2021b)

COVID-19 Impacts on Local Meat Purchases at Restaurants

Respondents who ate local meats at restaurants were asked how COVID-19 affected their restaurant purchases (Table 2). Over half responded that they had not changed their restaurant purchases (51.7%), while 38% decreased or stopped their consumption and 9.8% increased their consumption.

When asked to quantify the amount of decreased consumption, 30.8% responded that they had stopped consuming local meats entirely. The top three reasons provided by respondents are that most of the consumers avoided eating out during the COVID-19 period (90.1%), restaurants were closed or had reduced seating capacity (81.2%), and consumers were trying to save money by not eating out as frequently (40.6%). The next two responses suggest that some restaurants may have stopped serving local meat products.

Table 2. Local Meat Purchasing Behavior at Restaurants During COVID-19

	Percent
How has COVID-19 Changed Local Meat Purchases at Restaurants? (n=379)	
I have increased my consumption of local meat products at restaurants	9.8%
I have not changed my consumption of local meat products at restaurants	51.7%
I have decreased my consumption of local meat products at restaurants	26.6%
I have stopped consuming local meat products at restaurants	11.9%
(If Decreased) How Much Have You Decreased Your Local Meat Consumption? (n=146)	
I have stopped consuming local meat products at restaurants	30.8%
I have decreased my consumption between 75% and 99%	14.4%
I have decreased my consumption between 50% and 74%	27.4%
I have decreased my consumption between 25% and 49%	17.8%
I have decreased my consumption between 1% and 24%	9.6%
(If Decreased) Why Have You Decreased or Stopped Your Local Meat Consumption at Restaurants? (n=146) (total is greater than 100% because more than one response was allowed)	
I am currently avoiding eating out due to risks of COVID-19	90.1%
Restaurants are closed or have reduced dine-in capacity	81.2%
I am trying to save money by not eating out as much	40.6%
Restaurants are offering fewer local meat items on their menus	23.8%
Restaurants are not offering local meat items for carry-out or delivery	15.8%
I do not want to order local meat products for carry-out	9.9%

Source: Survey results (Richards, 2021b).

Post-COVID-19 Purchases of Local Meat Products for Home Consumption

Most consumers (97.3%) who purchased local meats to eat at home intend to continue purchasing local meats after COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted. Responses to the question of how much local meat they thought they would purchase after the pandemic show that most intend to purchase the same amount (48.7%), with 28.1% expecting to buy less and 23.2% expecting to buy more (Table 3).

Table 3. Local Meat Purchasing Behavior at Home After COVID-19 (n=621)

After COVID-19 Has Ended, Will You Continue to Buy Local Meat Products?	
Yes	97.3%
No	2.7%
How Much Local Meat Will You Continue to Buy After COVID-19?	
I will buy between 75% and 99% less local meat	5.3%
I will buy between 50% and 74% less local meat	9.8%
I will buy between 25% and 49% less local meat	9.0%
I will buy between 1% and 24% less local meat	4.0%
The same amount as I did before COVID-19	48.7%
I will buy between 1% and 24% more local meat	6.3%
I will buy between 25% and 49% more local meat	6.9%
I will buy between 50% and 74% more local meat	4.9%
I will buy between 75% and 100% more local meat	4.2%
I will buy over 100% more local meat	0.9%

Source: Survey results (Richards, 2021b)

Lessons Learned and Further Study

COVID-19 triggered an increase in demand for local meats in South Carolina. However, it is not clear if this increase will be a long-term phenomenon. The study findings highlight that after the end of COVID-19, most respondents will continue purchasing local meat products to eat at home. However, only 23% intend to increase their purchases and 28% plan to decrease their purchases. These results indicate a potential risk for the local meat sector in South Carolina. An expansion of local processing capacity will most likely need to be accompanied by an expansion of local markets. South Carolina livestock producers should consider escalating their marketing efforts to preserve recent demand increases.

The survey mentioned in this article also collected consumer preference data that is currently being shared with local producers to help them retain current markets and develop new ones. Also, a restaurant buyer survey will be conducted in June 2021 to discover ways to offer more local meats on restaurant menus.

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