

Title The competitiveness of local food clusters – supermarket strategies versus consumer preferences for vegetables in Sweden

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Abstract

Although several studies show that Swedish consumers express a preference for local or domestic products, imports of fresh vegetables have increased ever since Sweden entered into the European Union in 1995. Thus, the competitiveness of local food can be questioned. In Sweden most horticultural produce is sold through the large-scale food retailing system, which is concentrated to few highly vertically integrated wholesale and retail actors. Thus, our hypothesis is that these actors could be regarded as gate-openers to the marketplace for local food products. Hence, the success and competitiveness of local food ought to be dependent on the willingness of the major food wholesale and retail actors to offer a local range of products in their stores. The purpose of this paper is to examine the competitiveness of a local vegetable cluster in the southern part of Sweden, Skåne, with particular attention paid to the gate-opening role of the local supermarkets. For the competitive analysis we have used the Porter Diamond. Primary data were collected through observations of the range of locally produced vegetables in local supermarkets and interviews with representatives of local actors along the value chain. Results show that the range of locally profiled vegetables in the supermarkets is very limited, and some store managers stated that central chain strategy is a barrier to buying local produce. In contrast to this, many consumers stated that they buy local vegetables in the supermarkets on a regular basis. This contradiction could be explained by the fact that “Swedish” may be perceived by many consumers in Skåne as equivalent to local due to the region’s large share of national vegetable production. While supermarkets in general have not acted as gate-openers to local products, as was our hypothesis, there are individual exceptions, developed by innovative entrepreneurs and networks. Our conclusion is that, as the debate on climate change intensifies and the demand for high quality fresh produce increases, the supermarkets will eventually change strategies towards local products, at least on a seasonal basis.