

Abstract:

Educating the campus community about the benefits of consuming locally grown foods plays an important role in the philosophical approach to education embraced by Slippery Rock University. In an effort to support also small-scale producers in the region, the institution provided between June and August 2002 its employees with the opportunity of eating locally grown foods, in one dining hall on campus. A purposefully designed survey was administered to a sample (n=120) of regular diners and to a second sample (n=20) of local farmers, in order to investigate quality issues related to fresh fruit and vegetables consumption and production. The data were recorded on a Likert-scale to learn about priorities and concerns when fruit and vegetable quality is considered as a reliable indication of consumer's satisfaction. Ten indicators were proposed by the survey to define food quality (seasonality, taste, freshness, salubrity, price, ethics, locally grown, organic, shelf life, agronomic practices). A cumulative Pearson's correlation index of quality attribute scores identified by the survey ($r=+0.93$), allowed the researcher for comparisons among the subjects' perspectives on produce quality. The analysis of the data suggests that consumers at the university are particularly concerned with food taste, price, freshness, salubrity and shelf-life, whereas taste, freshness, seasonality, salubrity and foods that are locally grown appear to be the priority quality attributes of choice by food producers. An analysis of the remaining indicators is provided and limitations of this preliminary study are addressed with recommendations for further research needs. Despite the logistic and economic barriers that still impact the decentralization of modern food systems, there is a compelling necessity to embrace a more sustainable approach in food production and consumption by fulfilling market niches that are available at the local level. This modus operandi appears to be geared optimally also to insure food quality.