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> Capers Survey Indicates Why Shoppers Are Going Local

Capers Survey Indicates Why Shoppers Are Going Local

Sep 10, 2007 12:00 PM, By AMANDA BALTAZAR

VANCOUVER, British Columbia – Seventy percent of shoppers prefer to buy locally grown produce, according to a recent study of adults in Greater Vancouver conducted for Capers Community Markets here.

The report by the Mustel Group showed that seven out of 10 adults have increased the amount of British Columbia-grown produce they buy, and two-thirds said they are willing to pay more for it – usually 10% to 15% more.

Four-store Capers, which is owned by Wild Oats Markets (recently purchased by Whole Foods), has been a proponent of selling local produce since its first store opened in 1985. The founders of the chain, which then consisted of one store, would drive out to the Okanagan region and bring back produce to sell. The story has stuck with employees, who now strive to keep the local endeavor going strong in the stores.

The main reason customers prefer to buy local, according to the study, is to support local farmers and the local economy, but this is closely followed by concerns about the environment, with 81% of respondents showing concern about air pollution from trucking and fuel consumption. When a similar study was conducted in 2005, just 9% showed environmental concerns.

Other reasons for eating locally grown produce include: It is fresher and tastes better; it's better for consumers' health, since it's grown without added chemicals and antibiotics; and it's picked at its peak and is not preserved for long-distance transportation. Eating local also encourages consumers to eat by the seasons, and brings them more variety, since local farmers grow in small quantities and are able to try out new varieties based on taste and flavor.

The survey also revealed that more consumers are influenced by leading chefs who prefer choosing local – 53% of respondents in 2007 compared with 42% in 2005.

“Our goal is to support businesses in British Columbia and to put money back into the B.C. economy,” said spokesman Aron Bjornson.

Capers is in a good position, he said. Local farming is growing faster in British Columbia than any other Canadian province, “so we have more access and supply,” he said, adding that supply and demand seem to be growing together at a steady rate.

Approximately 40% of all produce sold in Capers' four stores is local – most of it certified organic. During harvest season from August through mid-September, this rises to 80%. Organic purchases are increasing by double digits across the board, explained Bjornson – some categories are seeing close to 25% growth.

This year, Capers will spend approximately \$1.4 million (up from \$1.2 million in 2006) on province-grown fruits and vegetables, purchased directly from 35 local farmers and growers such as Helmer's Organic

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Farms, which have been providing produce to the stores since 1985.

“We’re a seven-days-a-week farmers’ market,” said Bjornson. “For some products, we can get produce on the shelves within 24 hours of it being picked.”

Capers communicates regularly with the farmers, both before and during harvesting, and is able to meet customer demand through a picked-to-order system. This allows the produce merchandisers to provide direct feedback to farmers regarding product quality and taste, as many of the farmers (rather than wholesalers) make most of their deliveries directly to Capers. Some of the produce is shipped to central points before it’s delivered to Capers, which also helps reduce carbon emissions.

“We’ve built up relationships with suppliers and vendors that are collaborative, because we help their business,” said Bjornson. Over the years, the supply available for grocery stores has improved, he pointed out, because crops are better monitored and there are now a number of greenhouses, meaning more produce is available for longer periods.

To make customers aware of the local program, Capers provides point-of-purchase information – just a short description of the farm or the produce. The challenge is rotating the information, and not giving too much, which can turn consumers off, said Bjornson. The information is also available on the retailer’s website.

Capers has also created the B.C. Rooted and Routed program as part of its Get Local initiative. A logo accompanies local products featured in the retailer’s Fresh Start flier as well as at the point of purchase. Eventually, Capers hopes to use the logo at the POP with all local produce, and display grower and vendor profiles throughout the store.

Capers also gets the word out through its on-site nutritionist, Victoria Pawlowski, whose column is featured in the retailer’s flier and on its website. A recipe using local ingredients by Capers’ chef Nathan Hyam accompanies the column. Local chefs also contribute ideas. “We’re always looking for ways to make eating locally easier and more exciting,” said Bjornson.

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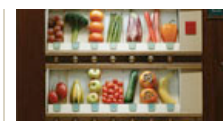
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