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Kentuckians' Consumer Perceptions of Local Dairy and Other Local Food Options

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In an era where food choices are abundant, there is a growing trend towards supporting local agriculture. One of the most impactful ways to embrace this movement in Kentucky is by purchasing local dairy products, meat, as well as fruits and vegetables. In 2023, a team from the University of Kentucky's Agricultural Economics department conducted a survey that included questions prompting Kentucky residents to indicate how often they purchased locally sourced food. While the Local Food Vitality Index Survey covers an array of aspects related to local food system performance, we will be focusing on purchasing activity related to local dairy products, meat, eggs and poultry, fruits and vegetables, and processed products (jams, salsas, baked goods, etc.)

Focusing on these food product categories, we asked survey participants to rate the performance of local products. Performance ('extremely poor' to 'excellent') was defined to participants as products **were easy to find, the items were reasonably priced, and the farmers or producers of the items were familiar and/or recognizable**. Table 1 summarizes the responses from Kentucky consumers. This is understandably a somewhat complex definition of performance ideas bundled together, but there seems to be a generally favorable view of local products across all the categories.

Table 1. Kentucky Consumer Perceptions of Local Food Performance by Product

Item	Don't Know	Extremely Poor	Poor	Neutral	Good	Excellent
Meat	16	5	9	33	26	10
Eggs & Poultry	13	4	7	31	31	14
Dairy Products	16	5	9	32	26	12
Fruits & Vegetables	8	4	7	32	31	18
Process Products	14	4	8	34	27	13

Perceptions of local food performance by product does not seem to differ much by product across age (Table 2), but rural vs. urban residency indicates slightly higher perceptions of performance in urban markets for most of the products. This is important to note because the location of consumers, and even the income of consumers, can play a large role in their purchase activity. Looking specifically at the dairy products in both the urban and rural charts, you can see that consumers rated

the performance of dairy products in the excellent category the same. Shifting to processed products, there is a slight change in those consumers in urban markets compared to those in rural. This could be due to producers selling in urban markets focusing on their branding and familiarity with consumers more so they might stand out in a larger market. Whereas in a rural market, there are less vendors and those that are selling at the market might have more personal connections with consumers. Thus, not focusing on brand awareness as much do to personal connections with the consumers.

Table 2 . Kentucky Consumer Perceptions of Local Product Performance by Age (Numbers are Percentages)

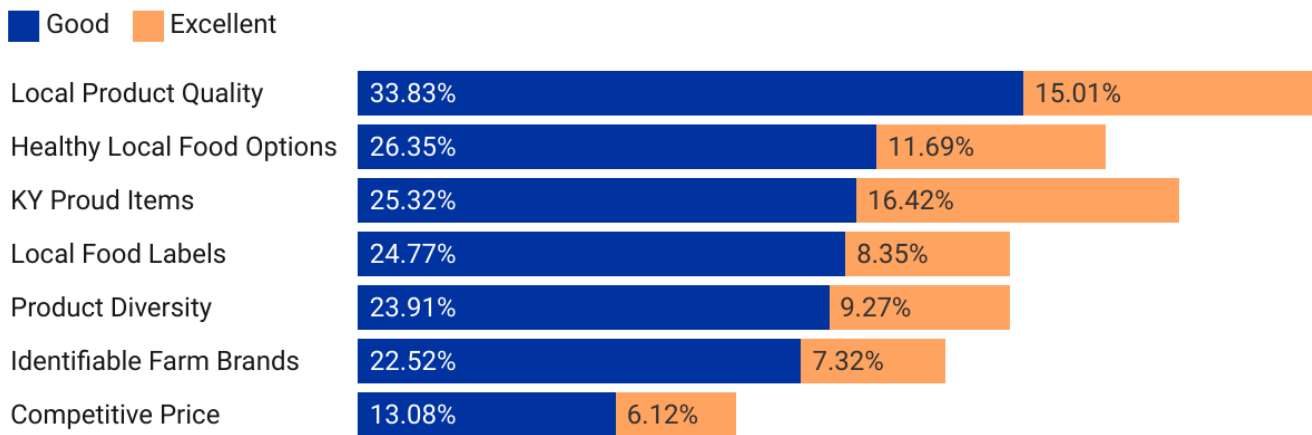
Item	Under 30 Years - Good	Under 30 Years - Excellent	30-49 Years - Good	30 - 49 Years - Excellent	50 YEarS - Good	50 Years - Excellent
Meat	23	13	36	11	40	14
Eggs & Poultry	36	15	35	15	35	16
Dairy Products	30	14	30	14	32	14
Fruits & Vegetables	28	16	31	20	35	19
Process Products	27	11	26	15	35	11

Table 3 . Kentucky Consumer Perceptions of Local Product Performance by Residency (Numbers are Percentages)

Item	Rural - Good	Rural - Excellent	Urban - Good	Urban - Excellent
Meat	26	13	38	11
Eggs & Poultry	32	15	41	17
Dairy Products	27	14	36	14
Fruits & Vegetables	30	18	38	21
Processed Products	29	14	35	17

Another area to focus on is local food product characteristics and how those can help describe Kentuckians purchase activity. You can see that respondents felt that the products at the market were hitting the mark when it comes to food product characteristics. Kentucky consumers have a strong positive perception of performance around local food as it relates to quality - and perhaps also to KY Proud branding and healthy options....but perceptions around competitive price are less positive. This seems to be a common challenge for local food marketing generally, including dairy, that consumers have a strong sense of quality/health but also that they are expensive.

Figure 1. Kentucky Consumer Perceptions of Local Food Product Characteristics Overall



Created with Datawrapper

Understanding consumer knowledge, preferences, and purchasing activity is important for promoting local food purchases and fostering a connection between consumers and their markets. When consumers are informed about the unique qualities of local foods, such as the health and economic benefits of buying local or the overall quality of local products, they are more likely to prioritize these products in their purchasing decisions. Knowing that the cheese or yogurt they purchase is made and produced here in Kentucky adds to the customer perception of the unique qualities of buying local. This awareness not only benefits the local producers in Kentucky by driving demand for locally produced goods but also contributes to sustainability and being connected to those growing your food. An informed consumer and producer base helps in preserving local food, especially our dairy and meat industry, as people become more inclined to seek out and support locally sourced food options.

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