A macro pilot study exploring the definition of “local”
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study is an investigation that captures a snapshot of the provenance of seasonal fruit in Los Angeles. This study does not aim to be comprehensive; rather its goal is to elicit attention to the question of how food retailers differ widely in their depiction of the origins of fruit available for sale (and perhaps other fresh produce as well). It is evident from this macro pilot research that not only the size, scale and ownership of the grocery store matter, but also the labeling practices and placement of signs within each individual store. It is hoped that this short study will lead to greater and more thorough analysis of the how the geographical source of fresh food is labeled.
INTRODUCTION

The research described in this report builds on the research completed in the “Distribution Strategies for Urban Farmers” chapter of *Cultivate L.A.: An Assessment of Urban Agriculture in Los Angeles County*, authored by graduate students in the UCLA Master of Urban and Regional Planning program at the Luskin School of Public Affairs. The client for the project was the University of California Cooperative Extension - Los Angeles. The project’s faculty advisors were Carol Goldstein and Stephanie Pincetl.

In particular, this researcher sought to expand on the work that Nicholas Efron and Zachary Zabel conducted, in order to learn more about the distribution of urban agricultural products in Los Angeles County. Efron and Zabel focused on two questions: “How do urban growers distribute their products? And: “What, if any, distribution networks are available for these small-scale growers?” One research method employed was to query representatives at six Los Angeles County grocery stores that advertise their produce as “local.” They asked the following questions:

*Do you sell local produce?*

*How do you define “local”?*

After collaborating with Efron and Zabel on their literature review, this researcher expanded their research by visiting additional grocery stores in order to find out what indicators the stores used to identify whether or not produce was “local” and what they defined as “local.” While this researcher utilized different research methods, the research seeks to shed light on some of the questions that Efron and Zabel identified through their work.

RESEARCH

In the literature review for the *Cultivate L.A.* chapter entitled “Distribution Strategies for Urban Farmers,” the authors explored several themes relating to the distribution of urban agriculture throughout Los Angeles County, including: “Distribution Systems and Models;” “Integrating the Urban Agriculture Sector via Direct Distribution” and “Local versus Urban.”

This researcher explored in-depth two research questions derived from the literature review’s “Local versus Urban” theme.

Overall, this researcher sought to examine the grocery stores’ practical applications of produce labeling and providing information about produce origins to consumers.

**Literature Review Excerpt #1**

“While the idea of integrating urban agriculture into Los Angeles County’s larger food system is promising, definitions of ‘local’ and ‘regional’ [as they apply to Los Angeles County] are vague throughout the literature” (Jackson et al., 2013).

**Follow-up Research Question #1**

What, if any, indicators at grocery stores tell the consumer what the terms “local” and “regional” mean when labeled as such?

**Literature Review Excerpt #2**

“The L.A. Food Policy Council defines the Los Angeles County Regional Food System as spanning 200 miles throughout 10 counties with over 22 million people” (Barham et al., 2012).

**Follow-up Research Question #2**

In practice, is this the minimum, common or maximum range from where produce marketed and advertised as “local” in Los Angeles County’s grocery stores is procured?
METHODOLOGY

This researcher conducted a macro pilot study, i.e., larger than a pilot study, but not extensive enough to be considered a full study, in late May and early June, 2013. The research examines produce labeling in a small sample of grocery stores in Los Angeles County. The entire County is extensive (in terms of both population and geography), and a full survey of grocery stores would have to include many more than the number that it was feasible for this researcher to visit in this phase of work.

**Initial Methodology**

The initial methodology for this research sought to compare selected produce at 24 grocery stores in two geographic locations in Los Angeles County (12 stores at each location) with distinctly different demographic characteristics.

The two selected locations were the City of Inglewood and the City of Santa Monica. According to U.S. Census Bureau 2012 population estimates, Inglewood is larger than Santa Monica at 111,182 residents, while Santa Monica has 91,812 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Inglewood is also slightly geographically larger than Santa Monica at 9.07 square miles, while Santa Monica is 8.42 square miles (US Census Bureau, 2013). Inglewood’s median household income is $44,021 and Santa Monica’s is $71,400 (US Census Bureau, 2013). Moreover, according to 2010 US Census Bureau data, Inglewood’s population is 23.3% White persons, 43.9% Black persons, 50.6% persons of Hispanic or Latino origin (2013). Santa Monica’s population is 77.6% White persons, 3.9% Black persons and 13.1% persons of Hispanic or Latino origin (US Census Bureau, 2013). By choosing two locations in Los Angeles County with different demographic characteristics, the research sought to compare whether location indicators and citations for produce differed by geographic location.

In order to select the produce for examination, research was conducted regarding crops currently in season at the end of May, 2013 located within the boundaries of the L.A. Food Policy Council’s definition of the Los Angeles County Regional Food System. The grocery stores to be surveyed were selected based on internet searches of “grocery store near Inglewood, California” and “grocery store near Santa Monica, California” on Yelp.com and GoogleMaps.com. This researcher then examined the lists of grocery stores generated by each search engine, and selected 12 grocery stores in each location based on the goal of ensuring that there would be a mix of different categories of grocery stores for the study. The stores were categorized in the following way:

- **Chain/Bargain**
- **Chain/Boutique**
- **Chain/Ethnic**
- **Chain/General**
- **Independent/Ethnic**
- **Independent/General**
- **Independent/Health**

A small sign lists corn as “Locally Grown” at Vons in Inglewood.

Photograph by Laurel Hunt, Vons, Inglewood, CA
Santa Monica vendors provided a sizable array of examples of in-season (last week of May, 2013) produce from within the regional “foodshed” area.

Revised Methodology

After conducting a pilot study of five grocery stores, three adjustments to the research methodology were devised.

First, the research shifted to compare more grocery stores in each category instead of focusing only on the differences between grocery stores in Inglewood and those in Santa Monica. Given limited time and resources, expanding the variety of grocery store categories took precedence. Consequently, the research area grew to incorporate a variety of Culver City markets, as well as two Chain/Boutique stores in Century City and Westwood (both located in the City of Los Angeles).

Second, instead of solely researching crops in season in the geographic area defined by the L.A. Food Policy Council as the regional “foodshed” of 200 miles, this researcher used the Saturday Santa Monica Farmers’ Market (on Arizona Street between 2nd and 4th Streets) as a control group (Barnham et al., 2012). More specifically, Santa Monica vendors provided a sizable array of examples of in-season (last week of May, 2013) produce from within the regional “foodshed” area.

If a produce item found at the Santa Monica Farmers’ Market appeared on more than two tables from farms within the “regional foodshed,” it was considered appropriate for examination in the study. In-season produce included such items as asparagus, cherries and cauliflower among many others (SFMA, 2002).

Ultimately, this researcher chose to pursue produce location indicators for apricots, avocados and nectarines, as these three products were common and would most likely be displayed individually at grocery stores, making it easier to compare the stickers on each item.

It is also important to note that there are many different varieties of apricots, nectarines and avocados and that this study examined all varieties of apricots, avocados and nectarines available in each grocery store. For example, white nectarines and yellow nectarines are grouped under the category of “nectarines.”
Third, this researcher subtracted two stores in Culver City that had been considered under the “Independent/Ethnic” category because, with further internet research of these stores’ advertisements and promotional literature, they did not appear to have substantial produce sections including avocados, apricots, and nectarines.

**Selected Grocery Stores**

**City of Inglewood - 8**
- Bestway - Chain/Bargain
- Buy Low - Chain/Bargain
- El Super - Chain/Bargain
- Food 4 Less - Chain/Bargain
- Northgate - Chain/Ethnic
- Ralphs - Chain/General
- Smart and Final - Chain/Bargain
- Vons - Chain/General

**City of Santa Monica - 8**
- Bob’s Market - Independent/General
- Co-opportunity - Independent/Health
- Mrs. Winston’s Green Grocery - Independent/Health
- Tehran Market - Independent/Ethnic
- The Farms - Independent/General
- Pavilions - Chain/General
- Vons - Chain/General
- Whole Foods - Chain/Boutique

**City of Culver City - 6**
- Asia Foods - Independent/Ethnic
- Pavilions - Chain/General
- Ralphs - Chain/General
- Sprouts Farmers Market - Chain/Boutique
- Top Valu - Chain/Bargain
- Trader Joe’s - Chain/Boutique

**Century City (City of Los Angeles) - 1**
- Gelson’s Market - Chain/Boutique

**Westwood (City of Los Angeles) - 1**
- Bristol Farms - Chain/Boutique

**FINDINGS**

After visiting all 24 stores, it became clear that analyzing the grocery stores by location yielded weaker findings than sorting them by category. Instead, the more important connection exists between the grocery store category and the likeliness that it would label its produce in a certain way.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that, while the category of grocery store was a more important indicator than its location, more stores of certain categories exist in certain locations than in other locations. For example, none of the Chain/Bargain grocery stores examined were located in Santa Monica and none of the Chain/Boutique grocery stores were located in Inglewood. This might be attributed to the different demographics of each city. For example, because Inglewood has a lower household median income, that might indicate a higher demand for Chain/Bargain stores than Santa Monica.

However, it is to be decided if this researcher had visited every single grocery store in each city, would the outcome of the study be different?
PRODUCE LABELING IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY GROCERY STORES

Chain/Bargain (Six Stores)

This category of grocery store did not use the word “local” in any capacity. There were no large signs, banners or educational materials about produce being “local” or “California-grown.” However, the grocery stores in this category listed countries of origin on their small product signs for produce.

In general, produce was not always labeled consistently (in terms of location of origin). For example, tomatoes at one grocery store had stickers indicating that the produce was from California, but small product signs listed them as grown in Mexico.

The stickers on the produce usually stated the following:

- Nectarines: USA
- Apricots*: USA
- Avocados: California

* (Two of the six locations visited did not offer apricots in their produce sections).

Chain/Ethnic (One Store)

This category of grocery store did not use the word “local” in any capacity. However, it used consistent small signs that stated the country of origin for its produce.

It is important to note that this researcher only went to one store in this category and, therefore, the research is too narrow to clearly identify any patterns for the entire category.

The stickers on the produce stated the following:

- Nectarines: USA
- Apricots: USA
- Avocados: California

Chain/Boutique (Five Stores)

This category of grocery store noted “local” and “California-grown” by occasionally connecting individual product stickers and small product signs to specific products.

Some grocery stores in this category used many large signs, banners and educational materials to advertise the fact that the produce was “local” and “grown in California.” Additionally, the educational materials provided customers with information about some of the farms and farmers who grow the produce offered in the store.

- At a grocery store in Santa Monica, the small produce signs described produce as being from California.

- At a grocery store in Century City, the small produce signs listed produce as “local” and “grown in California.”

The stickers on the produce usually stated the following:

- Nectarines: USA
- Apricots: USA
- Avocados: California

At Gelson’s Market in Century City, small produce signs indicate that organic, packaged apricots were grown in California.

Photograph by Laurel Hunt, Gelson’s Market, Century City (City of Los Angeles), CA
**PRODUCE LABELING IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY GROCERY STORES**

**Chain/General (Six Stores)**

This category of grocery store displayed banners, large stand-up signs and educational materials promoting their produce as “local,” and “California grown,” but did not match the signs to their products consistently. Here are some examples of the sign - product mismatches:

- A grocery store in Inglewood had educational materials about California farmers posted at eye level throughout the store (including over the refrigerators containing packaged fruit juices). There was also a small product sign next to ears of corn that listed the product as “locally grown,” but did not cite a location of origin for the product.

- A grocery store in Culver City displayed a stand-up sign stating that the store carries locally grown produce, but the sign was located next to a table of produce that was grown in the Midwest.

- A grocery store in Inglewood had a stand-up, updatable sign stating the number of locally grown products in the store on that particular day. Yet, the sign did not indicate which items were locally grown.

The stickers on the produce usually stated the following:

- Nectarines: USA
- Apricots: USA
- Avocados: California

**Independent/Ethnic (Two Stores)**

This category of grocery store generally did not indicate the source of its produce. Both stores surveyed only listed the price of the produce and did not include any other information. Additionally, at one store, stickers were not used to label the produce. At the other store, there was a limited selection of produce and the store did not carry avocados.

**Independent/Health (Two Stores)**

Overall, this category of grocery store was the most thorough in noting whether produce was grown in California or grown “locally” and connecting that information with specific products. The two stores studied in this category used small produce signs posted next to the produce items to distinguish whether the products were “local” or grown in California. At one of the grocery stores in Santa Monica, all produce signs stated “local” and “grown in California.” At another grocery store in Santa Monica, some produce signs stated “grown in California.”

- Ralphs in Inglewood has a large stand-up sign listing the number of “locally grown” farm fresh products that it carries. The sign can be erased and updated with new information about the daily number of farm fresh products.

  Photograph by Laurel Hunt,
  Ralphs, Inglewood, CA
When the word “local” was used, it seemed to denote that the product was “from California” and not necessarily from Southern California or within the L.A. Food Policy Council’s 200-mile definition.

Independent/General (Two Stores)

This category of grocery store had one store with occasional small produce signs that listed produce as being grown in the “USA.” The other store did not list the country of origin of its produce.

The stickers on the produce usually stated the following:

- Nectarines: USA
- Apricots: USA
- Avocados: California

ANALYSIS

While the original intent of the report was to examine stickers as the primary way to signify a product’s origin, research revealed that signage, (in particular, small product signs), was more important and a more commonly used way to distinguish produce. This may be because, from a practical standpoint, small product signs offer more physical space to attract attention to the location of origin of produce. Sometimes produce is too small or fragile to have stickers and sometimes stickers are too small to convey information. From another perspective, the grocery stores may create the small product signs either on site or through corporate marketing programs while the stickers are applied by the growers.

One complication with the methodology to use stickers as an indicator of produce origin was that some of the stickers listed orchard or farm names that were located in California without also stating “grown in California” explicitly. Moreover, because the stickers did not also explicitly state that the produce was “grown in California,” the location was not recognizable as being in California (if the observer was not familiar with the city where the distributor was located). For example, Kingsburg Orchards, a produce supplier for many of the grocery stores visited, applies stickers that say “Kingsburg.” Kingsburg is a small town (about 11,588 people and 2.83 square miles) in California near Fresno (US Census Bureau, 2013). However, many customers might not understand, from a sticker with the words “Kingsburg Orchards” alone, that Kingsburg is located in California.

Another surprising aspect of this research was the extent to which Chain/General grocery stores used other methods (in addition to small product signs and stickers), to convey product information. Many stores featured an assortment of banners and large signs in the produce section, as well as educational materials posted throughout the store. At first, it appeared that the most important indicator of product origin was signage displaying that produce was “local” and where it was grown specifically. However, it turned out that the word “local” was sometimes being used to distinguish produce, but it was not placed near the produce that it sought to identify.

Overall, grocery stores do not use the word “local” to describe individual produce items as much as it seems like they would want to for marketing purposes. When the word “local” was used, it appeared to denote that the product was “from California” and not necessarily from Southern California or within the L.A. Food Policy Council’s 200-mile definition. For example, at many of the stores, there was “local” produce from Watsonville and Salinas, each of which is over 300 miles driving distance from Los Angeles.

The finding that grocery stores advertise their local or “California-grown” produce without signifying products to which the term applies demonstrates a new challenge for grocery stores: connecting product information with specific products in a way that is informative and clear to the consumer.
The term [local] was used either sparingly or without any context as to what it means.

ADDRESSING INITIAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Literature Review Excerpt #1

“While the idea of integrating urban agriculture into Los Angeles County’s larger food system is promising, definitions of ‘local’ and ‘regional’ [as they apply to Los Angeles County] are vague throughout the literature” (Jackson et al., 2013).

Follow-up Research Question #1

What, if any, indicators at grocery stores tell the consumer what the terms “local” and “regional” mean in practice?

Findings

Stickers, signs, large signs and banners, educational materials do not provide clear and precise information about what “local” and “regional” mean. In practice, it was more informative to ask produce managers than to read text.

Literature Review Excerpt #2

“The L.A. Food Policy Council defines the Los Angeles County Regional Food System as spanning 200 miles throughout 10 counties with over 22 million people” (Barham et al., 2012).

Follow-up Research Question #2

In practice, is this the minimum, common or maximum range from where “local” produce in Los Angeles County grocery stores is procured?

Findings

It is unclear what the definition of “local” is as practiced in the grocery stores visited. The term was used either sparingly or without any context as to what it means (e.g., the large sign – see photo on p. 9 - that stated that there were 41 local products for sale not attached or referring to any products in particular). Therefore, “local” could mean “from California” in general, but even that assumption is unclear.

Vons in Inglewood uses a large banner to advertise the fact that they offer California-grown items in their store. This large banner is located above a refrigerator containing juice products.

Photograph by Laurel Hunt, Vons, Inglewood, CA
RECOMMENDATIONS

This macro pilot study’s findings reinforced what the researchers in the Cultivate L.A. report found: there is no distinguishable, consistent and specific definition of “local” used in the retail produce trade in Los Angeles County. Moreover, the lack of a definition is problematic for growers and consumers alike. Therefore, this researcher agrees with and recommends what the Cultivate L.A. report identified, which is that, for product transparency, representative growers, members of the retail produce trade and consumers should agree upon and implement a standardized definition of “local” produce for Los Angeles County.

In addition to adopting a standardized definition of “local” for Los Angeles County, this researcher recommends that grocery stores connect product origin information to specific products (instead of advertising broadly that those products are available somewhere in the store). If stakeholders produce a standardized definition of “local,” but products are not labeled accordingly, the exercise will be impractical.

To clarify, by “labeling products accordingly,” this researcher believes that grocery stores’ trade groups should agree upon uniform product information to include with each product. For example, they could display, for each product, the country, state and county or city of origin, as well as whether or not the produce is “local.” This information should be displayed on signs next to each product in order to maximize consumer access to information about the products that they are buying. While it is highly idealistic to suggest that all grocery stores should agree upon uniform information to include with their products, this is the most effective way for consumers to learn about the products that they are buying and the institutions that they are supporting.

Finally, on the subject of labeling, this research indicated that growers who utilize stickers should be clearer about where their produce is grown. As in the case of Kingsburg Orchards, customers might not know that the produce is from California because the sticker, in addition to the small product sign, does not indicate that Kingsburg is in California. On the other hand, avocados were consistently labeled with stickers noting that they were grown in California.

This research demonstrated that more of the produce sold in grocery stores was grown in California than is readily apparent (and perhaps more of the produce is grown within the L.A. Food Policy Council’s definition of “local” is as well). However, it is not possible to conclude this because of the lack of a standardized definition of “local,” and also because produce was not labeled as grown within Los Angeles County.
FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research on this topic should explore the gap between the information offered to consumers about produce in grocery stores and the facts about where produce is grown.

Potential approaches for expanding this research include:

1) A more comprehensive study in Los Angeles County using the same research methods would provide a fuller picture of produce labeling across different cities and categories of stores and products throughout all growing seasons in southern and central California.

2) A study combining the research methods used in this study with produce manager interviews would also shed light on the question of what “local” denotes in practice.

3) While researching grocery stores in Inglewood, it became apparent that there are a significant number of mini-markets, or, family-owned grocery outlets in Los Angeles County. None of these outlets were included in this study, but, in order to paint a more complete picture of produce distribution within Los Angeles County, it is important to study these markets in addition to examining larger grocery stores. Specifically, a future study could examine the definition of “local” exclusively at these outlets.

4) Interviews with growers’ trade associations regarding the advantages and disadvantages of identifying products individually by their geographic origin.

5) A consumer preference study using different types of labels, such as “Buy Local”, “California Grown,” etc.
CONCLUSION

The primary finding from this research, that signage indicating that a product is "local" is often not connected to a specific product, presents a challenge to grocery stores beyond defining the word “local.”

While defining “local” is a matter of policy, the prior action is a matter of industry accountability. It is critically important that consumers are able to know where their produce comes from if there is to be any initiative in the direction of promoting or expanding urban agriculture in Los Angeles County.

In fact, the two processes, supporting growers and supporting consumers, must develop in a mutually supportive fashion. If consumers, who make up the demand side of the market, can make informed choices about what farms and localities they want to support, then certain growers will also see a rise in their popularity and profits.

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A large banner at Vons in Inglewood located in the produce section notes the number of local growers that the store works with.

Photograph by Laurel Hunt,
Vons, Inglewood, CA
PRODUCE LABELING IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY GROCERY STORES

SOURCES


A poster on the wall of a subway station in San Francisco advertises California-grown avocados.

Photograph by Laurel Hunt, Van Ness Station, San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, San Francisco, CA