

Study finds local food movement rooted in relationships and values

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According to a new University of Iowa study, people are shopping farmers markets and joining food coops at record numbers because they enjoy knowing who grows their food. These so-called 'locavores' are also driven to eat locally grown produce and meat because their commitment to do so makes them feel a part of something greater than themselves -- a community that shares their passion for a healthy lifestyle and a sustainable environment. Credit: University of Iowa

More Americans than ever before are supporting their local food markets, and it's not just because

they believe the food is fresher and tastes better.

According to a new University of Iowa study, people are shopping [farmers markets](#) and joining food coops at record numbers because they enjoy knowing who grows their food. These so-called "locavores" are also driven to eat locally grown produce and meat because their commitment to do so makes them feel a part of something greater than themselves - a community that shares their passion for a healthy lifestyle and a sustainable environment.

For these enthusiasts, supporting the [local food](#) movement is a sort of civic duty, an act to preserve their local economy against the threats of globalization and big-box stores.

"It's not just about the economical exchange; it's a relational and ideological exchange as well," said Ion Vasi, an associate professor with a joint appointment in the Department of Sociology and Tippie College of Business at the UI and corresponding author of the study.

Vasi said the local food market is what sociologists call a "moralized market," that is a market in which people combine economic activities with their social values. Among their findings, the UI researchers discovered local food markets were more likely to develop in areas where residents had a strong commitment to civic participation, health and the environment.

"It's about valuing the relationship with the farmers and people who produce the food and believing that how they produce the food aligns with your personal values," Vasi said.

Vasi shared the results of the study August 22 at the American Sociology Association Annual meeting in Chicago.

For his study, Vasi examined the development of

local food markets by looking at the number of farmers markets, food coops, community-supported agriculture providers and local food restaurants in cities across the United States. Researchers also conducted 40 interviews with consumers and producers in different local food markets in Iowa and New York.

From a historical perspective, the recent growth of local food markets is rather surprising.

In 1971, Jane Pyle predicted farmers markets were "doomed by a changing society" in an article penned for *The Geographical Review*. At the time, there were about 340 farmers markets left in the United States and many were "populated by resellers, not farmers, and were on the verge of collapse," Pyle wrote.

Some 20 years later, the tide was beginning to turn.

According to the United State Department of Agriculture, national direct-to-consumer food sales increased three-fold between 1992 and 2007, growing twice as fast as total agricultural sales. The number of farmers markets listed in the USDA National Farmers Markets increased from 3,706 in 2004 to 8,268 in 2014. Plus, UI researchers found the number of Internet searches for farmers markets has almost tripled during that same 10-year period and the number of newspaper articles that mention farmers markets has almost quadrupled.

So, what's behind this need to know who grows your food and to believe in how it's produced?

It was the onslaught of big-box stores and globalization forces that reignited "buy local" campaigns across the country in the 1990s, said the UI researchers.

According to the study: "A growing number of communities have attempted to gain control of their own economies by encouraging civic engagement that supports investing in locally owned businesses instead of outside companies."

Sara Rynes, a professor of Management & Organizations in the UI's Tippie College of

Business, and co-author of the study, said the researchers also found that local [food markets](#), whether farmers markets, food coops or otherwise, were more likely to be located in cities and counties with higher education levels, higher income levels and more institutions of higher education.

"Sociologists and political scientists have argued that higher income allows people to make consumption decisions based on values in addition to matters of price or value," Rynes said.

"Education is likely to facilitate knowledge about such things as links between the way products are produced and their environmental and health impacts. And universities sometimes get involved in helping local farmers and individuals who are struggling to make a living, particularly through extension efforts."

More information: The paper, "Resurgence of the Locavore: The Growth of Multi-Motive Local Foods Markets in the United States," will be presented on Saturday, Aug. 22, at 8:30 a.m. CDT in Chicago at the American Sociological Association's 110th Annual Meeting.

Provided by University of Iowa

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