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Author(s): Susan Andreatta and William Wickliffe II

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Managing Farmer and Consumer Expectations: A Study of a North Carolina Farmers Market

Susan Andreatta and William Wickliffe, II

The overall goal of this research was to better understand the cultural relationships between the food-selling habits of farmers and the food-buying habits of consumers at a farmers market located near three urban centers in North Carolina. The project focused on farmers' and consumers' expectations and was designed to identify how the success of the market can be improved. Such improvement should increase consumers' satisfaction with the market and also increase farmers' quality of life. This study shows that the farmers market itself plays an important role in structuring the relationships between farmers and consumers and in determining whether the experiences of selling and buying at the market are satisfying to them. The market is more than just a physical space for commercial transactions; rather, the market, and the policies and regulations that govern its operation, is an active contributor to the cultural dynamic within which those transactions take place. Our findings emphasize the importance of understanding the market as a context within which farmers and consumers make their marketing and buying decisions.

Key words: farmers markets, agriculture, North Carolina

Social scientists have been examining ways to increase community support for local agriculture and local foods and to retard the loss of agricultural space and renew our connection with the local agro-food system. An important part of this process is increasing interest in direct marketing, where farmers sell their fresh-picked produce and value-added products directly to consumers (Byczynski 2000, 2001). Direct marketing activities include farmers markets, roadside stands, community supported agriculture (CSAs),¹ and pick-your-own operations, as well as sales to chefs at restaurants and institutions. Often products at direct markets are sold only hours after being picked, a claim supermarkets cannot make (Gibson 1994). These forms of direct marketing build relationships through one-on-one interaction, from which emerge loyalty, trust, and reliability. Although other forms of direct marketing have developed recently, such as

Web-based buying clubs and mail-order deliveries, these are not local and lack face-to-face interaction.

The simplest view of a direct marketing relationship is that consumers and farmers are motivated primarily by economic considerations, consumers seeking the lowest-priced foods and farmers seeking the highest return on their labor and investment. However, the economics of the situation are only a part of the story. Food choice and growing practices are heavily dependent on cultural as well as economic factors, and at some urban markets the influx of immigrants both as buyers and vendors adds to cultural diversity. In addition, growing interest among some consumers in caring for the earth and their bodies has led many to seek out organic farm produce.²

Of all the direct marketing approaches that link consumers with their agro-food system, the oldest is the farmers market, a location designated by a community or state where farmers convene to sell their products on a seasonal, weekly, or daily basis (Corum, Rosenzeig, and Gibson 2001; Gibson 1994). Farmers markets are especially important to small farmers, who have difficulty finding a place in the industrial marketing system because of their limited production. The markets also help reduce insurance, advertising, and other marketing costs. The number of farmers markets has been increasing in recent years. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports that 2,863 farmers markets operated in the United States in 2000, a 64 percent increase from 1994 (USDA 2001; Organic Gardening 2001). There is clearly support for farmers markets among both farmers and consumers, and strengthening their effectiveness would help small-scale farmers thrive in the face of competition

Susan Andreatta is assistant professor of anthropology at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, and William Wickliffe, II, is an agricultural extension agent in the North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Guilford County Center. This research project came together with the help of a number of key people. We thank all the farmers and consumers of North Carolina who participated in the study. We are very appreciative of the hard work the enumerators provided in interviewing consumers: Rebecca Crawford, Joshua Poster, Angela Walker, and Ann Bruskiwitz-Coates. From everyone's collective efforts we have a better understanding of farmers markets and the role they play in a local agro-food system. We would also like to thank our anonymous reviewers for their very helpful remarks on previous drafts of this paper. Support was provided by a grant from Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education, an arm of the United States Department of Agriculture, project # RD309-032/5493923 to Susan L. Andreatta.

from agribusinesses and other large producers. As in any commercial enterprise, the success of a market depends on how well the farmers' marketing strategies match consumers' preferences and expectations, and how well the opportunities provided by the market match the needs of the farmers.

The research reported here examines some of the cultural variables that contribute to understanding the dynamics of a farmers market from both farmers' and consumers' perspectives. Understanding these variables makes it possible to identify marketing strategies that appeal to those groups of consumers and farmers that can be reliably and consistently attracted to the opportunities available at a farmers market. Combining an understanding of the needs and interests of farmers with consumers' motivations is critical if farmers are to design appropriate planting and marketing strategies. For example, if most consumers at a farmers market are not primarily interested in inexpensive food, but in knowing more about how their food is grown, farmers would be better served by designing informative displays rather than by lowering their prices to compete with local supermarkets. Identifying such marketing strategies will allow farmers to connect with the consumers most likely to adapt their purchasing to the farmers' own patterns of production. This research was designed to determine both farmers' and consumers' expectations of farmers markets. What can we learn about these expectations that can assist in the planning of future markets and help assure their survival?

Background

Industrialization, consolidation, and vertical integration of agriculture and the food industry have transformed a local food system into one that is primarily global (Bonnano et al. 1994; Goldschmidt 1947; Grey 2000; McMichael 1994). As a result, there has been a gradual increase in monoculture crop specialization and a reliance on transportation and other technologies designed to maximize profit with the movement of farm products (Barlett 1993; Doyal 1985; Grey 2000). Some have argued that this shift has been made at the expense of the taste of food, the integrity of the environment, and the health of farmers, farmworkers, and consumers (Andreatta 1997, 1998; Grey 2000; Schlosser 2001).

Faced with these trends, small farmers increasingly encounter challenges and obstacles as they look for alternative growing and marketing strategies to sustain their livelihood. Many small farmers find themselves faced with limited capital, time, labor, and resources. They often produce in limited quantities, so traditional wholesale market outlets are not a viable option. Hence, small-farm operators are being squeezed out of the current agricultural system. And consumers are increasingly removed from the source of their food, which on average has traveled 1,300 miles before it reached their plate (Schlosser 2001). As Eric Schlosser (2001) points out in *Fast Food Nation*, a vast number of eaters are relying on convenience foods for their daily food intake, food which is

often grown many miles away from where it is prepared and consumed.

Dissatisfaction with the global and vertical nature of the current agricultural and food system has led to increasing support for local agro-food systems. Local agro-food systems comprise all the individuals and processes involved in getting food from local farms to tables. Increased support for small, diverse, multicrop farmers can help mitigate the challenges of the industrial food system with its reliance on large-scale monoculture and long-distance distribution. Increasing reliance on local farm products begins to move communities toward sustainable agriculture and food systems. Farmers markets are a critical part of any system that brings local food to local tables.

Farmers markets provide an opportunity for growers to sell directly to consumers, chefs, food purveyors, and food designers. They are a place of business as well as a location for building community, allowing consumers and farmers to become more closely connected. Many small farmers³ rely on farmers markets as a valuable part of their total farm operation. For consumers, these markets are an ideal place to purchase fresh, locally grown food and to interact with and learn from the people that grew it.

In contrast to the consolidation of the agro-food system, farmers markets allow farmers to sell local food directly to consumers. Different markets have their own character, depending on whether they are state-, city- or town-supported, on the type of farmers who use them and the products they sell, and on their location, their years of operation, and the clientele they serve. Some are in open fields where farmers pull down the tailgate of their pick-up trucks, while others are in shelters or enclosed buildings. At most, the space available for farmers is limited, and at popular markets during the summer months space is at premium. High demand for vending space has led many markets to establish space-priority rules, reservations, point and credit systems for tracking sellers' attendance, and waiting lists for future vacancies.

To maintain high quality, farmers markets establish guidelines for selling local produce, herbs, plants, and craft farm products such as artisan cheeses, preserves, and smoked meats. Although farmers may not sell as much at a market as they would to wholesalers, market sales are retail and command a higher price per unit than wholesale. Moreover, "because farmers sell directly to consumers, the typical marketing 'middleman' costs of grading produce, packing, shipping, handling, brokering, wholesaling, distributing, and retailing are reduced; such costs normally consume about 70 cents of each dollar spent on fruits and vegetables. Farmers make about 40 to 80 percent more on their products, while realizing their income immediately rather than waiting for payment from brokers" (Myers 1991:3).

As well as benefiting farmers directly, sales from farmers markets strengthen the local economy and help build cultural ties between farmers and consumers. A study of two urban markets in Oregon by Stephenson and Lev (1998, 1999) found that 92 percent of the consumers surveyed preferred

buying domestic to imported food, and 75 percent preferred to buy food from the immediate vicinity rather than from other parts of Oregon. These preferences transcended educational, income, and ethnic differences. Stephenson and Lev concluded that there was greater demand for local products than could be met by the available supply at these markets. Another study (Mason 1994) at a 125-year-old urban market in Greensboro, North Carolina, found that 60 percent of those shopping at the market had been doing so regularly for 10 years or more and 32 percent for 20 years or more, indicating a long-standing dedication to the local farmers selling at the market.

Farmers markets are more than simply locations where food is bought and sold (Andreatta 2000; Stephenson and Lev 1998, 1999), and information about their cultural-economic dynamics can suggest ways to strengthen local agro-food systems. A study by the Farming Alternatives Program at Cornell University (Ithaca, New York), which helps farmers to develop growing and marketing strategies, asked farmers their reasons for selling at farmers markets (Hilchey, Lyson, and Gillispie, 1995); the three most frequent were to increase consumer base (70%), receive direct feedback from consumers (70%), and gain encouragement and social support (64%). Farmers markets provide an excellent opportunity for farmers to establish rapport and build friendships with consumers and to educate them about their farms and the food they grow (Corum, Rosenzeig, and Gibson 2001; Hitt 1999).

Farmers markets typically develop in three stages (Lloyd, Nelson, and Tilley 1987). Stage One is volatile and generally lasts the first couple of years. This initial stage of development is an unstable one, where farmers find it too great a risk to sell at the market regularly. Consumers also may be reluctant to support the market if they find few farmers and limited fresh farm products. In Stage Two, a mix of part-time and full-time commercial farmers and home gardeners supply the majority of fruits and vegetables at the market. The presence of the larger producers at the market aids in lowering the chance of market failure. Stage Three is achieved when "customers shop at the farmers market weekly, and the market supplies a substantial amount of produce" (Lloyd, Nelson, and Tilley 1987:1).

These developmental stages were used in this study to analyze a state-operated farmers market. They provide a useful framework for farmers, market managers, and other participants to plan strategies towards building a successful market. Moreover, identifying the factors that sustain farmers markets and local producers contributes support for a local agro-food system.

Between 1982 and 1997, the number of farms over 1,000 acres in North Carolina increased by 47 percent; farms of 999 acres or less declined by 33 percent (USDA 1999). Still, in 1997, over 20,000 farms in the state (41% of the total) had less than 50 acres in cultivation. Although a purely economic reading of the data suggests a shift toward large-scale farms, small-scale farming remains an important part of the culture

of North Carolina agriculture. These small-scale farmers will only be able to sustain themselves in the face of the trend toward consolidation of agriculture by actively pursuing alternative production and marketing strategies.

The Piedmont Triad Farmers Market (PTFM)

For our study, we chose an established, active farmers market close to three major urban areas (Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and High Point) with a combined population of more than 500,000 inhabitants. The Piedmont Triad Farmers Market (PTFM) is one of five state-operated farmers markets in North Carolina. In 1986 the North Carolina General Assembly appropriated \$8.4 million for the purchase of 77 acres and the construction of several buildings for a regional state-operated farmers market in the Piedmont (Hey 1995). The market is situated on a portion of the 77 acres; two adjacent sides of the marketing area are protected by a secondary forested area and another side faces a well-used interstate highway. The market is visible from the highway and a lighted marquee draws attention to it. Squaring off the grounds is the entrance, which is marked by a gatehouse where farmers stop to pay their fees and consumers drive through to one of three parking areas. To the right of the gatehouse is a small building where the marketing manager and assistants are housed. Six large structures are visible upon entering the grounds: two shelters for farmers to sell local fresh farm products, one enclosed building for vendors selling nonlocal food products retail, a refrigerated wholesale building, a retail garden center, and a restaurant. The shelters, known as Farm Area 1 and Farm Area 2, have sheet-metal roofs to protect users from the elements. Farm Area 1 has 53 vending spaces on both sides of an aisle; Farm Area 2 has a single row of 32 spaces and is sometimes referred to as "the overflow area." Separating Farm Areas 1 and 2 are two parking lots and a wide road that can be challenging at times for pedestrians to cross and move between the vending locations. On average there were 48 vendors selling weekly and occupying all the spaces in Farm Area 1 and 18 farmers partially filling up Farm Area 2 from May through October. Farmers and vendors sell a wide variety of seasonal fruits, vegetables, animal products and byproducts, cut flowers, nursery plants, honey, preserves, and baked goods.

The PTFM is managed by a market manager, two assistants, and supporting staff of a grounds crew and a gatehouse operator. The market managers, who are state employees, respond to the North Carolina Department of Agriculture mandates and establish local in-house policies for the market. There is an advisory board comprised of seven local farmers and two vendors from the retail-produce building. This advisory board meets infrequently and has a limited role because the market manager makes all final decisions.

PTFM is a seven-day market; but Saturday is its busiest day. Up to 10,000 people may visit the market on any given Saturday between June and August, and even more attend during the market's biannual herb and craft festivals. During

the week fewer people visit the market, on average 1,000 to 3,000 daily. The PTFM experienced a doubling of attendance between 1995 and 1998.

Methods

The methods used in this research draw heavily from those used by Lockeretz (1986) in his study of urban consumers' attitudes and Stephenson and Lev (1998, 1999) in their study on consumers' spending patterns at farmers markets in Oregon. Data were collected from consumers shopping at the market and from farmers registered to sell at PTFM (purposeful sampling) or recommended by other farmers as data collection progressed (snowball sampling) (Bernard 1995).

Interviews with Consumers

A consumer questionnaire was developed on the basis of initial discussions with consumers, farmers, market managers, and extension agents. Six enumerators administered the questionnaire to a sample of 463 consumers shopping at the market on six consecutive Saturdays during June and July 2000. While at the PTFM, convenience sampling was used to select the interviewees (Bernard 1995) and each interview lasted between 15 and 45 minutes.

Interviews with Farmers

A total of 38 in-depth on-farm interviews were conducted by one of us (SLA) over a 21-month period (January 1999–October 2000) with small farmers who live in the Piedmont of North Carolina. All the farmers participating in this research earn well below USDA's criterion of \$250,000 per year for a small farmer. A structured, open-ended questionnaire was used to obtain data on the number of locations a farmer uses to sell his/her harvest, frequency of direct marketing at farmers markets, use of other marketing outlets, travel time and distance, and income earned. Interviews lasted from one to four hours. On occasion assistance was offered in harvesting or marketing in exchange for the farmers' time in participating in the study. In this study we interviewed only farmers who sell their own locally grown farm produce (fruits, vegetables, cheese, and some value-added products such as baked goods and preserves). Farmers selling products such as Christmas trees and crafts were not included.

Focus Groups with Farmers

A random sample of farmers registered to sell at the PTFM were invited to attend a farmer meeting to hear the results obtained from the consumer survey. Letters were sent to 102 registered farmers, 31 of whom attended one of four meetings held in January, February, and March 2001.⁴ Different meeting locations were arranged to accommodate their travel (Agricultural Extension Offices in Davidson, Forsyth, and Guilford Counties).

During the focus groups, participants were first asked to list aspects of their farming experiences that contributed to a good quality of life. Approximately 30 minutes was spent with participants listing one item per yellow sticky note. All sticky notes were gathered and placed on a large sheet of paper displayed for everyone to see. The facilitators grouped like terms (values and activities) into categories and participants were asked how they would regroup them and why. Additional information gained from the group discussion was noted on the paper to which the sticky notes were affixed. Discussions led to additional information about what contributed to a good quality of life. This procedure was used three more times in the course of the meeting to generate a list of: 1) positive aspects of the PTFM; 2) negative aspects of the PTFM; and 3) participants' solutions to problems or issues raised during discussion. Focus group participants were also asked to complete the questionnaire that had been administered the previous summer to consumers at the PTFM. They were then asked to think about the consumers with whom they interact and to respond with what they think most of their consumers do at the PTFM. The surveys were then copied and returned to the participants for them to follow as we presented the results from the consumer survey. These focus group sessions lasted from two and one-half to four hours.

Results of Consumer Interviews

The average age of consumers interviewed was 50, with a range of 18 to 84 years. The average household size was 2.6, with a range of 1 to 7 members; 49 percent were couples with a household size of 2, and 86 percent had a household size of 2–4. Although we did not ask for the children's ages for those still living at home, couples and couples with young children were the overwhelming majority of those who come to the market.

Travel and Spending Patterns of the Consumer Sample

Many consumers traveled a considerable distance to reach the market, and most said they attended the market regularly. Of those surveyed, 86 percent traveled 6 or more miles to the market, and 15 percent traveled over 20 miles. During the summer months (May–August) 56 percent came at least twice a month and 34 percent came every Saturday. Twelve percent said they come only when they need something different (artisan cheeses, meats, baked goods, canned preserves and chutneys), and 8 percent claimed this was their first time visiting the market. From discussions with consumers we learned that although the PTFM is centrally located, it is not necessarily conveniently located—visiting the market is not like making a quick trip to the nearest supermarket. Since the market is not located near other places of business, some thought and planning is involved in every visit.

Across all consumers, the modal amount spent per trip was \$16–20, considerably more than the \$6 per trip suggested

by Lloyd, Nelson, and Tilley (1987). Those travelling the shortest distances (5 miles or less) spent somewhat less (\$11-15) than those who travel more than 5 miles (\$16-20), but there was no tendency for spending to increase with distance traveled above 5 miles. There were no obvious differences in spending patterns across age groups—the modal amount reported by all ages was \$16-20 per trip.

The majority of consumers interviewed did not engage in “one-stop” shopping by purchasing from a single farmer. Approximately 89 percent bought from three to five vendors, and 38 percent bought from more than five vendors. The opportunity to visit with a number of farmers appeared to be part of the market’s attraction.

Why Consumers Come Regularly to the PTFM

A subset of the consumer sample ($n = 259$; 56%) were regular visitors to the PTFM, coming at least twice a month throughout the summer. We report here the reasons these regular visitors gave for visiting the market.

Consumers were asked to rank the items they purchase most (fruit, vegetables, flowers, bedding plants, or other). The combined first and second choices listed by regular visitors were vegetables (91%), fruit (76%), bedding plants (20%), flowers (17%), and other items such as goat cheese, ostrich meat, herbs, honey, and bread (8%). It is clear from their responses that most consumers visited the PTFM to buy fresh vegetables and fruit. (This survey was conducted during the height of the vegetable and fruit season, and different results might have been obtained at other times of year.)

In separate questions consumers were asked why they come to the PTFM. In the first question, consumers were shown a list and asked to rank four possible reasons for coming to the farmers market: to buy local food, to buy fresh food, to buy inexpensive food, and to meet a farmer. They were also given the option of stating additional reasons that were not on the list. Among the regular visitors, 88 percent said they came for fresh products, while 64 percent came for local products, 16 percent for inexpensive food, and 8 percent to meet a farmer. (Consumers could identify more than one reason for coming, so percentages do not sum to 100%.) Other responses (for a family outing or to become more familiar with food) were much less frequent (under 5%).

In a related question consumers were asked to rank some advantages of coming to the PTFM from a list (quality, freshness, support local economy, variety, or other). The regular visitors listed freshness (76%) as the main advantage, followed by quality (which included taste and appearance; 60%), supporting a local farm economy (26%), variety (20%), and a fun place for an outing (15%).

Consumers were asked if they came to the market for atmosphere, products, or some combination of the two. Among the regular visitors, 62 percent said they came equally for products and the atmosphere, while 36 percent came solely for the products, and 2 percent solely for the atmosphere. Moreover, 90 percent said that visiting the market was the

reason for making their trip, and 63 percent said they planned to do more shopping elsewhere when they finished their visit at the farmers market. Hence, fresh, quality local farm products and a positive atmosphere seemed to bring consumers out on a regular basis. These consumers were also contributing to the local economy by purchasing from local businesses as well as from local farmers.

Only 16 percent of regular visitors listed inexpensive food as one of the reasons they come to the PTFM. That finding was supported by their responses when they were asked how much they would be willing to spend at the market to buy a product that cost \$1.00 at a supermarket: \$.50, \$.90, \$1.00, \$1.10, or \$1.50. Eighty percent reported they would pay \$1.00 or more for the same product; only 4 percent expected to buy the product for \$.50. We received additional comments like “Well, why shouldn’t it be the same price for the same thing?” or “Why shouldn’t we be putting the dollar (or more) right in the hands of the farmer and not the supermarket?”

Consumers’ Dissatisfaction with the PTFM

Consumers were asked to list the top five things they disliked or considered a disadvantage of the PTFM. The disadvantages listed either first or second by regular visitors were distance traveled to get to the market (23%), the seasonal variation in food availability (14%), the hours when farmers were present (12%), and lack of locally grown food (10%). The cost of food ranked near the bottom of their dissatisfaction list (3%). However, 33 percent had no complaints about the market, suggesting why, out of 463 consumers interviewed, 56 percent keep returning on a weekly or biweekly basis.

Consumers’ Spontaneous Comments

As well as answering our questions, some consumers provided additional qualitative data, including both positive ($n = 215$) and negative ($n = 167$) comments. Among the positive comments, 29 percent indicated that consumers did not think about the price when buying food at the market. Others (15%) commented that coming to the market was like an outing; it was something fun to do on a Saturday morning. In fact, several couples said their weekly Saturday marketing experience began with eating breakfast out prior to coming to the market. Others commented that the market was pleasant and a nice place to visit (23%) or that they enjoyed the relationship they had buying from local farmers (10%). There were others who said they liked coming because of the quality of the products and selection of items, while others came primarily for special items or special events.

Although there were fewer negative ($n = 167$) than positive comments, a few people had suggestions that might be beneficial to farmers selling at the market. Some people expressed concerns about the freshness and “localness” of the food sold at the PTFM. Consumers making these remarks

wanted to see signs and permits at the food stands confirming that the food sold in Farm Areas 1 and 2 was grown locally. These consumers wanted to make sure they were purchasing the freshest produce from local farmers, especially if they were driving a long distance to buy local foods and support the local farming community (20%). Others wanted more variety in the foods available (15%), not necessarily at each booth, but in the market as a whole. A few comments were made about the way the market is advertised, and 3 percent thought more could be done to promote local agriculture and the PTFM. Other negative comments included complaints that too many of the vendors were selling bedding plants, possibly displacing local produce farmers, concerns about hygiene (such as dirty floors, smoking by vendors selling food, dogs, and food stored without refrigeration), and suggestions for improving traffic flow.

Results of Interviews and Focus Groups with Farmers

All the farmers interviewed for this study earned more than \$10,000 but less than \$100,000 and self-identify as small farmers. The small farmers grow and sell fresh vegetables, fruit, herbs, and flowers from March through December. The diversity of crops they grow allows them to plant and harvest continuously through three growing periods (spring-summer, summer, and fall-winter). Those cultivating earlier and longer rely on greenhouses to extend their productivity and marketing seasons. Most produce 20–40 different items in relatively small quantities, an effective pattern of production for bringing a diversity of products directly to customers through direct marketing.

From the interviews we learned not only about the diversity in farming, but also about the creative marketing approaches farmers used and about the differences in marketing conditions between county- and state-operated farmers markets. Additional information on these topics was gained from the focus group discussions. All the farmers interviewed on-farm sold weekly at farmers markets from March through the end of November or mid-December. All enjoyed working with the public at farmers markets, and many of the farmers generated a large percentage of their farm income in this way.

Both younger and older farmers described farming as a way of life as well as a business. In North Carolina the average age of a farmer is 55.2 years (USDA 1999); in this study the average age was 49 years and ranged from 27 to 80. Farmers view working for themselves as important to their quality of life. In fact, during the focus groups 32 comments made reference to “independence,” “being one’s own boss,” “not doing the same thing everyday is a blessing,” and “freedom.” As one farmer put it, “It’s a wonderful way to pass through life.” Nevertheless, farmers did not romanticize farming. They frequently mentioned that “Farming is a lot of hard work,” and “You’ve really got to love it to do it.” Another farmer said “The real boss is the consumer, the ones we are selling

to.” They all agreed that it was important to earn an income to stay in farming and to provide for their families.

Farming was associated not only with a way of life or earning an income, but also with stewardship of the earth. While walking through fields or sitting around a table, farmers commented that they “enjoyed working outdoors in fresh air” and “feeling connected with nature,” “taking care of and improving the land, especially in areas that are prone to erosion.” In both the on-farm interviews and the focus group discussions, it was clear that farmers like to make some of their own farming decisions by responding to market demands, creating marketing niches, adjusting farming practices to the weather, soil quality, and water availability.

Small farmers must market at numerous locations during the week to make a living. For example, some farmers with perishable products, such as berries or flowers, make weekly deliveries to eight or more locations. One farmer, who sold the majority of his harvest to restaurants, made over 25 deliveries and drove over 400 miles a week during his growing season. Another farmer has a CSA for her flowers, and she delivers flower arrangements weekly to restaurants and homeowners who prepay in January for the season’s deliveries. She has two subscription arrangements—a 13-week summer subscription and an 11-week summer-fall subscription—that require her to drive more than 150 miles a week. Others who produce unique craft products such as goat cheese or ostrich meat sell to more than a dozen restaurants and specialty food stores to supplement their sales at farmers markets. On average, the farmers we interviewed traveled approximately 200 miles a week to market their products. In aggregate, they use eight different venues to sell their products on a weekly basis, and 63 percent sell at two or more places weekly. Farmers benefit from these mid-week outlets, for it helps to constantly harvest and move produce or products before they perish. As one farmer reminded us, “You can’t tell a tomato to wait until Saturday before it is ready for market.”

These farmers all saw farmers markets in general as good places to sell their product, both because they could get a better price than elsewhere and because they valued the interaction with consumers. Comments from the focus groups included: “The market is an opportunity to show off your product.” “It is a market where you can sell most of your product.” “There is a good product mix for sale; there is variety, choice of selection.” “A customer can pick out the best quality and compare with other farmers’ products.” “Direct marketing provides better and higher prices.” Farmers in the focus groups also enjoyed the interactions with consumers afforded by selling at the market as well as the opportunity for educating consumers, especially children, about farms, farming, and the food they sell. The farmers also saw the PTFM as a nice facility. They were not on a roadside, or in a field, but under a roof selling at a facility that had restrooms, electricity and running water. Water was helpful for those who needed to water plants or sprinkle on produce to keep it looking fresh.

Although the farmers spoke favorably about the market, they also noted a number of negative comments when responding to listing the negative aspects of selling at PTFM. For example, some farmers have stopped selling at the PTFM because they could not be guaranteed a place to sell on Saturday or because they could not get a space where the consumer traffic flow is good. Farmers commented that it was not worth their time to get up at 3:00 A.M. to be at the market before 5:00 A.M. to sell only \$60 worth of produce. Overall, these farmers said they had to spend too much time at the market during the week to hold on to a space for Saturday.

Several farmers contacted for this study had stopped selling at PTFM for a variety of reasons. For example, of the 102 who were asked to participate in a focus group, 22 (21.6%) no longer sold at PTFM, and of these, 12 (11.8%) had stopped because of dissatisfaction with the market.

In one-on-one interviews and in the focus groups farmers commented on their concern with the misrepresentation of the products sold at the market. There are vendors at the market who resell each other's products, or who buy in Virginia, South Carolina, or Georgia to resell at the PTFM. A further concern is what is sold. According to management, 51 percent of what is sold needs to be produced on-farm by the growers whose farms are being represented by the products, but they do not have to identify what is theirs and what was purchased.

Prospects and Problems for the Future Development of the PTFM

How are we to view the future development of the Piedmont Triad Farmers Market on the basis of the data collected in this study, and what insights might we gather about the role of farmers markets generally in supporting a local agro-food system? As noted earlier, there are three stages of farmers market development (Lloyd, Nelson, and Tilley 1987). In the relatively volatile Stage One, which generally lasts the first couple of years, farmers believe the market is unstable and too risky to support with their time and product. Because of its newness, customers also have not found the market or at least do not depend on it as a regular source of their fresh fruits and vegetables. Consumers' lack of support at this time might not be unfounded if there is insufficient product. The PTFM has weathered this first stage, for there are part-time and full-time farmers, hobby farmers, and vegetable merchants selling regularly at the market. The market also has a strong consumer base, with a majority of visitors traveling significant distances to attend regularly (especially on Saturdays during the summer months) and spend substantial amounts of money.

After completing its sixth season of operation, and with the assistance of two market managers and public advertising, the PTFM has made the transition to Stage Two, which occurs when part-time and full-time commercial farmers supply the majority of the fruits and vegetables, but hobby gardeners still able to sell at the market. According to Lloyd,

Nelson, and Tilley (1987:1), "since the larger, more established producers participate in the market, there is a lower chance of market failure." Although the PTFM has clearly entered Stage Two, it is still experiencing some difficulties that may make it difficult for the market to develop further.

The "larger, more established producers" that provide a stabilizing function for the PTFM are seven "anchors" who sell at the market on a daily basis. Of these, only one is a farmer, another is running a full-time nursery and landscape operation, a third sells homemade bread and honey, and the other four are vendors selling on behalf of several farmers who cultivate some of their own products and receive other fresh farm products from their neighbors to sell. Since the market managers have decided that the PTFM will operate as a daily market, these anchors are important because they ensure that there is always something for consumers to buy. None of the smaller farmers has the time or resources to sell at the market seven days a week, and none of them would have sufficient product to sell if they could.

Because of the market's dependence on the anchors for stability, there is a perception among small farmers that these vendors receive preferential treatment and that the market rules are designed to favor the anchors, even if this disadvantages small farmers. The anchors occupied more than 10 of the coveted 20 aisle locations in Farm Area 1 from March through November. Since they were there every day and their tables and products remained in place overnight, other farmers never had access to these locations, which they perceive as unwarranted favoritism. The policy that sets prices for renting spaces makes it expensive to rent two adjacent aisle spaces (two aisle spaces rent for 2.3 times the cost of a single space), which means that small farmers must usually make do with a single space. Furthermore, although spaces are nominally rented daily on a first-come, first-serve basis, the managers make exceptions to this rule to make it easy for large vendors to leave their displays in place even when they may not be selling at the market. (One consequence of this is that the market staff cannot power-wash the floors, contributing to hygiene problems noted by some consumers.) Finally, many farmers believe some vendors are less careful than they might be about following the market rule that at least 51 percent of a vendor's produce must come from the farm that the vendor represents. We noted earlier that some consumers are also skeptical that the majority of the produce sold at the market is truly produced on local farms.

It seems that the PTFM managers are sensitive to the need, made explicit by Lloyd, Nelson, and Tilley (1987), for some large producers to ensure stability, but in this case their way of meeting the need fosters suspicion and dissatisfaction among the small, local farmers. Part of the problem is that there may be an inevitable conflict between two possible goals for a farmers market—to provide consumers with fresh farm produce seven days a week and to provide local small farmers with a marketing outlet.

Lloyd, Nelson, and Tilley (1987) provide a useful framework for thinking about how farmers markets develop. If we

view the market solely as a way of bringing food to consumers, then the framework captures a number of important issues very well. But if we want to think of the market as an element in the cultural dynamic that shapes the relationships between farmers and the community for which they produce food, we must recognize that other features of its operation are important. For example, market managers could decide they wish to make supporting the endeavors of small, local farmers a high priority and establish rules and policies accordingly. It is unlikely that any farmers market whose main aim is to support the local small-farmer community can sustain a daily operation, and if daily operation is to be the market's priority small farmers are inevitably going to feel dissatisfied with the rules that govern its operation.

Implications of Findings

In our initial conceptualization, this study dealt with the connections between consumers and farmers and was intended to investigate how these two groups might better understand one another's expectations, values, and priorities. The farmers market itself was seen more as a backdrop than an actor—a location where the interactions between consumers and farmers take place, rather than as a third element making its own contribution to the cultural dynamic. For example, consumers come to the market with preferences and expectations of product and their experience at the market. The nature of their experience will influence the likelihood of subsequent visits. Likewise farmers come to the market bringing products varying in variety, price, quantity, and quality. Farmers have expectations of consumers and fellow farmers selling at the market. Farmers' positive or negative experiences will influence the frequency of their visits.

The focus groups and interviews with farmers showed very clearly that the market itself, understood both as a physical space and as a set of rules and procedures governing how farmers can use the space, is a critical part of the picture. If we consider the farmers market as an active participant, much like farmers or consumers with their expectations and behaviors, a different perspective emerges. First, state and local policies, regulations, and economics influence the market manager as he makes decisions for the market. These decisions influence expectations and experiences of the consumers and farmers who use the market. For example, the market manager organizes "event days," highlighting the seasonal fruits and vegetables—Strawberry Days, Blueberry Days, and Turnip Days—to attract farmers and generate high traffic by interested consumers. The manager also must ensure product quality by examining produce stands and making on-farm visits. These actions influence consumer and farmer experiences at the market.

But discussions with farmers suggested that the market was actually becoming a barrier to the farmers' marketing efforts and to their interactions with consumers. Farmers'

expectations were challenged by how space was allocated and other rules were enforced at the market. Farmers' comments suggested that policies governing the operation of the market were more important to their satisfaction than the food preferences or spending habits of consumers. While one might wonder whether our focus group sample was biased toward farmers critical of the market, the written invitation described the gathering as a farmers' meeting where the results from the past summer's interviews with consumers would be shared. No written agenda was distributed and farmers did not know in advance how the meeting was to be conducted, so we are confident that the farmers' opinions were representative of those held by the group connected with the market.

Conclusions

There is much to be gained from furthering our understanding of the cultural dimensions of the agro-food system and strengthening the community of local farmers and consumers. Agro-food systems that rely to a large extent on local farm products increase the sustainability of small farmers and can help mitigate the negative environmental and social impacts of a consolidated food system with its reliance on large-scale monoculture. Keeping a farmers market going helps maintain rural areas in farmscapes and keeps local residents employed in farming.

The overall goal of this research was to better understand the cultural relationships between the food-selling habits of farmers and the food-buying habits of consumers in a farmers market. The project focused on farmers' and consumers' expectations and was designed to identify how the market can be improved. Such improvement should increase consumers' satisfaction with the market and increase farmers' quality of life, whether measured solely by income or by other factors. A primary finding of this study was that market rules of operation can interfere with farmers' willingness to sell at the market. Clearly, farmers markets managers should consult broadly and directly with the farmers they serve to implement policies that will encourage farmer participation rather than inhibit it.

At the market we studied, we found conflict among participants who have different expectations of the market. A farmers market that tries to mimic the patterns of food availability at a supermarket—as PTFM does with its retail building and preferential treatment accorded to anchor vendors—is unlikely to be supportive of local, seasonal agriculture, and efforts to do so will not educate consumers about the seasonality of food or the labor involved in its production and marketing. Consumers come to the market to purchase fresh, quality farm products from multiple vendors and to support a local farm economy, rather than to save money. Creating a market that alters that experience transforms the market into something consumers might not support as strongly.

Making fresh produce available seven days a week at the PTFM is very difficult for small farmers with limited

resources. As a result, the manager has been forced to rely on larger farmers and vendors to supply the market, putting small farmers at a disadvantage. Small farmers are able to produce quality products; their limitations are in time, capital, sufficient labor for production or marketing, and production of limited quantities.

Like other farmers markets in a similar stage of development, the PTFM must resolve an internal conflict, that of market identity (Lloyd, Nelson, and Tilley 1987). PTFM's current policies are not supportive of small farmers, and many are going elsewhere to market their products. The market could devise policies that would support small, local farmers, and this would be a valuable goal, both economically and culturally. Certainly, it would mirror the priorities that consumers seem to have in mind when they shop at the market.

In this study, we have identified some of the factors that attract consumers and farmers to farmers markets. On the consumers' part, these include an interest in fresh, locally grown produce, a desire to support local farmers and the local farm economy, an interest in cooking with seasonally available foods, and enjoyment of the market atmosphere. The possibility of buying food more cheaply than at a supermarket was not an important factor, even though Lloyd, Nelson, and Tilley (1987:2) list this first among the reasons they give for consumers attending a farmers market. On the farmers' part, attractive factors include access to a space to sell their products, the proximity of the market to their farm, and the number of potential customers.

Our study has shown that the farmers market itself plays an important role in structuring the relationships between farmers and consumers and in determining whether the experiences of selling and buying at the market are satisfying. The market is more than just a physical space for commercial transactions; rather, the market, and the policies and regulations that govern its operation, is an active contributor to the cultural dynamic within which those transactions take place. Our findings emphasize the importance of understanding the market as a context within which farmers and consumers make their marketing and buying decisions. They also point out the need for market managers to understand how their decisions may affect the success of the market by establishing a context that satisfies consumers' and farmers' expectations.

Notes

¹Community-supported agriculture (CSA) is a production and distribution system that is supported by prepaying members (known as shareholders or subscribers) who purchase a share of the annual seasonal harvest from a farmer, which is then distributed on a weekly basis at predetermined pick-up locations (Andreatta 2000; DeLind 1999; Groh and McFadden 1997; Kane 1998; Ostrom 1997). CSA subscribers share in the benefits and risks associated with crop production, including both bountiful and scarce harvests. Participating in a CSA enables consumers to take responsibility for the food system that nourishes them, creating a social responsibility toward the people involved and an ecological

responsibility to the land. A special aspect of the CSA approach is the opportunity to educate consumers about what it takes to grow food and build support for local agriculture and the agrarian community.

²Despite the general decline in small-scale agriculture, one recent success story has been organic farming. Organic farming is now the fastest growing sector of the farm economy, increasing by some estimates as much as 20 percent per year. Most organic farms are small with the majority producing on less than five acres (OTA 1999). Ironically, because of its success, even this sector is threatened by consolidation. Currently, there are numerous large farms and corporations cashing in on the popularity of organic food and threatening the same market price decline seen in industrial farming (Ikerd 1999; DeLind 2000; McMichael 2000).

³Although USDA classifies a small farm as one that generates less than \$250,000, small farms in North Carolina generate an income of less than \$10,000 per annum (NCDA & CS 2001).

⁴Three farmers participated both in the one-on-one interviews and one focus group.

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