

# BUYING LOCAL FOOD

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**A SURVEY OF  
SOUTHERN KENAI PENINSULA RESTAURANTS  
AND INSTITUTIONS**

**2018**



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Homer Soil and Water Conservation District

Prepared for the Alaska Division of Agriculture





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# Specialty Crop Block Grant Program USDA



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# Executive Summary

In the past decade, Alaska's southern Kenai Peninsula has experienced a small-scale agricultural boom. Statistics from the National Agriculture Statistics Service show that though the number of farms in the Lower 48 states has gone down by three percent between 2012 and 2017, the number of farms has increased 30 percent in Alaska and sixty percent on the Kenai Peninsula (Census of Agriculture, 2017). Small farms with diverse production are dotting the landscape on the southern Kenai Peninsula and the economic infrastructure is rapidly growing along with it. Opportunities for selling local food is strong with a thriving Homer Farmer's Market, community supported agriculture options, direct farm-to-restaurant sales, and a new online marketplace called the Alaska Food Hub.

The individual shopper at a farmers market plays an important role in the local food system. But when looking at this system as a whole, it is easy to see that certain players have a bigger role. The large purchasers like restaurants, institutions and grocery stores can sculpt the food system landscape for farmers, brokers, distributors and consumers simply with their choices.

The responses to this survey give us a glimpse into some of the factors that determine those choices. During the process of interviewing 38 restaurants, supermarkets and institutions, certain messages became clear. The first and foremost is that these buyers value local. It also is clear that they do not always buy local food. Though it may seem that price would be the deciding factor, survey results showed that the decisions buyers are making are much more complicated than that.

First of all it is important to understand the busy world going on behind the counter or in the kitchen. Chefs, managers and other buyers don't always have the time to hunt down local food, especially when compared to the ease of using the sophisticated large-scale food distribution system presently in place. Price may be a factor, but it is overshadowed by the lack of connection between the farmer and the buyer. A repeated theme among these interviews was the need to connect; whether to learn what is available, who grows it, or when it will be available. Communication is key. Buyers who already had good relationships with growers spoke highly of farmers who use technology to text or email announcements, orders and/or invoices.

Another reoccurring theme was the need for consistency and reliability. Few buyers like having more surprises in the kitchen than what are already inherent to the business of food service. Timely deliveries, quality and consistent product, and clear communication about availability and seasonality were all aspects that buyers valued highly.

Another aspect that became clear is that these buyers simply go through a lot of food. The small market farms on the southern Kenai Peninsula may always have a difficult time meeting the demand of these large-scale buyers, but luckily the quality of their products is well known.

For this reason, buyers would love to see any sort of centralization that would bring everyone's products together, whether it was in the form of a farmer-led distributor, a website for posting available products or a centralized distribution center. Anything that would make access to local foods easier would be appreciated.

The many dynamics of the kitchen and the grocery store aisle keep these buyers on their toes. The farmer, swayed by weather, timing, and labor issues, may not always see the consumer perspective. This study shows how these large-scale consumers are instead swayed by strong relationships, dedication and reliability, and any tactics that reduce uncertainty for their businesses. Understanding these dynamics will benefit the farmers who wish to enter into this large-scale market or wish to improve on sales they presently have.

To lessen our dependence on food imported into the state and strengthen our local economy, building relationships between our local producers and our largest consumers is key. This survey shows what aspects of those relationships are the pivot points between success and failure. May we all focus on success.

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*"Ten years ago it was quite difficult to get local potatoes and other items, but now it's easier. Alaska is going through an agricultural boom of sorts and it's been easier to get local products in bulk, but it still has room to grow and could be so much more." – local buyer*

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# Introduction

If we are to grow and build on the successes of our local food system, it is important to understand the nuances that affect and guide it. The food system is not as simple as a farmer growing something that a local will then eat. Between that farmer and that final plate of food there are also buyers and brokers and distributors, national chains and corporations, regulations and pricing structures, technology and communication. There are plenty of aspects to try to understand.

For this reason, in 2018 the Homer Soil and Water Conservation District undertook a local food market study of the Homer area. With the support of the State of Alaska's Division of Agriculture and a Specialty Crop Block Grant, this study began asking the area's largest consumers about their purchasing choices with hopes of identifying ways to better connect local demand with our local supply potential. To that end, this survey attempts to identify:

- what buyers are purchasing and in what quantities
- what price premium, if any, they are willing to pay for local and/or organic food
- their preferred methods for ordering, delivery and billing
- what requirements they have for quality, product form, availability or quantity
- what constraints they face in choosing local foods

Ultimately, this survey offers buyers the opportunity to inform supply-chain business practices, encourage economic growth and build collaboration with the small but vibrant community of local food producers and processors in the study area. We would like to thank all of the buyers who provided input and hope that the results will be helpful both to local producers and to local large-scale buyers. Conversations with study participants were truly engaged, and buyers went above and beyond in explaining what has worked and what hasn't in getting local foods into their kitchens.

## Methodology

The study was conducted through face to face interviews with managers in charge of food purchases for 34 local restaurants, 2 supermarkets, 2 institutions (a hospital and a senior services facility) and 1 combination restaurant/grocery business; interviews were supported by a survey of 36 questions (see the complete survey in the [Appendix C.](#)) All businesses and institutions are located in or just outside of Homer, Alaska.

These interviews took place during the summer and fall 2018. Nearly all of the restaurants, grocers and meal serving institutions in the Homer area took part in these interviews, resulting in a high participation rate for the study and a good representation of buyers' opinions. In the case of grocery stores, the interviews were done with the produce department managers which meant they could only answer questions regarding fresh produce purchases even though other locally sourced products such as meats and seafoods are available elsewhere in the store.

Participants were also asked to complete a checklist outlining what produce items they buy from any source (local and non-local products), average monthly quantities for each, typical prices and if there was a local preference for certain items to be sourced locally. Participation in this was lower (roughly 79%), however, data collected provide valuable insight into the current and potential market for produce items that producers may choose to supply.

For this survey, “local products” are defined as fresh and prepared foods grown, raised or harvested in Alaska. The definition of local was extended statewide because it can be difficult or impossible for buyers to identify which part of Alaska products come from if they are buying through groceries or distributors. While the bulk of Kenai Peninsula producers have direct ordering relationships with restaurants and institutional buyers, there are those who sell through groceries or other distributors where some products may be identified on product lists simply as Alaska Grown. Most producers on the Kenai Peninsula are growing vegetables, however small local farms are also raising livestock and other specialty products for sale and the authors of this study wanted to include these other products. Seeing that it may be difficult during interviews for buyers to separate out local farm-raised meats from Alaskan seafood purchases when recalling ordering invoices, seafoods were also included in the definition of local meats.

Much of this consumer survey was based around qualitative, open-ended questions that asked individual food managers to share their thoughts on the innerworkings of their businesses. It is challenging to summarize such layered, diverse perspectives, so direct quotes populate these pages in order to allow buyers to speak for themselves.

This report is broken into five sections:

1. About Buying—*What* do buyers purchase?
2. About Perceptions of Local—*Why* do buyer choose what they buy?
3. About Distribution—*How* do buyers get products?
4. About Challenges to buying local
5. About Solutions

# About Buying – *What Do Local Buyers Purchase?*

The buyers were asked a series of questions about both local and non-local buying choices in order to learn about the farm products they choose. [Appendix A and B](#) provide additional information on buying choices, foods that buyers would like to source locally, and opinions and comments buyers shared about local food.

## Local Food on Menus and Store Shelves

Nearly all (95%) of the participating establishments buy at least some local foods. Nonetheless, the types of local products and percentages they represent of a buyer’s overall food purchases vary widely among buyers. Buyers were asked to estimate the portion of their overall food purchases that are sourced from Alaska for summer and winter months separately. This distinction is important because the summer months

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*95% of buyers interviewed buy local products*

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bring large numbers of tourists and seasonal residents to the Homer area, creating a surge in demand for most of the participating buyers. Summer is also when more local fresh foods are harvested and available to buy. Overall demand is lower during winter for many buyers, though not all. Combined with a lack of availability for many fresh local products during winter, this leads to a sharp drop in the percentage of local foods purchased during winter months.

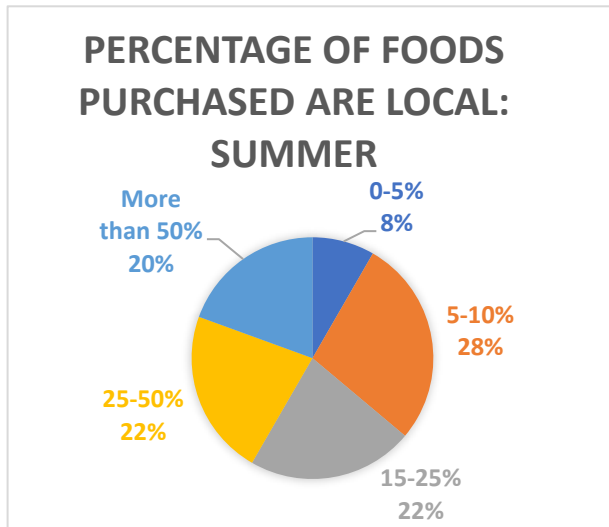


Figure 1

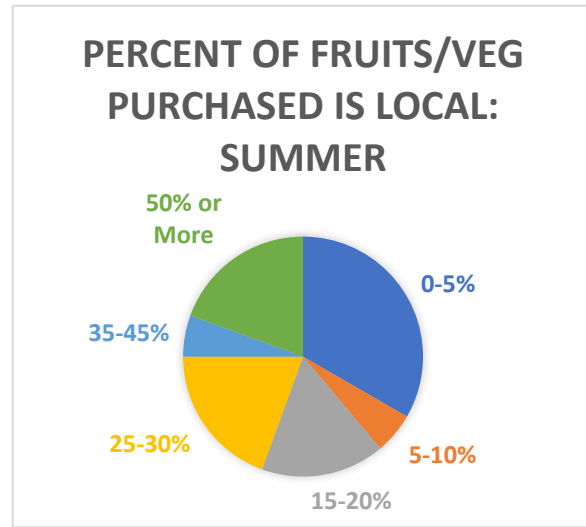


Figure 2

During summer months, local foods make up a large percentage in many buyers’ kitchens or retail outlets despite the fact that some key products are not available from Alaskan sources, such as sugar, oils, dairy products or most grains. Cooks turn these local ingredients into sauces, jams, salads, sides, juices, or the star of the main course.

- 7 buyers said local foods comprise more than half of their summer purchases
- 8 buyers put the percentage between 25-50%.

However, the majority (55%), utilize less:

- 8 buyers said they purchase local for 15-25% of what they need in summer
- 10 buyers said 5-10%
- 1 buyer said 0-5%
- Two report using no local products

It is important to note that Alaskan seafood is included in these percentages, which can increase them significantly. Homer is known for fishing, and Alaskan seafood features prominently on many local menus, fresh when available. For thirteen buyers, 34%, their local purchases are primarily or exclusively Alaskan fish, oysters or other seafoods, but they purchase little or no local produce or other products. One buyer noted they buy no local produce unless it's being sold at

From Local Fisheries
Halibut
Prince William Sound Shrimp
Salmon
Oysters
Mussels
Rockfish
Clams
Ling Cod
Crab
Pacific Cod
Black Cod (Sablefish)
Scallops
Octopus

Costco or Save-U-More (a local grocery store). But when it comes to buying seafood, some buyers insist on using only Alaskan seafood. Knowing that an Alaskan product like seafood can achieve such standing with consumers is encouraging, and also makes it worthy of analysis for successful tactics in the marketing, processing, sales and distribution that the seafood industry has developed over the years.

Figure 3

Winter purchases drop considerably for local goods, and no buyers report getting more than 50% from local producers once summer ends. Since the production season is over, the determining factors become storage, processing and/or freezing. Alaskan fish is the dominant player during the cold months, though buyers can still find meats, some hardy crops and specialty items. Alaskan potatoes, cabbage and carrots are often available from grocery stores or distributors year-round, and these come primarily from larger farms in the Matanuska-Susitna farm belt that have large-scale storage. Pea shoots and microgreens that can be grown locally indoors

Local Items on the Menu (Most Reported to Least)
Alaskan Seafood
Lettuces and Spring Mix
Potatoes
Cabbage
Carrots
Kale
Cucumbers
Chicken/Duck Eggs
Herbs
Pea Shoots/Microgreens
Red/Golden Beets
Red/Cherry Tomatoes
Onions
Spinach
Flowers
Broccoli/Broccolini Varieties
Swiss Chard
Radishes
Turnips
Bok Choy
Chicken
Beef
Pork
Arugula
Scallions
Green Tomatoes
Rutabaga
Celery
Berries/Strawberries
Snap Peas
Garlic/Garlic Scapes
Cauliflower
Romanesco
Apples
Beet Greens
Mizuna
Purple Orach
Birch Syrup
Chicken Livers
Mushrooms
Collards
Duck
Goose
Rabbit
Reindeer Sausage
Honey
Rhubarb
Green Beans

Figure 4

have recently come available and some buyers report getting these during winter along with hardy crops from a handful of southern Kenai Peninsula farmers who preserve late season crops for sale well after the harvest.

Nine of those interviewed run seasonal (summer only) restaurants or food trucks and therefore do not make any winter purchases. Grocery stores were not asked this question, but for the others feeding the community year-round:

- 9 buyers report buying local in the winter for 25-50% of their products
- 6 buyers report 15-25%
- 2 buyers report 5-10%
- 10 buyers (over a quarter of the participants) said 0-5% of their products are local

### Local Produce from the Farmer

Since the majority of southern Kenai Peninsula farmers produce vegetables, buyers were specifically asked what percentage of the fresh produce they use is local. For summer months the responses represent a range:

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*“Summer months- more than 50%.  
Whatever I can fit into my menu  
and my price point.”*

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- 7 buyers (18%) report as much as 50% or more
- 2 buyers use 35-45%
- 7 buyers use 25-30%
- 6 buyers use 15-20%
- 2 buyers use 5-10%
- 12 (32%) report as low as 0-5%

In all, 42% of buyers use at least 25% local produce in their kitchens during summer; some say they buy as much as they can when available. Local greens for salads are a very common choice, and some buyers get all their summer greens from preferred Homer area producers. One buyer’s local purchases are strictly produce — no fish, grains or meat. Two buyers get some local produce and would like to get more, and two others who bought no produce mentioned that they wanted to change that.

During winter, when much less fresh local produce is available, buyers must rely more on shipments from outside Alaska.

- 2 buyers still get 15-20% of their produce from Alaskan farms in winter (one buyer reported using 300 lbs. of Alaskan potatoes each week)
- 3 others use 5-10% during those months
- The rest of survey participants use none or very little, including 9 businesses not open during winter.

## Choosing Organic Non-Local Farm Products

Like successful marketing efforts for Alaskan seafood, “certified organic” growers have distinguished their products from similar conventionally available products. USDA certified organic products have become much easier to come by and more affordable in recent years though they still can be somewhat less available and pricier than non-organic products. Local Alaskan farm products are sometimes likened to organic versus other commercially sourced products, due to differences in price or quality compared to conventionally available options. Therefore, this survey asked specific questions about organic produce in order to get a better understanding of how local buyers valued it differently from other commercial produce. The majority of buyers interviewed, 63%, reported choosing certified organic, non-local products at least some of the time. Most reported using organic for only certain items or only occasionally, though a few stated that they try to get organic as much as possible. Combined, over 50 different products were named, which included several different kinds of dairy products, meats, baking products, and a huge variety of vegetables and fruits (the full list can be found in [Appendix B](#)).

Diverse reasons are given for whether buyers choose organic or not. Several buyers commented they prefer organic over non-organic based on principle, —they try to avoid buying products exposed to chemical pesticides or animals treated less humanely. Three more mentioned that they’ll choose organic when local alternatives are not available (“cucumbers when local aren’t ready”). Several others are focused on buying the best quality available— not whether a product is organic or not. These buyers switched to organic options for certain products after finding the quality was better. For example, individually wrapped heads of organic romaine lettuce were less bruised than other options that weren’t individually wrapped. One buyer reported choosing organic options if they are in better condition, but that the durability of non-local organic produce in general can be poor.

Some buyers shop around for the best price for the amount and quality they are looking for. For several it’s simply about price and they find that sometimes organic is cheaper. Contrary to this, others say they don’t buy any organic because it’s expensive, or because distributors usually only sell it in large bulk packages, so it’s hard to get reasonable-

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*“I don’t need certified organic, but if it’s non-local I tend to go for organic.”*

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*“When we choose produce, we are actually looking for the best quality, not whether it’s organic or not, so it varies.”*

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*“If it’s local but not organic we’re not very interested. Organic is a big priority. We want to move away from pesticides.”*

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*“Basically, availability dictates that one. In the winter it’s not about whether it’s organic or not for me, just which section has what I’m looking for. At [the store I shop] the prices on both these days are comparable.”*

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sized amounts for a small restaurant. One buyer claimed that distributors don't have much organic available, but they get what they can; another said they can't find organic meats in the volumes they need. On the other hand, several reported that sometimes organic is the only option for what they are looking for from stores or distributors year-round or week to week. One grocer noted that Homer stores sell more organic produce than similar stores further up the peninsula.

As noted in Homer Soil and Water's *Growing Local Food: A Survey of Commercial Producers on the Southern Kenai Peninsula* (2019), most southern Kenai Peninsula farmers producing for market are using growing practices that could be called "more organic than organic." Alaskan producers face fewer pests than those in warmer climates, therefore requiring much fewer pesticides. Farmers interviewed for the producer study overwhelmingly choose natural fertilizers and pest treatments over those based on petroleum products or other manufactured chemicals. Ninety percent of the farms in the survey use entirely natural practices even though they have not gone through the costly process of becoming officially certified organic. Given that many of the buyers interviewed are in the market for organically produced foods, local growers could benefit from informing potential buyers about their growing practices as a marketing tactic.

### Interest in Prepared or Processed Foods from Local Ingredients

Not all local food is sold raw, some local producers either currently prepare or plan to prepare ready-made products from Alaskan ingredients. Buyers were asked which, if any, of the products included on a list in the survey appealed to them for their restaurant or institution. Meat products from local livestock (e.g. sausages, bacon and jerky) were the most popular among the choices, with 60% of buyers reporting interest in having those items more available. Meat products were followed by products made from local dairy and then pickled or fermented

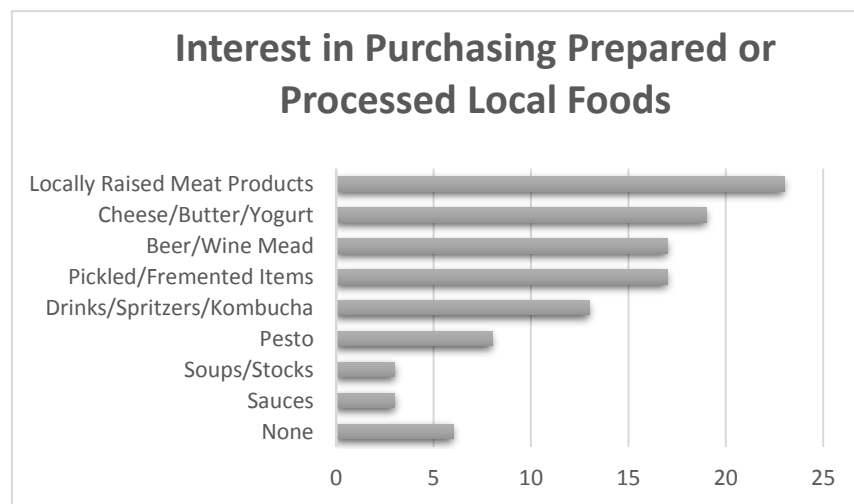


Figure 5  
Grocery store produce managers were asked only about fresh produce for this survey and not on choices made by managers from other departments in the store.

items like sauerkraut, kimchi, vinegar, etc. Several noted that it didn't seem feasible for locally produced meat and dairy products to be cost competitive, but that they were curious and interested, and that consistent quality and availability year-round were critical.

Specific products buyers mentioned they'd like to see are bacon, chorizo in link form, sausage and butter (all of which require specific processing facilities according to government regulations). One buyer reported previously buying cheese from a local woman, but it started forming an unidentified mold that spoiled it. And then there were a few who commented that they are not interested in prepared or value-added products simply because they make everything from scratch in their kitchen.

### Beyond Vegetables- Interest in Other Fresh Local Products

Clearly, there's more to the local food scene than fruits and vegetables, so buyers were asked what other types of local fresh products were of interest. In general, these gained more excitement than did processed or prepared items. In fact, seven (18%) of respondents checked all listed items as being of interest, and a roughly equal number indicated they'd be interested in all but one or two of the items listed. Specific comments again focused on competitive pricing and year-round availability.

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*"I'd love to be able to advertise that we have locally raised and produced sausage. I hate having to say it's New York sausage."*

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*"I would totally buy a local pig and have it butchered to make sausages and everything else... McNeil charges \$3.40 - \$3.50/lb and I wanted to buy a local pig from a girl for like \$1.00/lb more. I was ready to buy the pig, but the deal fell through."*

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*"We just can't get enough of the local eggs; we go through a full flat a day or more."*

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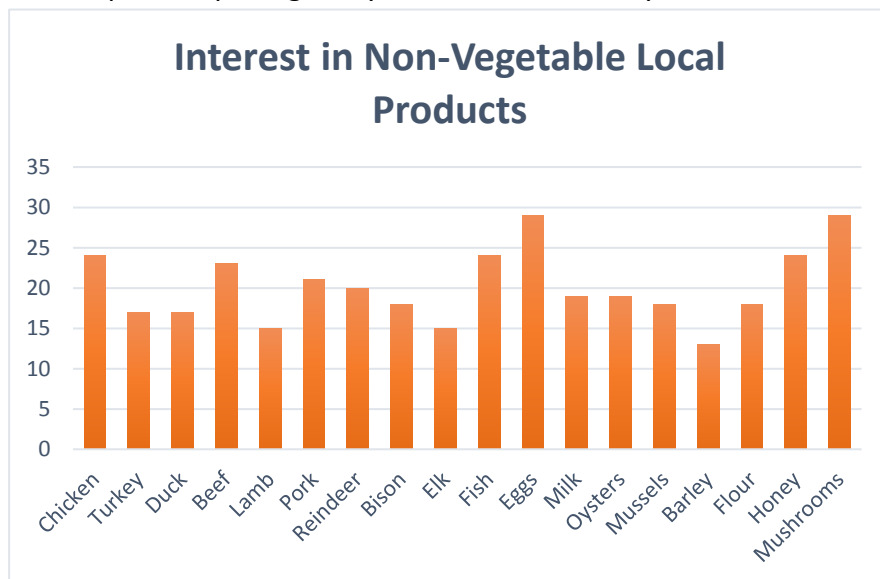


Figure 6

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*"All of these potentially, but again, has to be available year-round and competitively priced. But it would be cool! Oh my god, oyster delivery... heck yeah!"*

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During interviews some buyers spoke about particular foods they'd like to get more of locally. We have included these items for local farmers to see where current demand exists. More data on produce items that buyers indicated they'd like to source locally can be found in the Produce Checklist in [Appendix A](#).

*"We want more local peas!"*

I'd really love to get local berries and would be willing to get them frozen. I'd also like to get local milk or chevre. I've offered, and still would offer, my DEC approved kitchen to those who'd like to make chevre."

*"More local eggs."*

The only thing that's hard to get is mung bean sprouts. They don't last long and I don't think anybody wants to grow them."

*"If I could, I'd buy all local."*

Some products I'd like to specifically begin sourcing from AK, just because I know they grow fairly well up here in greenhouses, are chile peppers, like jalapenos, etc. Herbs too. And more Alaskan sprouts, other types of sprouts in addition to mung bean sprouts we have been getting from Alaskan Sprouts in Anchorage.

Local Foods Wishlist
Chile peppers
Cilantro
Herbs
Peas
Mung bean sprouts
Microgreens
Berries
Chevre (goat cheese)
Local milk
Leeks
Kale
Spinach
Tomatoes
Cherry tomatoes
Mushrooms
Beef
Eggs

*"We serve fruit with our breakfasts and I feel like there's a market for local fruit not being filled. "*

*"I'd love to get LEEKS! 40 lbs per month, both summer and winter. Kale, spinach, cherry tomatoes too- looking for a local supplier for these next year. Mushrooms too- big time! Would like to get as much local as I can get."*

*CILANTRO! If somebody could supply us with that it would be great!*

*"I'd love to get local beef. Love to get one cut of local beef that I can get enough of on a regular basis and put it on the menu."*

*"We get 300 lbs of Alaskan potatoes per week."*

*"I'd like to do local lettuce."*

*"A regular tomato supplier for two cases of tomatoes per week in summer."*

*"Dainty lettuce, not dirty and meaty."*

## How Much Local Food Would Be Preferred

Overwhelmingly, buyers expressed the desire to get more local foods. The majority stated that ideally they would get most, if not all, of their products from local sources if it were possible and the prices were competitive. Several also noted that currently there are factors that limit availability and that quality would still have to be good. Several others were satisfied with how much local product they currently buy.

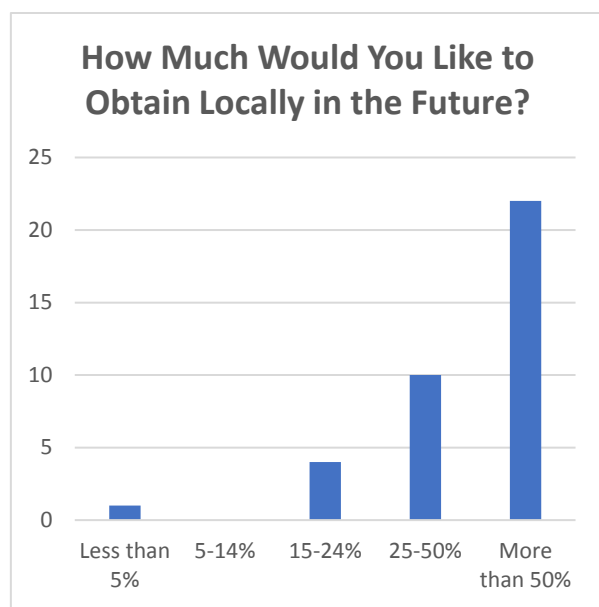


Figure 7

*“100% ideally. Currently, more than half our menu could be from local providers, and we like that, but cost is a factor.”*

*“If we could survive it and the numbers were in the right place, then I'd get as much as I could get my hands on.”*

*“It would be great if everything was grown in Alaska. That way we don't need the Lower 48 to take care of us. If it was priced right, I'd get everything from AK; it's fresher, supports the local economy, and everything could run smoother. I need consistency though. I get produce from distributors sometimes that's really old and withered. They may take it back, but they're always trying to get rid of their older product to us because we're at the end of the road here. They have the attitude of take it or leave it. We say leave it.”*

## The Produce Checklist

At the end of their interviews buyers were asked to complete a comprehensive checklist of produce options, marking which items they currently bought from any source (local or not), along with average prices for those items, monthly quantity, whether they had a local preference, and unit size. This was a challenging task for many busy managers, chefs and owners, in part because prices fluctuate widely month to month among the competing food distributors where they source their purchases. Specifying a monthly quantity was also challenging, since that too fluctuates and, for some items, would require buyers to review their invoices and store receipts. When buyers provided separate data for summer and winter quantities instead of yearly averages, the summer numbers were used when compiling data, as this is the time local produce is more available.

Roughly 79% of buyers filled in at least part of the checklist. Some checked if they used the product but then gave no details about how much or about preferences. Considering

participation in this survey was completely voluntary, it was surprising that any checklists were filled out at all. Though this data cannot perfectly and exactly describe this level of consumption of all of the large-scale buyers in our community, the quantity of information here is enlightening.

Compiled checklist data can be found in [Appendix A](#). This data can provide producers with insight into the size of potential local markets for a wide variety of produce items, as well as price levels with which

producers would need to compete. Restaurants, grocers and institutional buyers typically pay wholesale prices for much of what they buy, though bulk packaging may reduce labor for local producers, which may make selling at prices competitive with wholesale more attractive.

Looking at just a few of the crops that are being grown locally, Table 1 below gives an idea of how many buyers purchase them, how much they purchase, and whether or not they care if it is local or organic.

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**6,266 lbs.**  
 The average combined monthly amount of lettuce and baby greens used by the roughly 79% of buyers who reported monthly produce usage. If the 209 lb. per buyer average was extrapolated to the other 40%, the number jumps to 8,356 lbs. monthly.

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Vegetable Purchased	Number of buyers who purchase	Number of buyers who gave details	Details		
			Pounds/month	Purchase Local	Would prefer local/organic
Tomatoes	28	26	4,239 lbs.	3	12
Cabbage	29	28	2,688 lbs.	10	12
Bok choy	14	14	1,118 lbs.	4	4
Potatoes	28	25	11,005 lbs.	7	11
Zucchini	14	14	1,410 lbs.	4	4
Carrots	25	22	2,106 lbs.	4	8
Onions	27	23	5,350 lbs.	2	9
Broccoli	18	14	1,409 lbs.	4	5
Broccolini	10	9	836 lbs.	2	4
Cauliflower	8	6	1,231 lbs.	0	6
Peppers	23	20	1,706 lbs.	0	6
Asparagus	10	9	685 lbs.	1	2
Cucumbers	25	22	986 lbs.	10	7

Table 1: Produce purchased locally and how much, details from the Produce Checklist

Buyers were asked to estimate their annual expenditures for produce and for a combined estimate for eggs and meat. Tallying numbers for those who offered these estimates shows impressive sums:

**Estimated annual expenditures on produce:**  
 Information from 16 buyers— \$674,450  
**Estimated annual expenditures on meat and eggs:**  
 Information from 13 buyers— \$883,376

# About Perceptions of Local Ag Products

This section focuses primarily on buyers' feedback about (a) factors to consider when deciding whether or not to purchase local foods, (b) secondary benefits gained by featuring local ingredients, and (c) perceptions of how important it is to their customers to feature local foods.

## Factors to Consider When Buying Local

Many factors come into play when buyers consider whether to choose local or non-local options. For starters, logistics of ordering and obtaining local products can be very different from ordering from a large distributor or purchasing at a local grocery store. And businesses and institutions buying in large quantities weigh factors differently than do households.

Buyers were offered the following list of potential factors and asked to check which effect decisions related to buying local foods:

- Knowledge of point of origin
- Uniformity of vegetables, or consistency in size over the harvest season
- Packaging consistency
- Duration of availability
- Delivery
- Reliability of crops being ready during expected weeks
- Availability of pre-sliced or partially processed products
- Better shelf life of freshly harvested products than those shipped in from outside Alaska

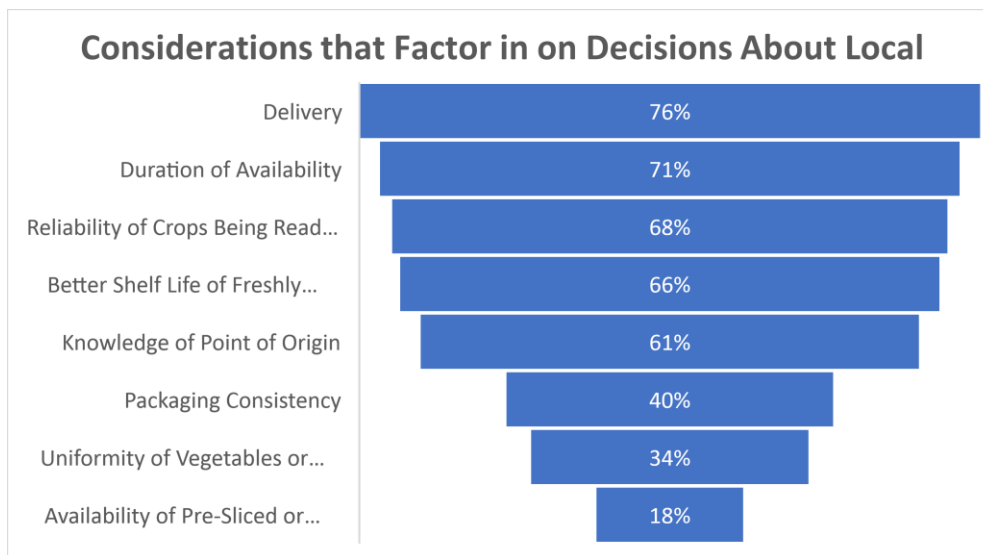


Figure 8

Establishments represented in this survey range from large, fast-paced restaurants, to small coffee shop/cafes, as well as a hospital, senior center and two grocery stores. Each deals with different product lines or menus, hours, staff sizes, purchasing volumes, etc. Nonetheless, data

reflect that common needs exist for these varied buyers who consistently try to provide foods that meet their customers' expectations. Five of the eight factors on the list were selected by well over half of participants as important when weighing whether or not to buy local foods. Buyer comments about different factors offer reasons why they matter.

### Delivery

Seventy-six percent checked this as a key factor to consider. Busy restaurateurs and other buyers rely on the time saving convenience of having product delivered to their doors, and several noted that this would be a real incentive to buy local. Some commented that they appreciate the Homer Farmers Market, but with Saturday crowds and limited parking they find it difficult to get in and out quickly or otherwise inconvenient to fit into their schedules. During interviews, some buyers commented that they really enjoy working with the farmers they buy from because of easy ordering and consistent delivery. In fact, local producers who have direct sales relationships with businesses typically do deliver. Delivery was not, however, a critical factor for all buyers. One commented that they would go out of their way to get a better quality product from a local farmer rather than ordering a lesser quality option that could be delivered. Another said delivery wasn't a problem if they could pick it up close-by.

### Duration of Availability

The second most checked factor, duration of availability reflects how long a product is available during the year. Many buyers look for products whose consistent availability they can count on, and they have tailored their menus to incorporate items characterized by a regular supply and acceptable quality. While some embrace seasonal local items that offer different tastes and aromas than those shipped up from large farms in the Lower 48, others find it tricky to switch among different products and/or suppliers. One buyer commented, "You don't want to go to 'Brand X' because the farms no longer have it." Others build more flexibility into their menus and can feature seasonal local products in specials or in place of other items they usually order. Even among similar establishments, opinions can vary. For example, one manager of a seasonal restaurant reported that duration of availability is extremely important because they're only open for a few months a year, while another said that because they operate only seasonally, duration of availability isn't important. Despite a mix of opinions, 71% of buyers identified duration of availability as affecting their purchasing decisions to some degree.

### Reliability of Crops Being Ready During Expected Weeks

While 32% of buyers did not find this an issue, two who commented stated that it was of critical importance to them, one citing it as the deciding factor for them in working with local farms. One noted being put off when a crop isn't ready when promised by the farmer or in quantities expected, requiring the buyer to order from other sources. Another noted being unsure of when crops like lettuce can be expected from local farms or how consistently they'd be available. For

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*"Our farmers now with their high tunnels are texting me in April about harvest times."*

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example, when would 24 heads of lettuce be available on a weekly basis? Some buyers were satisfied with forecasts offered by their farmers.

### [Better Shelf Life of Freshly Harvested Products Than Those Shipped in From Outside](#)

All of the comments about this factor spoke to the importance of freshness. “Fresh—Absolutely!” “Fresh and local are very important to us.” “Definitely a longer shelf life fresh-picked.”

### [Knowledge of Point of Origin](#)

Sixty-one percent said this is something they consider, and elsewhere in the interview buyers commented that it’s important to know the local farmers they buy from and to build a rapport with them. Some say they buy from the farmers who approached the business in person and were organized. One buyer said they have a strong emphasis on organic products and that the farms from which they buy use organic methods. Another stated that they like to know the farmer who sold the product so that if an issue comes up—like food-related illnesses— they can trace it to the source.

### [Packaging Consistency](#)

The overriding attitude buyers shared about packaging is that the packaging itself doesn’t much matter as long as the product arrives undamaged— a lot of damage can occur if the product isn’t packaged properly.

### [Uniformity of Vegetables, or Consistency in Size over the Harvest Season](#)

Only 34% of consider this factor when they think about buying local. One buyer commented that with certain crops, if harvested plants grow too large or arrive in a variety of shapes they’ll cook differently for certain recipes. Some buyers also commented elsewhere that they only use young or “baby” forms of certain crops and aren’t interested in fully mature stages due to differences in taste or texture.

### [Availability of Pre-Sliced or Partially Processed Products](#)

This was not a concern for most participants since they prep everything fresh in-house. One buyer commented that the only partially processed fresh product they are interested in is peeled garlic (peeling garlic can require a lot of time); another said they don’t want partially processed for fresh vegetables but do for meats.

### [Other Considerations](#)

During conversations several other considerations were named as factors that buyers take into account. One was convenience. Another was staff labor for prepping local products. However, comments on this were sometimes contradictory: One buyer stated that they had been excited about getting local lettuce, even though it cost a little more, but when it arrived, it took a lot of staff time to prep, and they had to throw away so much that it wasn’t worth it. On the other hand, another said local fresh means less labor and fewer rotten parts. One buyer reported that local products have less visual appeal, and another has experienced inconsistent quality. This

buyer stated, “I have had bad experiences with local producers. I got bad eggs once from [a local producer] that stank up my whole restaurant. I have chosen not to buy local produce at times because the quality wasn't there.” This buyer keeps supporting local farms but is to some extent still wary of local quality.

## Valuing Local

In this portion of the survey, buyers were asked to rank different aspects of the produce they purchase. The goal of these questions was to get a better idea of what motivates buyers to choose certain products over others and find out how likely it could be for them to pay a bit more to get a local version.

### Freshness of Produce

Buyers were asked to rate on a scale of 1 through 10 how much they value freshness when choosing what produce to buy. All respondents rated freshness at least 4, while most respondents—26—rated it 10. One buyer commented that though freshness scores a 10, they also understand that we live at “the end of the road” and produce shipped to Alaska, routed and handled through Anchorage, and later trucked down the highway to Homer may not be very fresh. Many commented during interview conversations that they must regularly inspect boxes for rotten product, some do this for every box of produce delivered. One grocer commented that freshness is very important to the company and that they have begun airfreighting some of their produce to Alaska instead of barging it, so, for example, mushrooms arrive hours from harvest instead of weeks. Buyers often chuckled when asked this question and said things like, “Of course freshness is of utmost importance,” seeming to imply, “Do you really need to ask this?” However, while most highly value freshness— or note that locally grown produce is by far fresher than products shipped to Homer via commercial distributors— many still buy relatively small amounts of local produce.

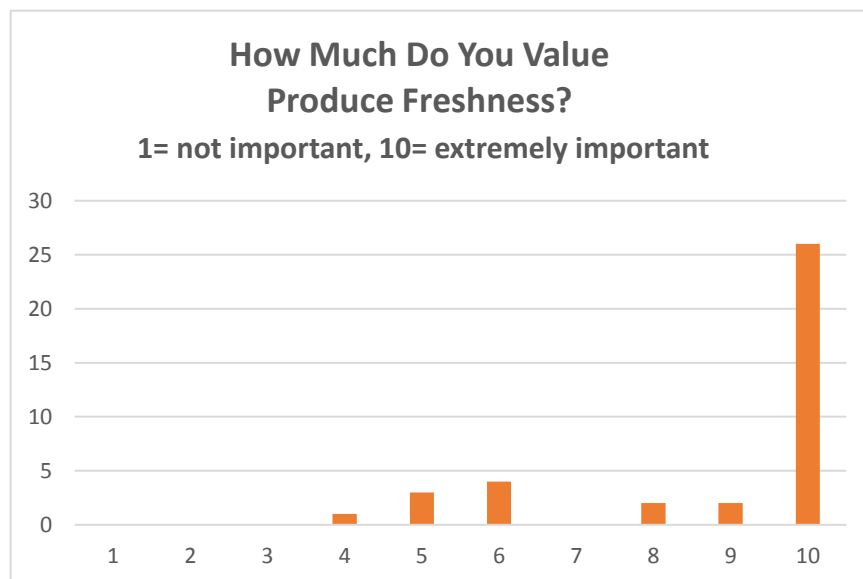


Figure 9

## Durability of Produce

When asked to rate how much they value durability of produce on a scale of 1 to 10, responses reflected a range. Roughly one-third said durability is of high importance (score of 10), one-quarter rated it as of medium importance (5), one-third rated it somewhere between these two (6-9), and eight percent gave it low priority (1-3). Many respondents use purchased produce right away and receive fresh supplies several times per week. Limited refrigeration and storage space contribute to this pattern. Small restaurants tend to have small kitchens and may not have space for storing more than 1 to a few days' produce. Larger businesses and grocers go through a lot each day and also need to resupply often. With rapid turnaround, durability matters more if it is shipped from far away.

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*"When you ship up a barge from Seattle 2,000 miles, you're losing 20% off the top from shrink. Much of the produce never makes it off the farm. So, that's why it's better to buy local; less loss so you can pay a little more [to the grower]. Moving the local produce more quickly means you can charge less, and it's cyclical. The local produce DOES move more quickly... I read an article that said produce in grocery store shelves is on average 3 months old. Obviously, not broccoli, but average it all and 3 months. If you want fresh produce, get local."*

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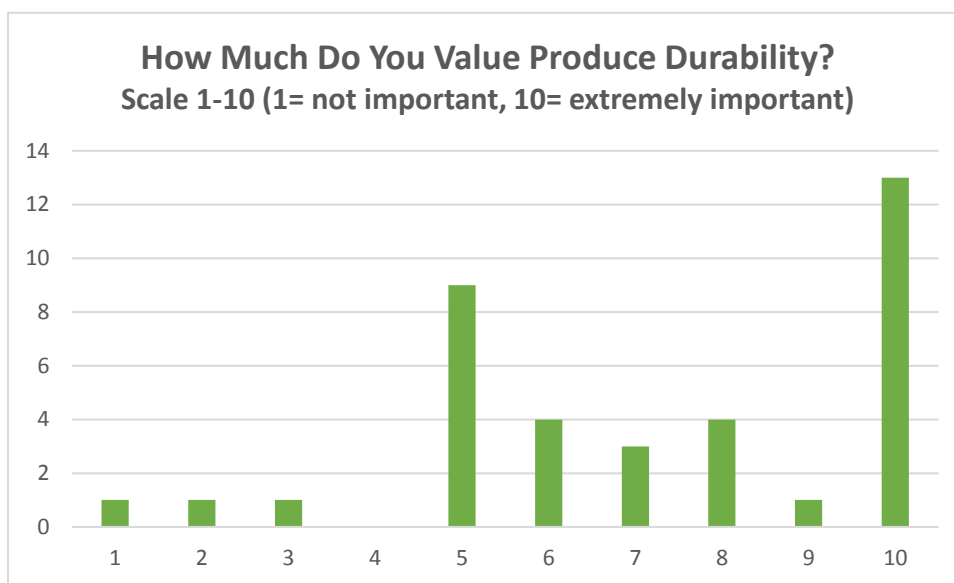


Figure 10

## Willingness to Pay More for Local

Considering that most restaurant, commercial, and institutional buyers pay wholesale prices for their products, it is worthwhile for local producers to have a sense of buyer willingness to pay more for local products and how much more they're willing to pay. Buyers were asked just that. Many responded that it

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*"It depends on what it is. If it's honey, I'd pay 50% more. If it's local flour versus an organic flour or other bulk items we get, I wouldn't pay that much. Fresh greens coming 5 miles versus wherever else they'd come from, I'd pay 15-20%."*

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depends on a number of factors, particularly the type of product and the quality difference that local can offer. One buyer makes it easy for producers to know what they are willing to pay by keeping a list on site of products they'd like to buy from local farmers and the prices they can offer. Figure 11 shows buyers' responses to this question.

### Secondary Benefits Gained from Using Local Products

Buying local products can offer a number of perks for businesses beyond what goes on in the kitchen or with ordering logistics. Participants were asked if their business gains any secondary benefits from purchasing local products. Buyers were supplied a list of potential benefits, and 89% reported that one or more applied to them or their bottom line, several offering other types of secondary benefits they receive as well.

Half of the businesses (50%) found that locally sourced food products can bring a higher price point for what they sell or can offer them a unique marketing niche (or both). Some pointed to the importance of their restaurant serving Alaskan fish, while one noted that people have been commenting on the upswing in local produce there. Increased customer loyalty was reported by 66%; one buyer expressed that their customers definitely like to know they have local ingredients. On that same note, 68% say that local products draw attention. But by far, the most reported secondary benefit was personal satisfaction (79%), and for some this was the only benefit they identified. Even if

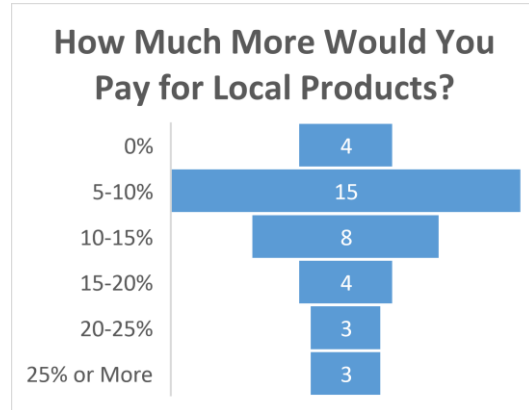


Figure 11

*"It's hard to buy tomatoes at \$8/lb vs \$4/lb at the store. I can only do so much local buying because it is expensive. I do understand the time and energy in growing the stuff, and I do support that. I do buy local but up to a point... I love going to the farmers market and seeing what they're growing. And sometimes even local farmers can be cheaper than the store. A cabbage at the market can be \$5 a head, whereas at the grocery store it's always by the pound, so there are times that I can get a better deal from local farmers. When people find out I'm buying local stuff they'll want it more, so eventually it will even out."*

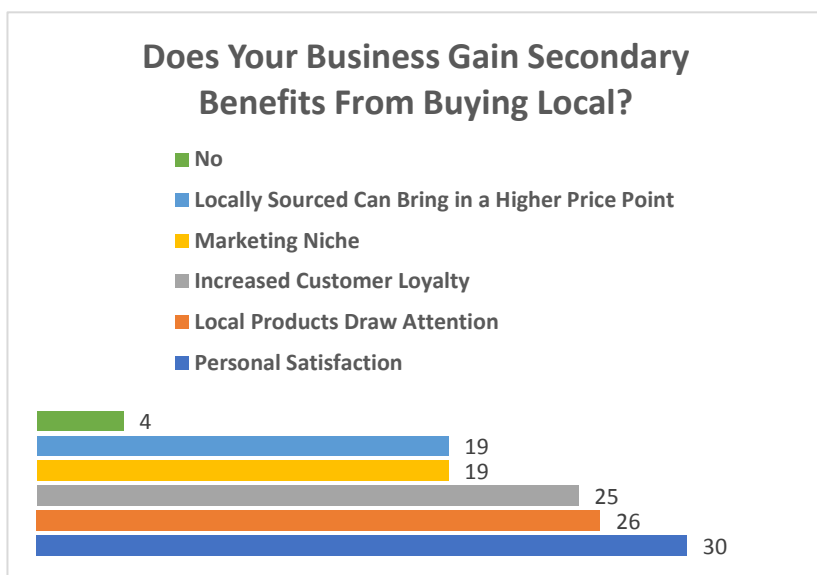


Figure 12

customers didn't respond strongly to local ingredients or they didn't advertise that they used them, these buyers bought local for their own sense of satisfaction.

A handful of buyers identified other secondary benefits, like having quality product for customers, or trades and discounts that vendors (farmers and restaurants) can give each other. One observed that farmers are more likely to pitch to businesses whose buyers are known to support local ag, which can lead to those buyers being approached by a wider variety of producers offering a wider variety of local products. On the other hand, a few reported they don't find buying local brings any of these benefits to them. One buyer put it this way, "I do think I buy quite a bit of local. But if I don't watch my bottom line and go bankrupt then that's one more business not buying local."

### Perception of Customer Interest in Local Food

Buyers know how they personally feel about buying local, and they can determine whether sales improve by offering local products, but more challenging for them is to estimate how important it is to their customers that they serve or sell local food. When asked to estimate on a scale from 1 to 10 how important local food is to their customers, buyers offered mixed opinions. Verbal responses revealed a trend in buyers believing that locals care more about locally sourced than tourists do. This led many buyers to try to average the differences between the two types of customers—those who care a lot about whether what they're served or sold is local and those who don't. While these perceptions may or may not accurately reflect attitudes of local customers and tourists, the perception that serving or selling local products is or is not important to a large percentage of the customer base may influence the emphasis businesses put on providing local products.

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*"I feel it's my responsibility to be an ambassador for the state. I want them to go home with a great Alaskan experience and tell everyone they know."*

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*"Our local customer base who's been coming here for years, I'd say more like an 8. The tourist clientele probably 3-4."*

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*"Local people definitely care- 8. Tourists probably care-6."*

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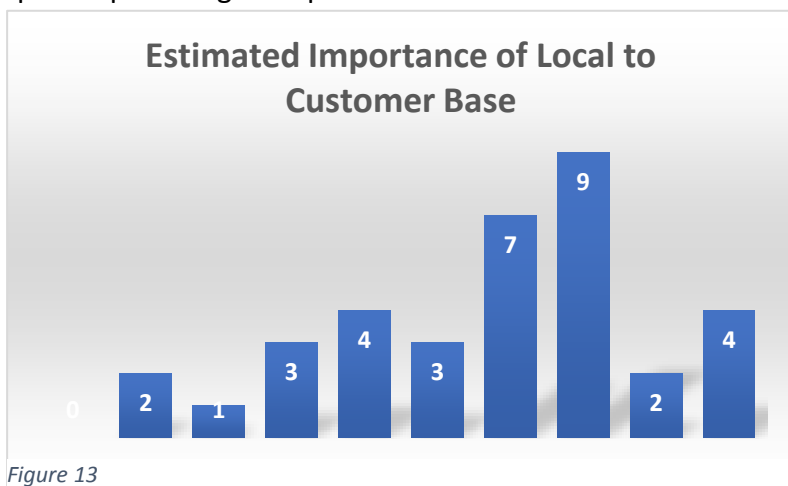


Figure 13

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*"I don't think the average person really cares... We generally sell a lot more conventional and I don't think people are looking to the organic section and price comparing. I had [local] cabbage at \$0.40 cheaper per pound than conventional and people were still buying conventional."*

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# About Distribution- How Do Buyers Get Products?

Homer area buyers obtain their food products in a variety of ways, from ordering through national or specialty distributors to hand picking from the store or farmers markets, to making deals with individual farmers or fish brokers selling a local catch. This section covers food outlets available to buyers, including the pros and cons of using wholesale food distributors, and other ordering logistics.

## The Options for Accessing Local Food

The first question buyers were asked about distribution was where they get their local products. Buyers commonly use a mix of approaches to get the Alaskan products they want; buying some things here and some there. The majority (26 respondents, 68%) have direct buying relationships with producers or fish sellers. These relationships include ordering weekly, buying what the producer or broker has on hand when they come to the door, ordering what's available on websites or Facebook pages, or receiving boxes of assorted products through community supported agriculture (CSA) subscriptions. Other direct buying options exist as well. On Saturdays and Wednesdays, the Homer Farmers Market is open and 47% of interviewees head down on a weekly or occasional basis. Buyers may check in with preferred growers at the market for specific items or may go to see what interesting ingredients are on offer. Some growers interact with buyers during the off-season in order to

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*We buy from a variety of individual farmers (Russian farmers who are growing a variety of nice produce, one farm in Anchor Point that grows a lot of good lettuce). Many people stop by the restaurant when they have products to sell, and that's o.k., but we would prefer to work with farmers who can grow products that are specific to our needs. We are very choosy about texture, taste, cleanliness of product, etc. for our dishes. We won't put just any produce on the plate. We would like to work with farmers ahead of the growing season to coordinate with them.*

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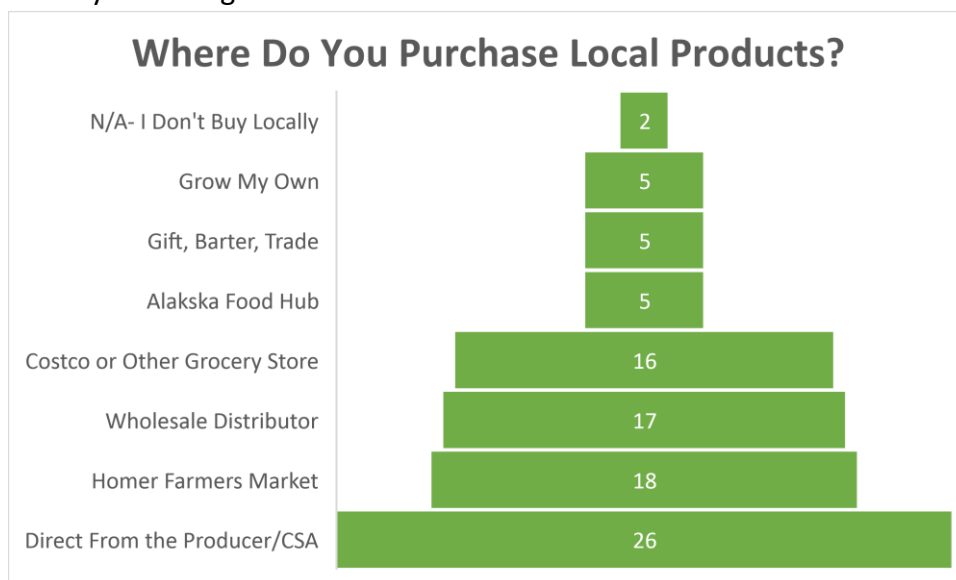


Figure 14

plan with them what to grow in the coming season, though this type of pre-planning is less common for buyers than simply choosing from what's fresh at the time of purchase.

Forty-two percent of respondents, (nearly 2/3 of those buying direct) stick with one to three regular suppliers who deliver to their door; the other 26% who buy directly from producers purchase from a variety of individual growers, boat captains or other fish suppliers. Some respondents included Homer-based fish brokers among their direct sales providers. These brokers buy fish directly from boat captains and sell it locally. Buyers may consider this as direct buying because these brokers are small businesses run by locals, and the fish or shellfish are usually caught in southcentral Alaska.

Buyers often use wholesale distributors and grocery stores to get Alaskan root crops like potatoes and carrots, typically from farms in the Anchorage and Matanuska-Susitna areas. Few buyers grow their own vegetables or herbs, purchase through the Alaska Food Hub, or barter and trade.

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*"We prefer to buy directly from the producer because we're buying large quantities and we don't want to take such quantities from what they have brought to the Farmers Market."*

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*"I don't have any steady farmers supplying me. Sometimes a farmer will stop by with goods for sale and I may buy them. I met somebody in a parking lot once and bought from them for the weeks they had product."*

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*"1-2 times per week or so (depending on how busy we are) we order from our farmers, who all like to deliver on different days of the week, so we get farmer deliveries 4 days a week. Most farmers prefer texting orders. We text them the day before it would be picked, then they harvest and deliver. We do 1 FSA order per week for bulk products. Seafood comes in frozen even though it's locally caught. We can order that whenever we want. Fresh salmon off the boat is dependent on salmon landings."*

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## Wholesale Distributors

Responses above illustrate the variety of ways buyers obtain local products, but typically most products used in commercial kitchens or sold in area grocery stores come from wholesale distributors. In order to get a fuller picture of how businesses and institutions procure food items, several questions were asked about buyers' experience working with these large distributors. This type of information can help local producers to understand what buyers are looking for in a provider and also what stumbling blocks to avoid.

Participants were first asked which food distribution businesses they use and how they would rate their satisfaction with each on a scale of 1 through 10. Ratings given tended to be only for

the larger distributors that are commonly used by area buyers, though some ratings are given for those used less commonly.

<i>Distributor</i>	<i>Number of Users</i>	<i>Ratings Given by Buyers</i>	<i>Average Rating</i>
Food Services of America (FSA)	26	8, 5, 8, 3, 3, 6, 5, 7, 1, 8, 8, 2.5, 1, 6, 6, 9	5.4
Sysco/DiTomaso	20	10, 6, 6.5, 3, 4, 10, 1, 6, 4, 8, 8, 9, 10	6.6
Peterkin Distributors	19	10, 8, 2, 6, 9, 8, 8, 2.5, 7, 6.5	6.7
Country Foods	16	7, 8, 8, 6, 5, 6, 2.5, 8, 7, 8	6.6
McNeil Canyon Meats	*	*	*
Costco	4	8	8
Charlie’s Produce	3	6	6
Teddy’s Tasty Meats	3	7, 7	7
Favco	2	**	**
United National Foods Inc.	2	**	**
Paragon Distributors	2	8	8
Northern Sales	1	**	**
New Sagaya Wholesale	1	**	**
Amazon	1	**	**

Table 2: Ratings of large distribution companies

\* A local butcher with a processing shop and a retail space in a local grocery store. There is insufficient data from the responses to determine how many buyers use them, though several buyers reported using them exclusively for their meats.

\*\* Indicates no ratings data offered for this distribution company by respondents

Some of these distributors specialize in items like organic produce, bread or fish; others supply a greater diversity of products. Buyers described shopping for different types of products from different purveyors (ex. dry goods from Costco, produce from Sysco/Ditomaso, FSA for hard to get specialty items, Paragon for drinks/kombucha...). Buyers reported using anywhere from one to seven different distributors for their weekly purchases, though they may use some of these providers only occasionally. The four used most frequently are two large national distributors— FSA and Sysco (DiTomaso is a Sysco affiliate based in Anchorage)— and two smaller, family-owned Alaskan distributors— Peterkin and Country Foods. Ratings for these top four show varied levels of satisfaction with each. Comments about what food distributors in Alaska do well, as well as what irks buyers about using them, can be found later in this section.

<b>Number of Distributors Used</b>	<b>Buyers Using That Amount</b>
<b>1)</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2)</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3)</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>4)</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>5)</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>6)</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>7)</b>	<b>1</b>

Table 3: Number of distributors that buyers utilize

## Weekly Ordering Schedules

A complex picture is beginning to emerge, revealing a web of relationships and services to get the food needed on menus and store shelves. Buyers were asked to describe their weekly ordering schedule, including deliveries. Large distributors often have specific days of the week that they deliver, so buyers can

*“I order something every day for the next day’s delivery. Limited cooler space requires continual delivery. We cannot do a once a week delivery schedule for local products.”*

schedule their purchases accordingly. Orders from large distributors are usually for next day delivery; local producers and fish sellers can also often have their goods ready and delivered within a day or two. About 42% of those interviewed get deliveries from at least one provider nearly every day, and 37% get deliveries three to four days a week (not including beer, wine and other non-food items). Only 21% reported receiving as few as one or two deliveries each week. To manage orders and deliveries, buyers spend a considerable amount of time taking inventory, placing and receiving orders, and restocking kitchens and store shelves. Add to these “daily trips to the grocery store” (16% of buyers)— often for produce or immediate needs— as well as visits to the Farmers Market, and responses to texts or emails reporting that specialty items buyers may be interested in are now available, and a fuller image forms.

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*“We shop every day for small things. Put our big orders in on Monday and Thursday for next day delivery. Produce arrives usually twice a week on Wednesday and Friday. We do try to get our local growers on a schedule, because in the summertime we get so many people showing up at the restaurant with produce for sale, but our busy schedules make it difficult to accept things on the fly.”*

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### Large Distributors- Buyers’ Likes and Dislikes

In the current Alaskan food system, foods shipped large distances is just a fact of life. Large distributors are the means by which the world’s products make it north to small Alaskan cities like Homer. When buyers were asked to share what they like and dislike about using large distributors, responses were abundant. Regarding what they like, three main benefits stand out- it’s convenient, consistently reliable and the products are available in quantity. At the same time, the experience buyers have in using them can fall short of the expectations for quality of product and service, and some found reliance on long supply chains troublesome. The main themes found are:

Likes	Dislikes
Product availability, quantity and consistency	Lack of product freshness, inconsistent availability
Ease of ordering	Working with big corporations, prefer to keep the money in the community
On time, next day delivery	Communication and customer service issues
Attentive representatives	Price fluctuations week by week
Rapid, reliable invoicing and payments	Sub-Par “Generic” Product Quality
Wholesale prices	Lack of knowing Product Sources

Table 4

### The Positive Side of Big Distributors: The Likes

Many of these themes overlap both amongst and between likes and dislikes. The following comments can help elucidate buyers’ experience working with large distributors; categories are arranged with most commonly mentioned benefits higher up on the page.

## Likes

### Consistency

- In ordering: “90% of the time they have exactly what you’re looking for.” “It’s just purely convenience.”
- In product form.
- With delivery schedules.
- Consistently reliable: “We don’t have to think about it, we know what we ordered will show up.” “They usually won’t ‘out’ you.” “I can always get green onions and tomatoes, specific tomatoes that I need. I know if I need 10lbs of kale I can get it. I don’t think they’re better [than local producers], but I think they’re providing different services.”
- “I don’t have any problems. They always take care of me. If they mix up my order, they always take it back and fix it.”

### Attentive Representatives

- Personal attention; visit buyers on-site, make sure they’re getting what they need: “He tries really hard for us.” “They’ll try to jump through hoops for us and get me the weird things that I want.”
- Quick service: “They take care of us right away.”
- The reps make it easy to add new items to an order.
- “The professionalism.”
- On smaller distributors: “I can talk directly with the owner if I need to., so there’s a personal touch. They’re a family-owned Alaska business out of Soldotna. FSA doesn’t have this personal touch.”
- “Being a regular customer pays off for us.” - on representative attention and prices.

### Delivery

- They bring it to the door.
- Usually next day.
- Timely: “Orders are (at least half-way) scheduled right.”

### Ease of Ordering

- Orders are usually handled by company customer service representatives: “Your rep. has your ordering history and their current product availability at their fingertips.”
- Having the ability to call somebody and ask what they have, get descriptions.
- “There’s an app for my cell phone that shows all their products, their current pricing and daily availability.”
- Can be one-stop shopping.
- “That I don’t have to go to the store every day.”
- Efficiency of ordering catalog.
- “Shooting off a text to my rep. and having what I need dropped off.”
- Easy to deal with: “They come to me, always tell me what they have in stock. I can place my order right there.”

### Product Availability

- Wide selection, large product line, variety.
- Can get products they need that can’t be grown here or very specific product types.
- Year-round.
- If one distributor doesn’t have a product they need another likely will.

<p><b>Quantity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Knowing the quantities needed can be served by them.</li> <li>○ Can scale up an order instantly.</li> <li>○ “Quantity. That’s probably the only thing.”</li> </ul>	<p><b>Prices</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “Can match or beat the prices of going to the grocery store.”</li> <li>○ “Some things are cheaper with one company, but quality is important to us, so we get the better fries from the other company.”</li> <li>○ “I like using major companies because they’re more cost-effective and the quality is good.”</li> <li>○ “The store can actually be cheaper by the each (not by the case). I think most people use the large distributors because of convenience more than money. Some can’t go to the store every day, but they’re not really saving money by going with them.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Invoicing and Payments</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Don’t have to pay right away: “I can pay after I sell it, so I’m not sitting on a bunch of operating capital. The restaurant business is very expensive.”</li> <li>○ They’ll put credit toward the next order if some of the product is spoiled or incorrect</li> <li>○ Pay with one check: “I don’t like writing a bunch of checks.”</li> </ul>	
<p><b>No “Likes”: Simply Don’t Like Using Them</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “I don’t, but I have to use them.”</li> <li>○ “Nothing really. They’re unreliable.”</li> </ul>	

One buyer described the ease of his relationship with his distributors. The day before the delivery he would be on the phone with a rep as he looked at his stock. The rep would have the buyer’s past orders in front of him so he could guess what the buyer wanted. Their banter during the order would include short-hand names for certain produce and discussion of prices or good replacements if a desired product was not available.

**The Negative Side of Big Distributors: The Dislikes**

While consistency, reliability and product availability are among the top reasons many buyers like working with large distributors, when those expectations are not being met it can actually have a reverse effect on convenience. In the words of one buyer: “Every single one of those things I answered above [consistency, reliability, it comes when expected] but said with irony. That's how it should work, but oftentimes something has slipped. They’re consistently inconsistent in some areas. They often don't

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*“I don't have anything negative to say. There's a limited amount of things you can get on a refrigerated truck in Alaska three days a week. It's a quirky place. I don't have any complaints.”*

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*“During summer we buy very little in fresh products from wholesale distributors, so we kind-of drop off their radar.”*

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pay attention to details, such as if the sprouts are no good or produce has become wet (ex. squishy bag of greens)- it's up to us to check that. Second layer of roma tomatoes are moldy, the cucumbers are soft..." The categories below are again listed from issues most often expressed to least.

## Dislikes

### Lack of Product Freshness- arrives half-spoiled

- "Their produce is not fresh. I have to go through my romaine or other greens and throw much away because it's not fresh, which costs me time and lots of money."
- "You're counting on the product they're supposed to deliver and you it may arrive half-rotten. Then you have to go to the store and buy it (hopefully), and still haggle with the distributor to get your discount/money back."
- "If you're buying from [the distributor] you have to unpack EACH item, the whole box, to make sure there's not mold on the bottom."
- "Since these distributors process your credit card right after you get your delivery, you have to check the quality of your delivered goods as soon as it comes, or else you may get charged for low quality or bad products."
- "Distributors try to offload sub-par produce on us. They can get credits from their source if the product goes bad, so why unload it on me? They know I have quality standards, so why try to sell me old produce (stuff that you wouldn't feed to animals)?"
- "Some distributors will try to say they'll only give a 50% discount on a case of half-rotten vegetables, since some appear to be usable, even though the mold spores are already all over the rest in the case."

### Inconsistent Product or Availability

- Sometimes they're out of what we need.
- Truck arrives without ordered products; no notice given.
- "If they short me I can't recover from that, which leaves me scrambling around trying to find something I need that day. No conversation before delivery to let me know that I'm not getting all of what I ordered."
- Wrong product gets delivered
- "Even things that you've been getting forever, with the same size/cut/quality specs and suddenly they send you some other garbage that's like "what is this?" Rotten lettuce. Shows up right before you're supposed to be serving, then I have to go out to the store and pay way more."
- "From one company you may get a bad batch and an identical product from the other company may be great. You expect consistent product and may be surprised when what you get isn't on par."

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*If everything we order comes in on time and is in nice shape, all's well. But, if items are missing or, say, the celery is half-rotten, then that's no good. On a recent delivery they didn't bring us any milk and they didn't call to let us know before the truck arrived either. This is not helpful to us.*

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### Working with Big Corporations

- May like the rep they work with but not the company.
- Treated as just a number.
- “They’re big corporations and I prefer small businesses.” “I don’t like supporting corporate America. It’s a personal thing, but here that’s really the only route you can go.”
- Lack of communication between the corporate system and the buyer.
- Dealing with corporate hierarchy can be burdensome; navigating large distributors’ systems can be difficult.
- Lack of personal touch at corporate level.
- The largest distributors are “all about ‘money, money, money’- corporate mentality.”
- “They’re just kind-of snakes and they’re only there to get money. They don’t really care about food quality and you have to watch their prices. Also, I just really want to know where my food comes from.”
- “Large distributors will pretend to tell you where the food comes from, but they’re really just telling you where they get it from. Trusting the big 4 [national distributors] is just a bad idea.”
- “You’re ‘Client X’ and may be speaking with some random representative.”

### Price Fluctuations Week by Week

- Without notice.
- “Price increases out of the blue. Cold snaps down in the lower 48 leaves us without cilantro, for example, even though we have a standing order with the distributor. International relations between the USA and Mexico get strained and the next thing you know avocado prices go through the roof or are just unavailable.”
- Their prices tend to jump ahead of the curve when the market jumps.
- Haggling with them is no fun.
- “Once they have you hooked on their product they’ll play with the prices.”
- They’ll only be competitive with prices if they know we are using a competitor’s business as well.
- Prices will change depending on the amount purchased- big volume discounts/small volume price hikes.
- “I limit what I buy from [one large distributor] them because they do “graduated pricing,” which means they hook you on one thing, and then after hike up the prices on everything else.

<p><b>Knowledge of Product Origin</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ E-coli outbreak scares.</li> <li>○ “During a recent E. coli outbreak scare it was very difficult to get any reliable information about whether my produce had risk of contamination. One rep finally told me all the impacted product was not being shipped any longer, but I have my concerns since produce getting shipped here spends a lot of time on a ship before arriving.”</li> <li>○ “Look at the romaine we've had to throw out just in the last year from things like e-coli and infection, and I think it's a direct result of factory farming and the lack of national safety concerns for how that produce was picked.”</li> <li>○ “It can take everyone down with a bad batch.”</li> <li>○ “Not knowing where the food is sourced from is huge.”</li> <li>○ “The fact that I don't know where my stuff comes from. When you buy garlic and it comes from China and has been bleached or something.”</li> <li>○ Prefer humane or organic products.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Customer Service</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Constant sales pitching on items they know we don't buy.</li> <li>○ They prioritize their customers who buy more over customers with smaller orders.</li> <li>○ Inconsistent service: “Sometimes you get an unhelpful sales representative who doesn't give you what you order, or the wrong product. Some sales people just aren't very good at their jobs.”</li> <li>○ Communication within the company: “Seems like there's always problems with the order. They mess it up, double what I ordered, send the wrong thing. There's no communication throughout the chain to get the order filled- there are too many channels.”</li> <li>○ Mishandled product: “I'm not sure if they have high turnover in the warehouse, but sometimes pallets come to us packed very poorly and it ruins some of our shipment.”</li> <li>○ “They don't even look at the quality of what they're stocking.”</li> <li>○ It seems like they don't have the best interest of my business as a high priority.</li> </ul>
<p><b>They're not Local</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “Though they give jobs to people in-state, the money goes largely out of state. You don't get the feeling of buying something within your community.”</li> <li>○ “Putting money in the pockets of big business. I would rather keep money in the community.”</li> <li>○ “We want to keep our money in the local economy.”</li> <li>○ “...Also, there's a joy that comes to the local farmer when you buy from him, but to a distributor you're just everybody else.”</li> <li>○ “Increased carbon footprint mainly. If there was a local large distributor, that would be great.”</li> </ul>	<p><b>“Generic” or Sub-Par Quality</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “Can feel a little generic and separated from the food source, impersonal. It's generally not appetizing to see an 18-wheeler truck in front the restaurant I'm about to eat at.”</li> <li>○ “They sell produce that is often sub-par, such as unripe tomatoes, things that were forced to ripen like avocados that look perfect on the outside but are brown inside. I think they could use local products better.”</li> <li>○ “[one company] could have better quality in their products.”</li> <li>○ “I also don't like that you can get the exact same soup at 50 different restaurants because it's mass produced.”</li> </ul>

## A New Outlet for Local Products- The Alaska Food Hub

The newest outlet for local products, the Alaska Food Hub, offers online shopping and once-a-week order pick-up. From April to November (a longer season than the Homer Farmers Market) producers post information on the Food Hub website about the products they have available— fresh vegetables and fruits, locally raised meat and eggs, honey, etc.— and buyers order what they want and then pick it up at central locations. However, only 16% of buyers surveyed (6) had used it and roughly 24% had not heard about it before they were interviewed. Those who had used it were asked what they liked about it and also whether they had encountered any barriers in using it.

From a list provided, the following “likes” were reported:

- 5 (83.3%)- *Easy, convenient online shopping*
- 5 (83.3%)- *Variety of products*
- 4 (66.7%)- *Knowing/choosing which farm my product is from; supporting preferred farmers*
- 4 (66.7%)- *Chance for my purchasing dollars to stay in the local, economy; support agricultural boom*
- 4 (66.7%)- *Chance to buy locally raised meat*
- 4 (66.7%)- *Reduce miles my product needs to travel; carbon footprint*
- 4 (66.7%)- *Chance to buy fresh local fish*
- 4 (66.7%)- *Season is longer than the farmers market*
- 3 (50%)- *Freshness of products*
- 3 (50%)- *Reasonable prices*

Other comments offered were appreciation that it can provide all the “likes” listed in the survey and that it was easy to use. Many of those who hadn’t heard of it or were relatively unfamiliar with it said they were grateful to have learned more about how it works through participating in interviews and that they would like to check it out.

From the list offered of potential barriers to using the Food Hub, the six who had used it responded:

- 3 (50%)- *Limited variety; lack of year-round availability*
- 2 (33%)- *Lack of knowing how to access the Food Hub; limited volume; prices are not competitive; lack of predictability*
- 1 (17%)- *Inconsistent quality; inconsistent prices; lack of convenience; inconsistent supply*

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*“It’s awesome to have an indoor place to buy local. When you have a two-year old and it’s raining at the Farmers Market it’s not a good thing. Also, I walk everywhere and definitely care about carbon footprint.”*

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*“You see some things on there that we haven’t seen before, such as duck eggs from Brennan Farms, who we’d never heard of before. Now we have a direct purchasing relationship with them. I’ve had no problems using the Food Hub.”*

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One person noted that they had used the Food Hub to purchase products for their personal use but not the restaurant and had experienced no barriers to using it.

It is worth noting that the weekly ordering window runs from noon on Fridays through 10pm on Mondays. Though that is when ordering for customers is open, producers can post available produce Thursday through Monday. If a producer posts many options for the opening of the ordering cycle, and buyers are prompt, there may be less selection by Monday. Additionally, if producers post on Sunday what they didn't sell at the Saturday Farmers Market, then buyers that only look on the first day of ordering could miss a deal. There are many dynamics of this new platform that still need to be understood. Additional barriers or reasons for not using it were shared, including:

- “I would like to order later (Monday), but by then it's called for. Have to order on Friday with a projection for Wednesday's pickup in order to get the items I want.”
- “The only reason we haven't used the Food Hub is that we already have those established relationships with farmers, many of whom are on the Food Hub as well. We really appreciate what the Food Hub is doing.”
- “I just for some reason find it inconvenient. It doesn't work with my system that I have, which I feel is an already pretty dialed-in system.”
- “One of the things about the Food Hub is I don't get to touch the food, check the quality. Inconsistency exists.”
- “I don't have the time and don't feel the need to change my ordering.”
- “I'm happy to pay the retail prices for my own household, but I can't for the restaurant. I wouldn't expect a local farmer to compete with Charlie's Produce's wholesale rates, and I will pay more for local produce, but I can't pay a niche premium price for the business. There isn't a wholesale pricing structure in the Food Hub.”
- “Haven't given it a try. It seems more for home people than for restaurant people. It would be cool if there were a separate section on the site for restaurants where restaurant prices and volumes are available.”
- “No delivery. I only work with delivery.”

For more information about the Alaska Food Hub visit the website at [www.alaskafoodhub.org](http://www.alaskafoodhub.org).

## Industry Requirements

Buyers were asked if producers had to meet any industry requirements or certifications before the buyer would purchase fresh products from them (e.g. safety certifications, liability insurance, etc.) Some buyers were familiar with the regulations and requirements of the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) that affect use of locally produced products in restaurants or institutions, others were less sure or held certain misconceptions about what

the state allows. Only two buyers had company-specific requirements. One grocery retailer said that farms from which they bought local products would be required to have the capacity to supply multiple stores, but that the company was considering altering that requirement. They also indicated that they would need to be able to identify the source of any specific product they sell in case a customer experiences a food-borne illness. One restaurant manager said that they would want farmers to have liability insurance so that if there was a problem with the product and a customer became ill and sued the restaurant, the farm could help pay legal fees or damages. One restaurant manager said they don't know of any certifications that they'd need, but they do ask farmers they buy from to test their water sources.

In the interest of clarifying Alaskan regulations, below is a list of regulations affecting use of different kinds of locally produced or processed foods in restaurants, grocery stores, and institutions. Listed web links provide more information:

### Approved source

Alaskan farms are considered an “approved source” by the DEC and may sell to restaurants, grocery stores, institutions, at farmers markets and to the public.

### Vegetables and fruits

No permit or certification is required for raw, whole produce; this is commonly known as the “first cut rule.” Crops can be washed, trimmed of roots or unwanted top parts, just not further altered. The only produce item with restriction is sprouts due to the high incidence of foodborne illness associated with them.

### Produce Safety Rule

A federal rule that applies to growing, holding and distribution of produce. Farms selling less than \$25,000 worth of produce annually are exempt. Those selling less than \$500,000 worth of food annually can receive qualified exemption if more than 50% is sold to direct users of the food, including restaurants and retail stores. Most Alaskan growers are either exempt or meet criteria for qualified exemption.

### Poultry

Farmers can sell directly to restaurants, grocery stores, hotels and households if they slaughter fewer than 20,000 birds a year and neither buy nor sell poultry products they don't raise themselves, and as long as the birds are properly labeled and sold within Alaska. Poultry can be dressed— defeathered, eviscerated and heads and feet removed— but cannot be cut-up or marinated. The DEC has no restrictions on poultry sales to hospitals, though hospitals may have their own internal regulations.

### Meats

All red meat animals (such as cattle, pigs and goats) must be slaughtered in a USDA inspected facility to be sold to restaurants, institutions or stores. This also applies to farm-raised game animals such as deer, elk or bison (though some regulations differ for reindeer). For local producers, the nearest USDA FSIS-certified facility is in Palmer, 250 miles away.

### Dairy

Milk must be Grade A and pasteurized.

## Eggs

Can be sold directly to restaurants, institutions and grocery stores, though hospitals may have added requirements. They must be clean and sound, in a package that protects them from breakage and contamination, be delivered in a way that keeps them at 45° F or below and labeled according to Alaska Food Code and Alaska DNR specifications. Safe handling instructions exist for eggs that have not been specifically treated to destroy all viable salmonellae. They also must remain under the restricted egg tolerances for the United States consumer Grade B. Farms with more than 5,000 hens need to have an onsite egg grader.

## Fish and shellfish

Must be caught by commercial fishers and sold by certified distributors. Fishermen can apply to become certified distributors to sell theirs and others' catch. Sport caught fish is not allowed to be purchased, but restaurants can prepare a customer's sport-caught catch for them. Farmed oysters need to have samples from each batch sent off to the DEC for testing, and restaurants must keep the slips that state which batch of oysters they are serving. Smoked or canned fish or shellfish products are highly regulated and require a seafood processing permit from the State of Alaska through the DEC. Restaurants are free to smoke seafood or any other foods for flavor, but not as a means of preservation.

## Cottage foods

These are things that are "non-potentially hazardous"<sup>2</sup> and have been processed by a home-based food business, including baked goods, jams, pickled or fermented vegetables, confections. While home-based businesses can sell to home buyers, these items must be prepared in a DEC approved kitchen in order for restaurants, grocers or institutions to buy them for use.

## Foraging

There are no restrictions in Alaska about selling foraged goods, except for special labeling requirements and quality assurance in the case of mushrooms.

## Online resources

- *Alaska Food Code*, Alaska DEC
  - <https://dec.alaska.gov/media/1034/18-aac-31.pdf>
- *Farm to Restaurant Fact Sheet*, Alaska Division of Agriculture
  - <http://dnr.alaska.gov/ag/FactSheets/FarmtoRest2014.pdf>
- *Produce Safety Rule*, Alaska DEC
  - <https://dec.alaska.gov/media/7764/what-is-produce-safety-how-will-it-affect-me-20170512.pdf>
- *Cottage Food Facts*, Alaska DEC
  - <https://dec.alaska.gov/eh/fss/food/cottage-food-facts>
- *Food Establishments Webpage*, Alaska DEC
  - <https://dec.alaska.gov/eh/fss/food/>

## Loyalty Agreements

When asked if any loyalty agreements with existing partnerships could affect their ability to scale up local fresh products, 89.5% answered no and 10.5% answered yes. Several said that they don't have any explicit loyalty agreements, but they choose their local farmers because they like what the farmer offers and its reliable quality, "Certain farmers have products I really go for." One buyer commented, "They send emails, communicate, their product is bagged up perfect, it's great produce. We have loyalty and will keep buying from them." Another stated that they have no loyalty agreements but recognize that farmers can get a better price selling at the Farmers Market, so there's incentive to try to sell it there instead. Two answered that loyalty would have nothing to do with it because business is business. Other thoughts offered by buyers include:

"Currently no, but if a local producer were to offer a discount for loyalty to them or would knock off a percentage from your bill if you pick it up yourself, I think I would definitely want to work with them. If you help me, I'll help you. If paying more for produce would help a farm to get their operation off the ground, and later on they offered discounts for those buyers who helped them get going, I would be happy to pay more at first."

"I answered no, but there is an element of personal relationships that comes into play."

"We've made verbal agreements with individual farmers in the past, and a couple of times different staff spoke with different farmers, and we accidentally doubled up our orders. We had to only buy from one of the two farmers, so the other guy felt hurt and slighted, and hasn't come back. It would be easier to buy from a local cooperative so that we could support all the guys we like, who have great product, and not hurt anybody's feelings."

"Loyalty agreements certainly could, and would, but currently no. However, I do have some loyalty to [my producer]. I applaud her professionalism- continued emails, quality of produce, the greens were consistent, all those things. Her consistency and communication put her on my radar because I never had a chance to forget about their farm. Other purveyors were not weighing the bags of their product, had inconsistent size, weight and product itself. They were uncommunicative and made more work for me, along with more questions. I don't have much time for that."

"Our local fishermen that we have relationships with know they can always count on us to buy their catch, and we do, even if our inventory is full because we want them to keep coming back to us. Especially with sablefish."



# About Challenges to Buying Local

Local producers looking to develop new markets can benefit by understanding what factors currently prevent food managers from adding more local ag products to their inventories. This section focuses on two main questions: (1) What, if anything, limits buyers' ability to scale up local fresh product purchases? and (2) What are the biggest challenges they face in buying local foods? Gaining insight into these can help interested producers identify ways to make their ag businesses more attractive to the segment of the market targeted in this study.

## Limitations to Scaling up Local Food Purchases

The question of what limits a buyer's ability to scale up his or her purchases of fresh local products was asked early in interviews and in an open-ended fashion. No set of factors was offered for interviewees to choose from, and none of the preceding questions included factors that might influence responses— questions that would suggest factors to consider came up later in the interview. Perceptions shared are those the interviewees brought with them into the interview. Responses were sorted into two major categories: (1) product availability and 2) price, time and convenience. Numbers of buyers who brought up each kind of limitation within the two categories are given in Table 6 and 7 below.

### #1: Availability

- Total who mentioned availability: 24 (63%)
- Quantities: 8 (21%)
- Knowing what's available or which farmers to connect with: 4
  - Few farmers reaching out to the restaurant or institution: 2
  - Farmers not offering to restaurants or institutions all of the produce they offer at the Farmers Market: 1
- Variety: 4
- Seasonal availability: 4
- Need consistent product or certain size (ex. baby bok choy or arugula, not mature): 3
- Certain products are unavailable: 3
- Uncertain that local growers can keep up with demand: 2
- Supply on demand: 1
- On-shelf availability at the local grocery store: 1
- Ability to use local bounty during the short harvest window: 1
- Customer unfamiliarity with unusual varieties: 1

Table 5

## Price, Time and Convenience

- Total who said price is a limiting factor: 19 (50%)
- Time and convenience to connect with individual farmers, ordering and coordinating: 8 (
- Delivery: 6
- Time processing product that is dirty or has slugs means more money in staff wages and adds to an already tight prep schedule: 6
- Pricing consistency: 2
- If farmers aren't using communications technology (ex. text-based ordering) they find it difficult to work with them: 2
- Need to watch prices to customers so they come back: 2
- Clientele doesn't seem to prefer local: 2
- Need clear invoicing: 1

Table 6

Buyer responses illustrate that no single issue prevents them from scaling up local purchases. Similarly, no “magic bullet” was identified that could tell producers how to increase sales to commercial kitchens and retail outlets. However, identified issues do connect and overlap in many ways. The buyers’ own words are the best way to convey their concerns and the issues they identified as limiting them from adding more local products into their ordering cycles. Quotations from buyers were sorted by category, though many address more than one. The overlap visible in responses shows interconnectivity between many of the factors.

### Price

*“Price. Local greens are more expensive than a huge bag of spinach from Sysco, which costs \$9-10. We go through a lot of this. It lasts a week, and if we buy two bags at a time it will last about a week and a half in the winter... We'd like to buy more local, but food cost is our major issue.”*

*“...However, for the cafe I have to watch prices more carefully. I bought from The Veggie Bus every time I saw him because the prices are reasonable. I'd love to get local spinach and arugula, but it's expensive. I currently pay \$8.30 for a 2.5 lb. bag of spinach and would be willing pay 2-3 times that for local, but the prices I've found are more like 10-12 times that. I go through two large bags of each per week... One farm had put in arugula for me, but I need baby arugula and they let it get big and stemmy, so I couldn't use it.”*

*“Price. If it was the same price, I'd buy local.”*

*“Price and prep time. For example, even though I'd like to get local garlic, it is much more expensive, and it takes my staff time to peel and process, thus more cost, etc.”*

*“Price point. Whether or not paying more for local, and in turn having to raise prices, will effect if the customers come back.”*

*“Price and availability. If the price is too high, why do it? We only have six months to make a living and I already donate a lot.”*

*“What limits my ability is the money for sure. I don't believe they are charging too much, I just believe what I am making is too little.”*

*“I use a lot of beef eye round and other things I can't get locally. Sometimes price stands in the way of getting certain items. Usually though, the price of local produce is good for me, so no complaints there. I support the local farmers market every Saturday.”*

*“There have been times where I pay \$10 and get a gallon bag of pea shoots, but as the season wore on, I'd get half that for the same price. Their prices have been consistent each season, but the quantity hasn't been consistent. This doesn't keep me from buying from them, but it definitely makes me look at what I'm going to buy and if it's going to turn a profit for me... Some products are reasonably priced and I am willing to pay more for a superior product. With the tomato example, buying good, tasty local ones versus half-green ones from the store... I'm willing to pay more to a point, but I also have to think of my clientele. Most people (tourists) don't care if it's local or not, but locals do care. I get local fish and use McNeil Canyon [Meats], and when people find out I use a local butcher they're happy... But is it worth it to buy local things and spend the extra money where people won't notice, versus sticking to products from local farmers of superior quality where people will actually notice, like really good tasting, ripe local tomatoes and excellent lettuce? Things where quality is visible, I try to buy local as much as possible. Other things like onions get used in stocks and sauces and become invisible in the dish, so I choose to buy wherever the cheapest price is.”*

### **Time and Convenience**

*“...Also, if produce, say lettuce, arrives dirty or has slugs, it can cost us up to three times as much as a similar product from a wholesaler because it can take a long time to clean and process [employee time/wages].”*

*“Consistency in product, price and time. It's really easy to do my ordering electronically with Sysco in 15 minutes or less.”*

*“It is really difficult for me to work with the farmers who don't use communications technology. It's almost not worth my time. I am more prone to use distributors than non-tech savvy farmers, because I need easy to read receipts and data. I use two farmers almost exclusively because of the ease of ordering/receipts with technology (particularly text message)... Text message-based ordering, year-round, and also impeccable product from these guys. Another thing is shelf availability of Alaska products at local grocery stores.”*

*“Time. Getting the product. If it can be dropped off, OK, but I don't have time at all.”*

*“Ability to process it through a restaurant. Say lettuce. It was more money, but it was exciting to get local lettuce, but there was so much prep time in handling it and there was so much that needed to be thrown out, it wasn't worth it. For meats and for produce we need to be able to get our hands on the quantities we need and at the price point we need.”*

*“The biggest thing for me is the time. The other wholesalers come to me, tell me everything about what's available, have all the information in one place, and I can do a really quick order. Another big thing here is time to process and prep everything.”*

*“Customer base. We'd need a lot more customers to buy more local. We buy as much as we can in terms of the things we get currently. Availability and cost can also prohibit us from buying other types of locally produced goods. We do go out of our way to spend the extra money in summer. Convenience is an inhibitor as well. Delivery is a great idea. If there was that option or a central place to buy it instead of battling Saturday traffic, I'd be more inclined to buy local. We have a very busy schedule.”*

### Availability and Quantity

*“Quantities. I can't get enough of the products we use for our sales. We have been able to get enough greens, but not enough tomatoes, herbs, or other vegetables. We would probably buy local meat if we could get enough of it. On the other hand, I find that prices for local produce to be pretty competitive with non-local, so this is not a barrier for us.”*

*“I could pay 15-20% more, but this depends on the product and the quality. Also consistency. My menus need consistent product if at all possible; it's a big thing for us.”*

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*“I'm going through 200 lbs. of vegetables in July.”*

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*“The only thing I can think of that's holding us back is supply on demand. Just for the fact that I'm not sure if the local growers are going to be able to keep up with the consumption.”*

*“Availability and sometimes amounts as well. My needs are sometimes bigger than what they have. Last summer we bought really nice baby greens from [a farm], but by the end of summer it was really big, woody-stemmed lettuce, not baby anymore. We can't serve people that type of lettuce. It doesn't match our standards.”*

*“I don't think they can handle my demand. Also, pricing consistency is important.”*

*“Certain things people aren't growing enough of to keep up with the quantities we need. I can get nice tomatoes from a local farm. But I can't get two cases or 100 lbs. each week. There are limitations in Alaska growing traditions. For example, I can't find any local fruit right now, and not a lot of fruit seems to be available overall. We serve fruit with our breakfasts, and I feel like there's a market for local fruit not being filled.”*

*“We live in Alaska. You can only grow produce so many months of the year. When we can grow, probably the last place people think to sell is the grocery store. We can't pay what you can get retail. You can get more money at the farmers market, so if I was a farmer I'd want to go where I can get a higher price. One thing when paying for local produce is if I have to package it or top carrots I'll have to pay less, because that's labor and cost to me.”*

*“Availability and when they deliver. Sometimes they can't get here before we open and we can't accept orders while we're open.”*

*“Price and availability. It's nice to have convenience (as with distributors). Local produce is fresh and high quality and lasts longer, but it's nice for FSA to deliver to us because it's been consistent and reliable, and we can reject it if we don't like it. Local products have to meet the same quality standards. Our farmers usually have good quality, but low availability, not only during winter but even in the summer.”*

*“Availability. If farms we already work with brought in new products, we'd get them. If Bell's Nursery brought in tomatoes on the vine, we'd take it. One of the farmers began offering Tuscan kale, so we got it. Really, whatever these farms bring to the table we'd be willing to buy. Of course quality counts, but the Alaska Grown has been very high quality. Just availability really, not price or other things, limits our ability to get more Alaska produce.”*

*“Obviously availability, and product itself— types of produce, what's available on a large enough scale. We're kind-of stifled by how much we can actually get.”*

### Knowing How to Better Access Local Foods

*“One thing limiting our ability to scale up is knowing what is available. I'll go to the Farmers Market and see 50 vendors, but then only three vendors come to the restaurant to sell. They don't always have what they can offer at the Market. Sometimes they give me a restaurant discount, and I feel bad because they could be selling it retail, but it would be nice to have more variety too.”*

*“Availability and just knowing people, awareness, connection to other people [farmers].”*

*“Organization and lack of grower salesmanship on a regular basis.”*

*“I really believe that with the Food Hub, with the 2 days of market, the farmers are really doing everything they can to get it out there. It's my limitations that get in the way of me getting more local.”*

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*More a lack of me knowing than anything. I'm sure convenience comes into it, I'm sure volume and things play into it, but I haven't used it [local food system] enough. Sure, a thing of sprouts costs \$15 versus a bag of AK sprouts at \$6 from Anchorage, but I want to support local. Halibut is so expensive, and I get it, but there's no profit. I get cod in spring and can make a little off it. I need to check into it more on my own time. I just have so little time. People come to promote their products, but it's usually at lunch rush and I don't have help [works solo] and so it's hard to sit down with them for a conversation.*

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*“Ability to connect with the right farmers. Having the time to do that. The only thing I can get consistently throughout the summer is cabbage. Green leaf lettuce is hit or miss. Availability is an issue.”*

*“Realistically, it all depends on what I'm looking at. How much volume can they deliver? And price... 0-5%, sometimes maybe 10-15%, it all depends on what I'm looking at... I have these health gurus that would love to have local veggie soup, local lettuce in their salad. I get that. I just haven't been able to put it together for a number of reasons. (1) finding a grower, (2) Then getting the information of what can be grown, when, for how long, (3) getting the product to me, and (4) the price point. It's all about communication and information. I need a proposal from somebody.”*

## Other Limitations

*“Definitely price. Also customer education. Some amazing produce is available from my farmer, but many of our customers may be unfamiliar with the vegetable (e.g., bok choy, kohlrabi). If customers don't know what it is, they may shy away. We still get some of these different, unique, interesting ingredients/vegetables, but our staff has found it challenging to let people know what this great stuff is (“what is a kohlrabi mash?”). We don't want to discourage our farmer from trying new things, we want him to keep expanding his repertoire, but sometimes we find it tough to make a place on our menu for all his great new stuff.”*

*“The ability to use things before they go bad. We get so much local and have learned to process or freeze it, but we can only use so much [at a time]. Tomatoes have a very short season. Getting milk, butter, flour, etc. local is not really possible.”*

## The Biggest Challenges to Buying Local Ag Products

Later during interviews, after much discussion about local foods, buyers were asked what were the biggest challenges they faced in buying local fresh products and given a list to choose from. Responses closely mirrored answers for the open-ended questions about scaling up purchases, and only two challenges were reported (by one buyer each) outside of the list provided. The results are below and in Figure 15.

22 buyers: Limited Volume

21 buyers: Price

18 buyers: Lack of year-round availability

16 buyers: Inconsistent supply

16 buyers: Lack of convenience (working with producers and getting product from the producers)

16 buyers: Limited variety

11 buyers: Time constraints

10 buyers: Lack of knowing where to buy local products

10 buyers: Producers are unable to deliver product when needed

7 buyers: Inconsistent quality

2 buyers: None

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*I didn't start carrying local until late summer, and that's because [my farmer] came in for dinner and approached me.*

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*“The farmers market has outgrown its space, which ties into the ‘lack of convenience’ option.”*

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*“There are sometimes personal clashes with local growers who are disappointed by the restaurant not buying their product.”*

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*“Me and two of my cooks believe that great things could be coming out of this place if we could become more food-forward. But I don't think the plan for this establishment includes this.”*

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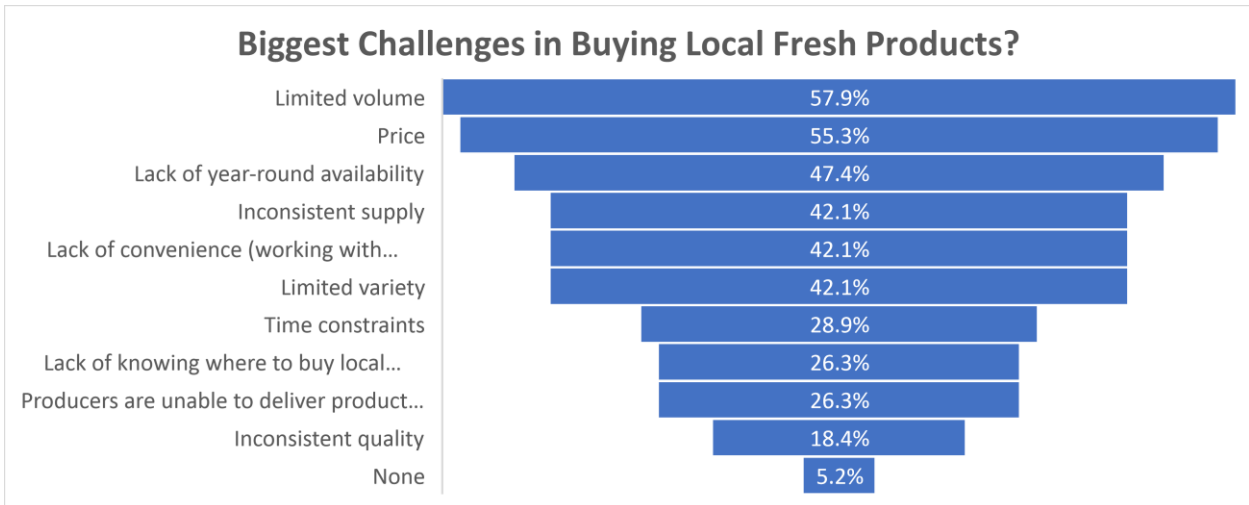


Figure 15

Six buyers reported that only one primary obstacle inhibited them from buying local products (these were price, lack of year-round availability, limited variety and lack of knowing where to buy local products). Five others found that only two main challenges exist for them, though no trends were found among the pairs of challenges they reported. Nearly all of the remaining respondents (66% of buyers) reported a mix of challenges, though two (5%) reported they face no challenges and are content with the way they currently buy local products.

One challenge mentioned throughout the survey was lack of knowledge about local ag products. Some buyers are unsure about where to get local products, but uncertainties about a range of other components of buying local also stand in the way for them and others.

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*“Unable to get product from them when needed isn't quite a problem for us, because even though they don't grow in winter, it doesn't stop us from getting it in summer. Price is sometimes an issue because we buy quite a bit. Time constraints, yes, it's hard for either of us to leave to go pick things up. One of our biggest issues is finding local employees who want to be here on a consistent basis and who are honest. It ties up a lot of our time not having good help.”*

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*“No on time constraints (we can always work with people on time constraints), yes on everything else. We've had an issue with mussels; she wouldn't pop in all the time. Lack of knowledge. The only way we know they have it is if they pop in at the door and say, "this is what we've got." The only way to know is to know somebody, who knows somebody. We would really like somebody to come by, like food distributors do, with a list and prices. We'd be all over that. Farmers don't regularly come in here and let us know what's available [inconsistent supply]. We can work with specials when harvests come in, but if it's on my menu I HAVE to have it. All of these listed here are important.”*

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These uncertainties were pointed out during various parts of the interviews and are included here to help clarify the challenges some buyers face.

#### Important Questions to Answer for Buyers:

- How much can farmers grow (volume)?
- When are different products available (especially now that season-extending high tunnels have become common)? This includes when crops can be expected to be available and when specific harvests actually occur.
- What products are available/what varieties?
- Which farmers have what products?
- What are the prices? This is in part because prices between farms can vary.
- Who can answer all the questions buyers have about local ag products? Who can help them put together and understand all the parts and pieces that go into buying local?
- Who can provide all the information buyers need in a way that's fast, easy, and tailored to their situation?

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*“NO challenges, They're good, it's easy. We don't have a lot of produce, so getting what we need isn't hard.”*

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# About Solutions

Throughout this survey it has been apparent that building the relationships between producers and consumers is important. There are many ways that can take place. In this section of the survey, buyers were asked several questions with the intention of connecting back to the producers. This includes ways buyers can give back to farmers by 1) answering questions about food waste for possible compost or animal feed, 2) describing the ways they would like to plan with farmers for planting crops, and 3) Advice that buyers have for farmers looking to sell to the large-scale buyers.

## Closing the Circle: A Note About Food Waste

Food waste is gaining recognition as a problem worldwide. Commercial kitchens and grocery stores can help divert food waste from landfills by setting it aside for other purposes, such as offering it to local farms for animal feed or composting.

The kitchen and produce section managers participating in this study were asked if they separate out food waste from other trash, and if they don't yet, would they be willing to start. At time of interview, 59.5% were separating out food and 40.5% were not. Nearly all who do, set it aside for either employees or others to take for chickens, other livestock, or compost, though two keep it for their own chickens or compost. In fact, one restaurant has an on-site electric composter with enzyme digestion, which doesn't take up much space in the kitchen and quickly turns vegetable scraps into a black mulch. Another saves used oils for a community member to collect. Several reported that they only save food scraps some of the time, and some others only separate out certain things, like romaine ribs for a local woman with goats. One local business monitors food waste as a matter of course, and the kitchen manager faces pressure from management to keep waste low.

Respondents who used to save buckets of food scraps but no longer do (16%) explained that the

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*"I would love to compost rather than throwing food away. Anybody who has a pig and wants food scraps, I would set it aside for them."*

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*"Even if it's designated for a chicken farmer, if they don't collect it one of our employees will take it home. We have a system here and don't have a problem with buckets being left here overnight."*

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*"Farmers come pick it up to feed their animals (mostly chickens and cows), and some people compost it too. Around 6 people/day come checking in for it. We probably have 4 big trash bags worth each day, mostly things like exterior lettuce or cabbage leaves, stems, ugly stuff. Any food that's not good enough to sell but still edible goes to the Food Pantry."*

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*"One lady came by asking if we could put scraps in a compost bucket for her and I definitely would be into doing that."*

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people who were supposed to pick them up weren't doing so on a regular enough basis, so they stopped (one restaurant even had a bear get into their bucket). The practicality of keeping scraps buckets varies among restaurants. Some can keep the buckets overnight whereas others can't, either due to lack of a good space to keep them or concern over rodents, dogs, or birds getting into them if they are kept outside.

Nonetheless, 89% of interviewees said they would be willing or even happy to separate out food waste, as long as it was convenient and picked up on schedule. While some buyers don't mind if the buckets stay overnight, it is generally preferred that buckets be picked up every day or every other day (16% stated they would require daily pickup). One buyer suggested that having a special dumpster out back for food waste could be really convenient and easy to manage, and another offered that they have used oil that could be collected too.

This is all good news for those who would like access to food scraps from these businesses in the Homer area. Hopefully this information will help producers and others to feel emboldened get their buckets ready and approach businesses like these with requests for their scraps. Community composting is gaining momentum around the country as towns and neighborhoods try to put unwanted food to good use. The Institute for Local Self-Reliance is a resource to learn more about community composting and about different composting programs around the country; see <https://ilsr.org/composting/what-is-community-composting/>.

## Planning between Buyers and Producers

Local buyers and producers have the opportunity to work together to plan crops and harvests for the coming season. To gain a sense of when farmers should approach them to talk about planning crops together, buyers were asked when in the year would work best for them. Many of the buyers were flexible on this, noting that they're happy to talk with the farmer whenever it works for the farm's needs to plan for the crops. Two said they would like to communicate twice in the year about this-

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*"I'd love to. Somebody came by last year to ask if they could put a dumpster out back to collect scraps for compost. I said yeah, I'm all about it, but they haven't come back. I do recycle and sort out some of my trash now. Logistically it is difficult to do inside our kitchen, but if I had a special dumpster for food scraps I'd make it happen. We have done chicken buckets for employees and others, but they don't always take those away when I need them to."*

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*"If there's anybody who wanted it in the winter we'd definitely do it. In winter we separate coffee grounds, but in summer we also separate food and recycling too."*

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*"I would love to be able to talk to them and build a repertoire with them. Sit down and figure it out. Lead time on something like that would be 1-3 months, though this would all depend on a conversation between us where we assess both of our needs. We could go further out than 1-3 months to coordinate this."*

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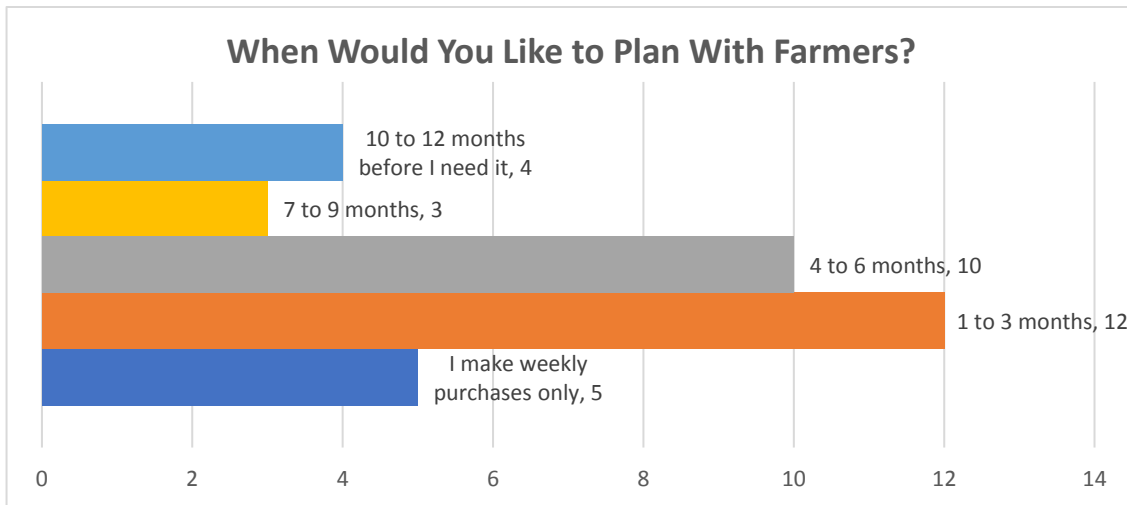


Figure 16

sometime during or shortly after the busy summer season and then again one to three months before harvest time, when farmers are doing their starts.

Planning six months or more out was less popular than talking with the farmer closer to the growing season. Roughly 35% favor making arrangements for the coming season with farmers one to three months out (in the spring or summer) and 29% prefer four to six months out (in the mid to late winter). Fifteen percent said they are only interested in week by week planning.

### Connecting Buyers to Producers

In addition to the best time of year for planning crops, participants were also asked what the best way for local producers is to contact them. The most popular options by far were to come by during business hours or to call on the phone (63% for each). Buyers appreciate consideration of their schedules and at food service businesses paying a call is best done outside of the busy “lunch rush” and popular dinner hours.

Introducing oneself in person to the buyer may be the ticket to gaining their interest. During

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*“If I could orchestrate with a grower to grow my arugula and spinach for me, who could produce consistent product at a reasonable price, I would love that. I could talk to them whenever. My menu remains stable throughout the year.”*

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*“Whatever they would need I would work with. I could tell them up to a year in advance that I would want. If I'm going to give them a volume count, they'll have to figure it out. I'd need to do a test purchase with a grower, or growers, to see how it went. I would need to go with them for a season and give it a trial. Realistically, it's smart for the grower and it's smart for the buyer. I would want it to work for both parties.”*

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*“Both 10-12 months and 1-3 months. I'd like to order 10-12 months out AND it would be great if a producer can come see me 30 days before when the harvest is expected to let me know if they do or don't have what I needed.”*

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other parts of the interviews some buyers said they would buy more local products if they knew what was available or commented that few buyers were reaching out to them. Personal connection with and attention from vendors were mentioned time and again as important factors in who they choose to work with, as was clear communication. One restaurant manager said they liked the way one of the farms they work with came in with a detailed flyer, and noted that texting is better than phone calls once a connection has been established because sometimes they're busy and don't have time to talk. The initial visit need not take very long, but establishing that first contact and a plan to follow up can open doors for producers interested in breaking into larger markets.

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*“Come by during business hours. Everything else is alright, but that would show me that they're willing to sell me something and we can work together. It's a 50/50 dance. I want to be able to rely on a provider.”*

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What is the Best Way for Local Producers to Contact You?	
Come by during business hours	24 (63.2%)
Call you on the phone	24 (63.2%)
Contact you via email	15 (39.5%)
Come by before or after business hours	9 (23.7%)
List their items on the Food Hub	9 (23.7%)
Contact you through Facebook/social media	8 (21.1%)
Visit your website	1 (2.6%)

Table 7

## What Would Make Buying Local Farm Foods Easier?

Buyers were asked not only what the biggest challenges are to buying local fresh products, but also for their thoughts about possible solutions to some of these challenges. Insights from participants in this study can help answer questions, such as: What strategies can local farmers use to attract more businesses as customers? What off-farm tools can assist farmers and commercial buyers in building professional relationships? For local farmers interested in expanding sales to Homer-area restaurants and institutions (or even other parts of the state), these may be the most important questions in this survey.

The first question in this series asked buyers to choose which options from the list provided would make buying local farm products easier for their businesses. Unlike open-ended



Figure 17

questions, the answers don't vary and offer the chance to see comparable trends more specifically among the buyers.

From the list of options, consistent volume and supply was the most popular and was checked by 81.5% of buyers, followed closely by knowing what products are available (78.9%). Affordable prices and a farmer-led distribution service ranked as third and fourth, each being checked by more than two-thirds of buyers. In fact, all options were checked by over half the participants, indicating that all were viewed as constructive approaches by the group as a whole. Moreover, the majority of buyers saw all or nearly all of the available choices as helpful strategies; 55 percent chose 9 or more of the 11 options. For those who checked only one to four option(s), results closely reflected choices characteristic of the group as a whole. Two buyers reported being content with the way they purchase local products and chose none of the options. However, one of the two noted that while none of the options were necessary for them currently, all of the choices could help make it easier for the restaurant community to buy local ag products.

Comments offered about each strategy shed light on buyers' opinions on how businesses like their own could be encouraged to buy local farm products more often. The reader will notice that buyers' input reveals various connections and commonalities among various options; these connections between options are discussed immediately following buyers' perspectives on the individual options.

#### Consistent Volume and Supply (81.5%)

Considering other survey responses, consistent volume and supply was obvious as the option that would help the largest number of businesses buy more local products; it generated few comments other than "a big yes." One buyer reported that their business was focusing on ways

to incorporate smaller quantities into their buying system, saying “corporate is working on this right now, how to buy more produce from smaller farms.”

#### Knowing What Products are Available (78.9%)

Many buyers reiterated that knowing what is locally available and when would make a big difference in facilitating local purchases. Buyers offered ideas on ways that individual farmers or groups of farmers could share information about what they’re producing and how to buy it. Two respondents appreciated that the farms they tend to buy from send out weekly emails specifying what’s available and offering the option to order it right then. They felt this was a good model for farms to use. One of the two noted that they realized it would be difficult for multiple local farms to publish a collective weekly email, but that doing so would make ordering local foods much easier for them.

Other buyers shared similar ideas such as a master list akin to those that large distributors provide—which identify available products and facilitate ordering—or an online or printed directory featuring farms, products they produce, and contact information. The Alaska Division of Agriculture does compile the Alaska Grown Source Book as a directory of farms, referred to by one buyer as the “Alaska Grown Magazine.” Listing is voluntary, and directories are not necessarily very complete. See <http://www.buyalaskagrown.com/buy/producers> for this statewide directory, and for the section on southcentral Alaskan farms visit <http://dnr.alaska.gov/ag/sourcebook/SCindex2016.html>. Another buyer mentioned connecting to a farmer after finding them on the Alaska Food Hub, another possible directory of local farmers with information about what they sell, their farming practices, and their contact information. A third buyer referenced a farmer who came with a flyer, photos of the farm’s products, prices, and sample bag sizes— all of which clearly showed buyers what they would be ordering. This buyer purchases from several farms by ordering via text message, noting the ease of this form of communication. On the other hand, another buyer mentioned that they appreciate face-to-face communication with farmers. Given that roughly 79% of respondents checked this option, it is clear that farms interested in selling to commercial buyers can benefit by reaching out to these buyers with information about farm products and ways to order.

#### Affordable Prices (73.7%)

Comments about affordable prices centered on competitive pricing between local products and those available from major food companies. Naturally, respondents would like to buy products

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*“Knowing what products or farms are available. Alaska Grown Magazine showed all the farms, their products, contact info, and I really liked that... I would like to see an updated version of that. For example, it's not easy to google "Alaska honey" and find all the farms, since not all the farms are online. One resource for Alaska farms would be helpful.”*

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*“Mainly knowing what's available now. That could be an email, like [one local farm] does each week saying, "this is what's available tomorrow," and then you can order from that. That's seriously convenient. I wouldn't expect that all farmers could do this together, but it would be very easy for us to order that way.”*

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at the lowest possible prices. But, as seen in responses to this question and other parts of the survey, many buyers understand that carefully tended products from small local farms will likely cost more than those from massive “factory farms” in other regions of the country or world. One buyer suggested that local farms consider a more demand-controlled price range. This buyer recognized that local farmers may have superior quality and high labor costs for what they produce, but they felt the quality difference may not match the price markup; the buyer stated they wouldn’t be willing to pay a 100% markup on a product if the quality is only 30-40% better.

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*“Lower prices would make it easier, but I know what it takes to raise the food and that they have to charge for that. I understand. Coordination with farmers directly would be good. Right now, we’re at the mercy of what the farmers have available each week. It’s hard for many restaurants to get consistently the amount of produce they need all season. You’d need acres and acres of land in production all summer. It would be nice to be able to get stuff consistently.”*

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#### Farmer-Led Distributor or Other Delivery Option (68.4%)

The phrase that best sums up buyers’ comments regarding the option of a farmer-led distributor is, “that would be helpful.” Many buyers expressed interest in having one point of communication with whom they can place weekly orders for delivery from local farms—something like a local “rep” for farmers. Ease of ordering, delivery, and one-stop shopping all make this an attractive option to buyers concerned about adding more steps in their food purchasing structure. Such a service already exists in the Anchorage area provided by Arctic Harvest Deliveries

(<https://www.arcticharvestak.com/wholesale>). Previous to Arctic Harvest, an Anchorage-based chef known as “Delicious Dave” collected produce from Mat-Su Valley farms for distribution to Anchorage restaurants. Two of the buyers interviewed for this survey recalled the service that Delicious Dave provided to Anchorage chefs, Alaska Root Sellers, as a good example for others to follow. One buyer pointed out, however, that while convenient, a local farm distributor would be an added “middle-man” whose salary would have to be added to product prices. This buyer stated that they feel they’ve worked it out so that they and the farmers they do business with have an agreed upon system for prices and supply.

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*“A farmer-led distributor would be very interesting. Summers for us are SO busy, the easiest way possible is how we will go. Farms we use now do text ordering. If we have a line out the door and around the corner, they can still supply us. [One farmer] made it easy with a flyer, photos of what they sell, prices, sample bag sizes; they showed us what we’d be ordering.”*

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*Having somebody from the local farms sit down with my boss and go over the finer points of the benefits and advantages of buying local. So, basically a local rep. There are advantages that the customers perceive in buying local that some business owners may need to be educated on.*

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### Website Where Farmers List Expected Product Availability Before Harvest (65.8%)

Similar to the ease that distributors provide, websites can also be a place to compile information about farm product availability. One buyer commented that a website with expected availability before harvest would be great, and “for all those paper pushers, a newsletter showing what’s coming in season (kind-of like what Sysco hands out).”

In addition to providing a tool for buyers seeking out farm products, websites or other online resources may also be a method for buyers to communicate what they are looking for to the farming community— somewhat like a sophisticated “want ad” for food service businesses. Several buyers mentioned the Alaska Food Hub as having potential as an interface between farmers and commercial buyers. Two suggested that it may be useful if the Food Hub were to develop a space for restaurants to post what they need so that farmers can know who to reach out to with their products.

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*“I really like the website one. And the Food Hub (didn't know about it before today); I can get on a computer and see what is available and the prices, get it right there as I need it. I just don't know where to get it is our main thing. It's also got to be consistently available when it's expected to be ready and competitively priced. All of these would make it easier, but the thing that would get me on board is seeing a piece of paper that said, "we have this many cases." It'd be a whole different world if I was running a 6-table restaurant.”*

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### Increased Coordination and Pre-planning with Farmers Directly (63.2%)

The idea of coordinating with individual farmers so farmers could plan to grow is well-liked by many study participants. This could help buyers anticipate harvest times and promote consistent availability of crops throughout the season. As one buyer put it, “coordination with farmers directly would be good. Right now, we're at the mercy of what the farmers have available each week.” Buyers who have coordinated crop planning with local farmers have had mixed experiences. A few reported that plants were grown too large or otherwise out of spec for their needs or were not consistently available. Others reported good success working with farmers to coordinate what they’d like produced the following growing season. One buyer stated, “we already coordinate with certain farmers to grow for us and it’s a good option overall.” Another spoke about their vision for the restaurant to display a “local board” that would show which local growers and local products are being used each day. This buyer would also like to coordinate with multiple local farmers to grow staple menu products and specialty items for as many weeks of the year as possible.

### Long-term Storage Option (60.5%)

Restaurants, grocers and institutions understand that local growers may not currently have access to cold storage options to help store products for sale another day and that could ease harvesting pressures. Over 60% of respondents indicated that a cold storage option would be very beneficial to the local grower community. This would allow farmers to harvest crops at ideal maturity and then stockpile harvests for longer durations to sell upon demand. One buyer commented, “we go through a 50 pound case of red potatoes every week, and a 50 pound bag



of carrots every two weeks in the summer, 50 pounds in the winter. Long-term storage would be good.” Another had a different sentiment, saying, “I wouldn’t be very interested if it’s pre-purchased food. Say you bought produce from a farmer and it’s being stored for you somewhere else because you don’t have room. This may open the door for theft. But, if it’s not pre-paid and just being stored for later purchase after it’s been harvested, then absolutely yes! If a warehouse situation with pre-purchased harvested products was managed and looked over, then yep, I’m in.”

### Clear Invoicing from Farmers (60.5%)

Even though invoicing wasn’t among the most popular options on the list, it generated many comments, perhaps because it’s an easily improved process that would make local purchases more attractive for managers of stores and kitchens. Buyers find invoices challenging, especially if the receipt is hand-written on small piece of paper or there is no receipt at all. One buyer lamented, “Farmers often give me a little scrap of paper that’s easy to lose. Some of them get back and email you, but if I lose the little paper, that’s no good.” Another said, “Invoicing is a huge thing. My chef will get local herbs once in a while and come back with no receipt. That’s hard to track.” A third stated, “Bad invoicing can really ruin a business relationship.” Some buyers, on the other hand, feel positively about the invoicing they receive from farmers they work with. One such buyer praised the farmer they buy from, saying “the person I order from, their invoicing is legit.” Invoicing apps are available to download to computers and cell phones and some have the capability to produce receipts.

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*“... and clear invoicing from farmers- that would be really nice. A piece of scratch paper isn’t as helpful.”*

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### Centralized Distribution Center (60.5%)

Centralized distribution centers can take a number of forms, ranging from farmer-run collectives to grocery stores with large selections of local products. The key is having a place where buyers can shop for local products from a variety of local producers all under one roof. While some buyers expressed that they only work with delivery and therefore aren’t inclined to utilize such establishments, others are open to, or even excited about the idea of one central shopping destination for local products. One buyer noted that they would prefer an option like this if it were not hosted at the busy farmers market. Another buyer interested in this concept stated that the local grocery store could become a very easy-to-use hub both for local products and other needs; “I love the idea of [a local grocer] having a local section. It would be amazing to do a one-stop shop. Be able to get my local stuff and my canned coconut milk...” However, as one buyer noted, this approach has the drawback of reducing face to face interaction with the farmers.

The Alaska Food Hub does provide local farmers and buyers a centralized online shopping forum, though it is still relatively new and building its base of farmers. At present, products posted for sale on the Food Hub tend to be available only in small quantities and at retail prices or above. However, Food Hub infrastructure could be developed in ways to help draw buyers of large

quantities and farmers who can provide it to them together. Local grocery stores also have the potential to become one-stop shops providing local products, particularly for restaurants. One local grocery buys directly from southern Kenai Peninsula farmers, though again, quantities and availability tend to fluctuate or be limited. The store has expressed interest in expanding its local selection and has generated renewed interest among local farmers, but as a retail business it is unlikely to offer wholesale pricing, which may limit it as a resource for some commercial buyers.

### Opportunity to Pre-order (57.9%)

Pre-ordering can offer something close to a sure bet for buyers concerned with local availability. Several buyers commented that the opportunity to pre-order would benefit them, one even stated that pre-ordering is essential. Another buyer observed, “I like the idea of pre-ordering. It would create a cutthroat market, but that would get people buying.” One interviewee posed the question, “Could a restaurant set it up so that they state a known amount that they will want and then it can be reserved?” Some buyers are leery of depending on products not yet fully vetted and have reservations about pre-ordering, and one stated that they did not choose this option because they like the idea of seeing and knowing the product before buying it. Still, the majority of buyers chose this as an option that appealed to them.

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*“My plan for the local thing this summer is to have a big “local board” where I list the farm and what I’m sourcing from them. I’d like to have 5-6 key farmers that I’m working with directly. I’m going to be planning my summer menu and would like to let them know what I’ll need; I’m hoping they’ll grow as much for me as I can buy and then I can always source from [the distributor] when they can’t. I’m also interested in getting unique items on a smaller scale from other farms (or my guys) when they come available. Would love to get my staples lined out by local guys both in summer and as far into winter as I can.”*

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### Open House to Meet Farmers and see Products (55.3%)

Although a farmers’ open house was checked less than other options listed, over half of buyers interviewed responded that they would like such an opportunity on the southern Kenai Peninsula. An event like this could provide a chance for buyers to appraise the quality of available products, which one buyer specifically noted as being very helpful, and another likened an open house to a farmers market food show. One buyer said, “The opportunity for an open house to meet farmers and see products would be fantastic.” Setting up an open house where buyers could see local products and connect with farmers would have some logistical hurdles. One buyer noted that a one-time open house wasn’t enough for them to meet farmers and gain a sense of their different operations; that buyer preferred to visit farms to get an understanding of their products and practices. Scheduling an

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*“We did not choose the open house option because with open houses you only get one chance. We don’t benefit from food shows for the same reason, so this is not the most useful to us. These events also tend to be scheduled while our restaurant is open and we are working. I’d prefer to spend like six hours on the farm and really understand the operation.”*

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open house could also be difficult because many local buyers and producers keep long hours and must meet varied schedules, so choosing a time that works well for most buyers and farmers could prove challenging. One respondent suggested that scheduling a gathering for farmers and buyers to meet one another might best be done at the beginning or end of the season.

## Specific Suggestions from Buyers

The last question asked of interviewees was whether they had any suggestions that would help local producers better serve their needs. This question allowed participants to really reach out to the local producer community and share their best advice for how to help bring the two sides together. Their suggestions are included here in full (with minor editing).



- *“Baby vegetables. It would be good for farmers to think of what we're using the product for. Little veggies are better on my plates, in my final products, while things like big, full grown bok choy are less useful for me. I know it may mean more work for farmers to harvest young and then do additional plantings, but then again, since baby vegetables are more tender maybe they can command a higher price point.”*
- *“Our suggestion would be meeting up with us before the season and let us know what's being grown this summer and when it will be available. People pop in all the time with foraged or farmed foods for sale, but ahead of time is better for us. Also, crops are ready from many farms at the same time, causing a glut in the market for those weeks, but none before or after. For example, everybody has turnips at the same time. Connections with individual farmers and communicating what we want, down to the type of lettuce or variety of radishes. To summarize: consistency in how we get the product and connection with the individual farmer.”*
- *“Face time. Show up at my café, have some samples ready and available, have some pre-printed prices, multiple payment options, regular follow-ups, delivery available. Delivery is VERY important to us. Also, clear invoicing and a list of what's available or what's limited. [A local farm] has emails of what's available every week, and because of this my delivery always makes it to me the way I expect. Their communication with us on availability and delivery schedules leaves me with no surprises on delivery day. I never have to run to the store to get greens or whatever I may have ordered from them.”*
- *“Not really. The farmers market is right there and it's all pretty accessible right now [August]. It would be pretty cool, though, to have a "restaurant hub" or a delivery service that picks it up from the farmers and brings it to either you or a central spot. Kind-of like how distributors work, but independent and local.”*

- *“I really think price for restaurants is the biggest barrier. I don't think year-round availability is. For example, right now we're looking forward to rhubarb. We look forward to seasonal availability. I think that's where our country has gone wrong. We decided years back that people want tomatoes in January and that we need everything all the time. I value seasonal produce.”*
- *“I see a lot of farmers trying to grow the entire seed catalogue. I'd really like to see a little more specialization on some farms, where they pick three things and do it right instead of a little of everything. Be the carrot guy. Be the lettuce guy. Build a reputation for that. I think there's a lot of room in Homer for that to grow and make sales. I also, as I said earlier, feel really strongly that electronic ordering with local farms is important for me. The two producers I use send me data on what they have, I order it, it's invoiced. This is easy through text message. I'll buy some stuff from people showing up at my door, but not much. Similarly, calling other farms on the phone, finding out what they have, and their uncertainty of their inventory makes things difficult. Getting foods needs to be simple and easy for my restaurant.”*
- *“Our advice would be if you call and you have something to offer us, to know your prices. Be as organized as possible before coming to us. If I have to weigh your product and write out invoices, I will be much less excited to regularly do business.”*
- *“I'd love to get in contact with any producers intending to grow hemp for CBD pain relief products. And, on a slightly different topic, I have an idea for a community food and other necessities drop-off that can fill the gaps in the week when the Food Pantry isn't open, since they're only open once a week. See me for details.”*
- *“I'd love to be able to get local meats with reasonable prices, even if it was just a meat co-op or a fish co-op. Local elk, reindeer, bison, pork, duck, chicken, lamb... I'd LOVE to be able to get those things locally and to not order meat through distributors or Anchorage because I prefer to know where my meat comes from. I would also just love a local chevre producer. We need more local honey. I tried to work with [a farm] on arugula and it all bolted. They didn't believe it was worth their while to grow it to just the young baby phase. However, I would love to have a good relationship with individual farmers who can produce consistent, quality product for me. My goal is to buy all organic and local; that's the vision. I want to get all that Alaska has to offer. I think tourists would respond to that. I believe the way the animal is raised and the intention or passion that went into the food we get matters, it's healthy. I want to connect my customers to their food— I think that's important. I tell customers the story of the salmon they're eating, and the same for other local ingredients. Every farm I've bought from I've gone out and visited, have seen the operation and can tell their story. I believe that adds to the experience.”*
- *“If we did a test buy, test season, then I could have some feedback. But I can't come up with a story line here when I haven't already done it.”*

- *“What are farmers growing in the Kenai Peninsula area? What is your season? I don't know. We need continuous vegetables. Sometimes local vegetables are not great quality and we see a difference in quality between local vegetables and distributors, so our quality would be different season by season. Distributors vegetables are always the same quality, consistently. Summertime-only restaurants find it easier to use local farmers, but year-round businesses find it impossible.”*
- *“The magazine thing. If there was a physical, and online, place where all the current farmers were listed, what they have, contact information, and that this was updated yearly and distributed to all the restaurants.”*
- *“I know it would be super expensive, but for us picky restaurants send a gift basket. Let the business owners that are more into the bottom line and haven't yet gotten into buying local produce taste it— taste a blueberry, taste your carrots, see the difference. Make it an experience, show them why your local produce is so much better. We're a small town and we shouldn't be ordering from [large distributors] any more than is absolutely necessary. I'm from Oregon originally, where the farmers markets are awesome and our little market here in Homer has blossomed to be about as good as the ones down in Oregon. If you care about food, and you care about your customers, and you care about what walks out your door, then fresh local products should be a gimme. Homer has a very unique experience. I don't want to turn into [another town]. I'm tired of not tasting food. If you dump salt on it at least you'll taste something.”*
- *“Make visits if they truly would like to sell more product. Everybody is looking for money, that's business, but they have to make a decision as to whether they'd like to sell to businesses or if they want to set up a stall at the farmers market. Business people don't like change. It's like a fine-tuned machine. You spend a lot of time and effort trying to cultivate relationships with the people you do business with.”*
- *“Networking this so that information about availability is out there and easy to access. Also, you probably can't grow a zucchini or tomatoes in May, that's the nature of our planet. But, if farmers were to coordinate with each other or perhaps stagger certain crops that can be harvested throughout the season, then we wouldn't have to order those items from distributors. Spinach, for example. We buy a lot of produce like spinach in May that we can't get locally. It seems like we can get it fairly early in season and late in season, but not in the middle of the season. Another thing is that it's fantastic that farmers are selling niche products in small volumes. I totally respect and like that. But, for a small restaurant like ours we have to go with farms who can produce the volume we need.”*
- *“Can they start growing rice and beans please? Just kidding. Sometimes the Farmers Market is so busy and crazy and I have to get back to the restaurant. It would be very helpful if I could see at the beginning of the season what they have and what the availability is or will be.”*

- *“When producers and fish sellers are jumping their prices around, all wishy-washy on how much they want to charge, I just don't have time for those kinds of people. I don't want to play games. Come up with a price that you need to charge and stick with it. Obviously, market prices adjust. But no negotiating at my business about price and then trying to sell that same product the next day for cheaper prices. Especially products I haven't seen.”*
- *“I think just visibility so that we know they're there. A lot of times I don't. This is a wonderful community and very close-knit groups, but if you're not a part of the whole farming community you may not know they're out there growing food to be bought.”*
- *“I love the idea of getting a local section at [a local grocery]. I think the farmers are doing great, they're not charging too much money, I just don't have a lot of money to spend. But it would be so convenient to me to just grab local produce when I'm going to the store for my other needs, so that convenience would be a real boost for me. That would be a huge incentive. It would definitely make me think twice about buying local. So, if I don't have to go somewhere else (Farmers market, Food Hub) to get my produce, I'd be incentivized to buy the local stuff right there at the store.”*
- *“Actually, no suggestions, they're kind-of doing it. They're letting us know what's available and when, they're communicating and deliver it, which is what we need.”*
- *“I enjoy working with all the farmers I've been working with. I've got no complaints.”*
- *“Drive it here, delivery. I like the idea of a food show. I think that would be really cool.”*
- *“I guess communication probably. But that's also a lack of communication on my part. But hopefully I'll know more by the end of this summer.”*
- *“Our restaurant always been known as an FSA/Sysco house and it's been really hard to get farmers in here to let us know what they have. It's been a really hard wall to push against. So, making themselves visible and sharing what they can do with us, like a good car salesman, showing us what you've got. Carrots and much of the produce tastes better out of the ground than off the truck. We just don't have any salesmen coming here. The farmers market, we'd buy them out of greens in one day if we went down there. Lack of information is our main obstacle. Our main thing is I employ somewhere between 40-80 people a year. It's a machine that if you mess with the wheels too much it makes it so I can't employ all those people. The big companies can get us what we require at expected, acceptable prices. It's not that we don't want to do local, but we need a certain price point. Our owners want people to come in three times a week, not once a month, so we have to keep it affordable. Certain big companies give a price break, which lets us get some higher end products. But, you kind-of have to buy some other product with it. They know we buy 'X' amount of cheese or flour in a year, so they give breaks. If I had a piece of paper with a list and prices, I'd be very into that. I would rather support the locals and the town all day rather than having the*

*money go out of state. That said, this is the most anybody's come in here to talk with us about local food. Only shellfish people have really approached us."*

- *"Here are some collaborations and events from the Anchorage area that I think people here on the Kenai Peninsula may be interested in looking into, or perhaps could generate some ideas for people involved with local food down here: 1) Alaska Root Sellers— Delicious Dave Thorne used to drive around as a one man delivery service hauling local produce to restaurants around Anchorage. We restaurateurs loved that. He really moved local produce to the restaurants. 2) Alaska Global Food Collaborative— UAA graduate Robin Richardson started and managed this event which featured booths for Alaska products like Yummy Chummies, wines, etc... a conference of food people- producers via Delicious Dave, people who make produced items, and buyers."*
- *"We don't have any time to mess with anything in July, so I think everybody's a little bit leery that local farmers won't be able to get us what we need when we need it. Also, you've got to be price competitive."*
- *"I just need to look at this information and talk with them. It used to be only one person here running the show. I've been here three years and am just starting to get the hang of it. If we could farm it out to our local guys and not get it from up the road, that would be easier for everybody."*
- *"Just work on quantity really. I've had some farmers come in and tell me they can produce this much per week (e.g. 40 lbs of cucumbers per week). I have to tell them that I use about 30 lbs a day, so that 40 lbs could supply me for one day. So, quantity is the big one. If a farmer could say "I can supply Kenai, Soldotna and Homer in cucumbers," they'd be in. So if anybody wants to go bigger... I think it would be awesome to see a larger variety of Alaska Grown. I'd love to see all our vegetables be grown in Alaska in summertime. I think that'd be awesome."*
- *"[The farmer we buy from] stopped by a few years ago with his extra produce from the Farmers Market and since then we've set up a weekly delivery with him. He made a point of coming to our business, which made it easy and convenient for us. Summertime is hectic and busy and short staffed, and we don't have a lot of time for figuring out how to get what from whom. We have reliability with our guys."*
- *"[One farmer] comes by every week in the summer, but no standing orders. We were ordering a lot from [another farmer], but he just got too busy and put us on the back burner, didn't come in with stuff as much anymore. I just need to talk to these guys more. Get their lists of what's available, what they have."*
- *"In order to get people hooked on Homer produce, you need to make it the same process as they are used to."*

# Appendix A: The Produce Checklist

The Produce Checklist was a supplemental document left with buyers to fill out after the interview with specific questions about their produce usage. This checklist asked buyers:

- Which produce items they buy
- Monthly average quantity
- Average price
- Did they purchase any of this product from local producers in 2018?
- Would they prefer to buy these items from local farmers and/or organic options

It is important to note that the data in the table below is not a complete. Thirty buyers (79%) participated in the produce checklist portion of the survey, though not all filled it out completely. Some buyers indicated which items they buy, but only gave data for certain items on monthly quantity purchased or pricing. Seventeen (45% of buyers) chose to check boxes for whether they purchased any of the produce items locally in 2018 or if they had a local and/or organic preference; this means that potentially more buyers purchase some of the produce items locally and/or would like to begin to than appear in the table. Additionally, some of the data given was offered in a way that wasn't clear enough to include in totals. Regardless of the gaps, the data given is a good indicator for understanding the activity in our local food system. To clarify these gaps, the columns were added that show

- How many buyers said they purchased the item
- How many also included data on price and/or quantity

## More detail about the Produce Checklist on the next page:

**\*Fruit:** This category includes apples, blueberries, strawberries, raspberries

**\*Artichokes:** only one buyer reported using fresh artichokes; the rest reported data for canned artichokes. Quantity and average price could not be calculated with the data provided.

**\*Garlic:** one buyer reported garlic at 2.00 each bulb which would make the per lb price roughly \$16.00 lb. This was considered an outlier in the data and was not included in the calculation for average price because it varied widely from all other reported priced per lb. If including this \$16.00 lb in with the others the average price becomes \$5.72 lb.

**\*Herbs:** average price for herbs was could not be calculated with the data provided. Also, some buyers gave data for herbs purchases in pounds and others in terms of bunches. Therefore, the total quantities are separated between those who reported data for each type of unit: 124 lbs, 370 bunches, and "7 bags cilantro"

**\*Microgreens:** quantity and average price for microgreens could not be calculated with the data provided.

**\*Potatoes:** one buyer commented that the Homer Farmers Market only has small potatoes and they would prefer larger ones.

*\*\* indicates insufficient data.*



## The Produce Checklist for Homer Area Commercial Buyers

Type of Produce	# of Buyers	# Who Reported	Monthly Avg.	Avg. Price	Purchased Locally	Prefer Local or Organic
<i>artichoke*</i>	8	7	**	**	0	3
<i>asparagus</i>	10	9	685 lbs.	\$5.03/lb	1	2
<i>beans</i>	5	4	120 lbs.	\$2.93/lb	0	2
<i>beets</i>	13	12	423 lbs.	\$2.56/lb	7	3
<i>bok choy</i>	14	14	1,118 lbs.	\$2.64/lb	4	4
<i>broccoli</i>	18	14	1,409 lbs.	\$2.87/lb	4	5
<i>broccolini/rapini</i>	10	9	836 lbs.	\$3.06/lb	2	4
<i>Brussels sprouts</i>	9	7	407 lbs.	\$3.59/lb	2	1
<i>cabbage</i>	29	28	2,688 lbs.	\$1.49/lb	10	12
<i>carrots</i>	25	22	2,106 lbs.	\$1.29/lb	4	8
<i>cauliflower</i>	8	6	1,231 lbs.	\$3.60/lb or \$2.50 each	0	3
<i>celery</i>	28	25	1,388 lbs.	\$1.44 lb or \$2.42 each	2	10
<i>chard</i>	5	4	71 lbs.	\$3.18/lb	2	2
<i>chilis</i>	14	6	369 lbs.	\$2.96/lb	0	3
<i>corn</i>	7	3	1,225 lbs.	\$1.41 each	0	1
<i>cucumbers</i>	25	22	986 lbs.	\$2.40/lb	10	7
<i>fennel</i>	5	4	75 lbs.	\$2.50 lb or \$4.50 each	1	1
<i>flowers (edible)</i>	4	0	**	**	1	0
<i>fruit</i>	16	12	1,392 lbs.	\$4.82/lb	2	5
<i>garlic*</i>	20	18	425 lbs.	\$4.58/lb	5	5
<i>greens- young</i>	24	21	916 lbs.	\$6.49/lb	8	9
<i>greens- mature</i>	9	7	241 lbs.	\$4.00/lb	5	0
<i>herbs*</i>	24	20	*	**	9	8
<i>kale</i>	14	11	371 lbs.	\$3.31 lb or \$2.88 bunch	6	3
<i>kohlrabi</i>	1	0	**	**	0	0
<i>leeks</i>	13	8	367 lbs.	\$2.29/lb	1	4
<i>lettuce</i>	28	24	5,351 lbs.	\$2.51/lb	4	10
<i>microgreens*</i>	9	6	**	**	4	1
<i>mushrooms</i>	23	19	1,797 lbs.	\$3.31/lb	1	7
<i>nettles</i>	2	0	**	**	0	0
<i>onions</i>	27	23	5,845 lbs.	\$1.05/lb	2	9
<i>parsnips</i>	5	3	152 lbs.	\$2.00/lb	2	0
<i>peas</i>	11	6	129 lbs.	\$2.98/lb	1	3
<i>peppers</i>	23	20	1,706 lbs.	\$3.14/lb	0	6
<i>potatoes*</i>	28	25	11,005 lbs.	\$1.28/lb	7	11
<i>radicchio</i>	2	0	**	**	0	0
<i>radishes</i>	9	7	119 lbs.	\$2.60/lb	3	2
<i>rhubarb</i>	4	2	20 lbs.	**	3	0
<i>romanesco</i>	3	2	80 lbs.	\$3.30/lb	0	0
<i>rutabaga</i>	2	1	150 lbs.	\$1.30/lb	0	0
<i>scallions</i>	17	5	281 lbs.	\$3.11 lb or \$1.06 bunch	1	4
<i>shallots</i>	8	7	121 lbs.	\$3.26/lb	1	2
<i>sprouts</i>	9	6	74 lbs.	\$12.00/lb	2	2
<i>summer squash</i>	8	7	195 lbs.	\$3.11/lb	1	1
<i>tomatillos</i>	3	3	65 lbs.	\$2.91/lb	0	1
<i>tomatoes</i>	28	26	4,239 lbs.	\$2.53/lb	3	12
<i>turnips</i>	3	2	105 lbs.	\$1.20/lb	0	0
<i>winter squash</i>	11	8	278 lbs.	\$2.31/lb	2	1
<i>zucchini</i>	14	14	1,410 lbs.	\$2.13/lb	4	4

# Appendix B: More Notes on Organic and Local

## Organic Produce on Buyers' Shopping Lists

Over 50 types of organic produce mentioned

(Listed in order of most reported to least)

Carrots	Coffee	Milk
Cucumbers	Spices	Rice
Greens	Sprouts	Herbs
Yogurt	The store's whole organic	Onions of all kinds
Eggs	section	5-6 different kinds of garlic
Cabbage	Asparagus	Beef ribeye
Flour	Pork	Duck
Sugar	Chocolate chips	Figs, cherries
Berries/fruits	Alternative milks	Potatoes
Zucchini	Butter	Teas
Tomatoes	Breads	Coconut milk
Spinach	Maple syrup	Kale
Oranges and other citrus fruits	Eggplant	Canned beans
Celery	Dairy, sour cream, goat cheese	Bok choy
Romaine	Bananas	Fennel
Chicken	Broccoli rabe	
Peppers	Food grade lavender buds	

## Other Notable Quotes on Local Foods

*"During the summer we get all of our greens from [our farmer] and many varieties of fresh veg— kale, chard, bok choy, cucumbers, root veg., etc. His prices are often less than from big distributors."*

*"We want to go higher with local produce and other locally raised foods. We're looking at more purveyors."*

*"The only thing I've had any luck with buying local is green leaf lettuce, cabbage, spring mix."*

*"It keeps more money in the community instead of giving it to big businesses. I'm very interested in that. I just recently found out about the Food Hub and plan to look into it- seems convenient."*

*"Most vegetables bought in summer is from the Farmers Market so we can support local farmers. We use a lot of cabbage. We get a lot from the Farmers Market every year. We always get from [a preferred farmers] because we love him. We use [another preferred farmer] a lot too. We get a lot of pickling size cucumbers. I shop daily at Save U More for produce that I can't get locally."*

*"We buy no local produce, which is really unfortunate and I want to change that. The local food market has really blossomed. I think it is really a misconception, perhaps a generational one, that buying local is more expensive than from distributors, who also charge you for mileage and*

shipping. My boss has been running the business for a long time. For him price is the bottom line in all decisions. I, however, really want to jump on board with those other restaurants in town with buying local. I think for our clients, I'd like to present them with what we have here- this is Alaskan food. I think this will keep them coming back."

"I try to buy as much local produce as possible. Mixed greens, radishes, scallions, herbs, potatoes, cabbage (occasionally, but I have to supplement at [a local grocery store] because I need a lot). I buy a lot from [a local farm], but she can't provide everything I need, so I go to the Farmers Market for the rest. If I can't get it from the Farmers Market, I'll go to the store. Sometimes at [another local grocery store] they'll have AK grown potatoes, so I'll buy that. I'll always buy AK Grown items from the store over generic, shipped in ones. Tomatoes- when I get tomatoes I try to buy from Alaska. For example, [one local grocery store] has Anchorage tomatoes from Bill's nursery. One thing about the Farmers Market, it's good for the farmers but you have to be there right at 10:00 am to get the tomatoes, because if not they're gone."

"I usually get at least 4 local pigs each year."

"I like buying local produce better than salad greens from, say, Organic Girl. The dates on their packaging tend to be way off. It may say it's got another week and be bad, it may say it's expired and be fine. The local stuff comes in and usually flies out the door that day."

"I love local eggs but go through 40-50 dozen per week in summertime."

"In the growing season we'll get as much as we can from AK growers- we prioritize it. Recently our Alaska farmers have been facing higher demand and are having a hard time keeping up, so we've had to supplement during the growing season with produce from Washington or other places outside the state. But as long as it's available from the Alaska farmers we source from that's all that we'll have out there. For example, the broccoli out on the shelf won't be 1/2 Alaska Grown and 1/2 from outside. Generally, AK Grown is high quality and the larger Alaska farms we work with have usually been able to get us what we are expecting. However, if they run into a problem and can't get it to us, it can be a bit of a burden because we will not have planned to get that produce sent up here from outside."

"We will buy Alaska Grown over organic grown out of state, e.g. Alaskan potatoes."

"Moving the local produce more quickly means you can charge less, and it's cyclical. The local produce DOES move more quickly. "[A local producer's] carrots are \$4.99, Cal-Organic's are \$2.39 for the same amount of carrots. People are buying more of [the local farmer's] because they're local. Cal Organic's have been in the wax box for at least a month; [local carrots], those were picked literally 2-3 days ago."

# Appendix C: The Buyers Survey – 2018

## Homer Soil and Water Conservation District Buyers Survey

In the past decade Homer has experienced a small-scale agricultural boom, with a thriving Farmer's Market, Community Supported Agriculture, direct farm-to-restaurant sales, and, as of 2016, a centralized Food Hub web-based marketplace. Food producers, seeking to build on this trend, are requesting clarity on food buyers' preferences and limitations when making local food buying choices. To that end, Homer Soil and Water is undertaking a food market study. This study will identify what you, as a food buyer, are purchasing and in what quantities; what price premium, if any, you are willing to pay for local and/or organic food; your preferred methods for ordering, delivery and billing; and what requirements you have for quality, cleanliness and product form or quantity. By participating in this survey, you have an opportunity to inform best business practices and encourage economic growth in this small but vibrant community of food producers and processors.

We appreciate your input on this survey and hope that the results will be helpful to both you and our local producers.

Feel free to contact us if you have any questions:

Kyra Wagner at 907-299-4920; [kyra@homerswcd.org](mailto:kyra@homerswcd.org)

Nicole Arevalo at 907-399-4161; [nicole@homerswcd.org](mailto:nicole@homerswcd.org)

\* For the purposes of this survey, "local products" are defined to include both fresh and prepared foods grown or produced in Alaska.

\* Required

### ABOUT YOU

1. **Name of Selected Site \***
2. **Name and Title of Contact(s)**
3. **Address**
4. **Email**
5. **Phone**
6. **Which of the following best represents your site: \***

Mark only one.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery Retailer: Independent | <input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant: Casual Dining |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery Retailer: Chain       | <input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant: Fine Dining   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Institution: K-12             | <input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant: Food Truck    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Institution: Hospital         | <input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant: Seasonal      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Institution: Residential Care | <input type="checkbox"/> Other:                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant: Cafe              |  |

### YOUR VIEW OF LOCAL

- 1) **Does your site currently buy locally grown products?**

Mark only one.

- Yes  No

- 2) **If so, by your best estimation, what percentage of the foods you buy (including animal products) are from local Alaskan farms or fisheries? Since this differs by season, please estimate here for the**

**Summer months:**

Mark only one.

- 0-5%  
 5-10%  
 15-25%  
 25-50%  
 More than 50%

**-Winter months:**

Mark only one.

- 0-5%  
 5-10%  
 15-25%  
 25-50%  
 more than 50%

- By your best estimation, what percentage of the fresh produce you buy is local?**

**Summer months:**

Mark only one.

- 5% or less  
 5-10%  
 15-20%  
 25-30%  
 35-45%  
 50% or more

**-Winter months:**

Mark only one.

- 5% or less  
 5-10%  
 15-20%  
 25-30%  
 35-45%  
 50% or more

**Specifics:**

**3) Are you willing to pay more for local products? If so, how much?**

Mark only one.

- 5-10%
- 10-15%
- 15-20%
- 20-25%
- 25% or more

**Comments**

**4) What, if anything, limits your ability to scale up local fresh product purchases?**

**5) Would you be interested in purchasing prepared/processed foods made with local fresh products? If so, which items?**

Check all that apply.

- No
- Pesto
- Soups/stocks
- Sauces
- Cheese/butter/yogurt
- Pickled/fermented items (sauerkraut, kimchi, vinegar, etc...)
- Drinks/spritzers/kombu cha
- Locally raised meat products (Sausage, Bacon, Jerky, etc...)
- Beer/wine/mead
- Other

**Comments**

**6) In addition to vegetables, are you interested in purchasing other local fresh products? If so, which products?**

Check all that apply.

- Chicken
- Turkey
- Duck
- Beef
- Lamb
- Pork
- Reindeer
- Bison
- Elk
- Fish
- Eggs
- Milk
- Oysters
- Mussels
- Barley
- Flour
- Honey
- Mushrooms

**WHAT DO YOU VALUE MOST?**

**7) On a scale of 1-10, how much do you value freshness of produce when making your purchasing decisions? (1= Not at all important and 10= Extremely important)**

Mark only one.

- Not even considered 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely important

**8) On a scale of 1-10, how much do you value durability of produce when making your purchasing decisions?**

Mark only one.

- Not even considered 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely important

**9) Do any of the following considerations factor in on decisions about purchasing local foods?**

Check all that apply.

- Knowledge of point of origin
- Uniformity of vegetables, or consistency in size over the harvest season
- Packaging consistency
- Duration of availability
- Delivery
- Reliability of crops being ready during expected weeks
- Availability of pre-sliced or partially processed products
- Better shelf life of freshly harvested products than of those shipped in from outside Alaska
- Other:

**Comments**

**10) Does your business gain secondary benefits from purchasing local products**

Check all that apply.

- No
- Yes. Increased consumer loyalty
- Yes. Local products draw attention
- Yes. Locally sourced can bring in a higher price point
- Yes. Marketing niche
- Yes. Personal satisfaction
- Other:

**Comments**

**11) What would you say, generally, is the perception of your customer base on the importance of providing local foods? (Scale 1-10, 1= Not very important, 10= They really want local)**

Mark only one.

- Local isn't very important to them 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 If it's local, they're smiling

**YOUR BUYING HABITS**

**12) Does your site currently buy organic non-local farm products?**

Mark only one.

- Yes
- No

13) If you answered yes, please list some of types of organic non-local products you buy.

14) Where do you purchase local products?

Check all that apply.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> N/A - I don't buy locally.  | <input type="checkbox"/> Grow my own (see below for follow up)         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Homer Farmer's Market   | <input type="checkbox"/> Gift, barter, trade (see below for follow up) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The Kenai Peninsula Food Hub (renamed Alaska Food Hub in spring 2018)                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Costco or other grocery store                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Direct from the producer or Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) (see below for follow-up) | <input type="checkbox"/> Wholesale distributor                         |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> Other:  |

15) If you checked the option for producers or CSA's above, please specify the farm or business:

16) If you checked the box for "Grow my own" in the question above, please specify what you grow for your business, and what percentage of your usage you estimate growing your own covers:

17) If you checked the box for "Gift, barter, trade" above, please specify the types of product you get in this way, and what percentage of your business' usage you estimate this covers:

18) In percentages, how much of your product would you like to obtain locally in the future?

Mark only one.

- |                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 5% | <input type="checkbox"/> 15-24%        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5-14%        | <input type="checkbox"/> 25-50%        |
|                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> More than 50% |

Comments

## BUYING WHOLESALE

19) Which food distribution businesses do you use? (ex: FSA, Sysco, Charlie's Produce) Also, please rate on a scale of 1-10 your overall satisfaction with each.

20) What are some things you like about using large food distributors?

21) What are some things you dislike about using large food distributors, or think they can do better?

22) Are there any industry requirements or certifications your site must require from producers before purchasing local fresh products? (E.g. Safety certifications, liability insurance, etc.)

23) Would any loyalty agreements with existing partnerships affect your ability to scale up local fresh products?

Mark only one.

- |                          |                              |                             |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|

Comments

24) If you checked "yes" in the previous question, please elaborate:

25) Tell us about your weekly ordering schedule.

## YOUR EXPERIENCE BUYING LOCAL

26) What are your biggest challenges in buying local fresh products?

Check all that apply.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of knowing where to buy local products   | <input type="checkbox"/> Producers are unable to deliver product when needed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Limited variety   | <input type="checkbox"/> Inconsistent supply                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Inconsistent quality  | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of year round availability                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Limited volume  | <input type="checkbox"/> Price   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of convenience (working with producers and getting product from the producers) | <input type="checkbox"/> Time constraints                                    |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> Other:  |

Comments

27) Have you ever purchased food products from the Kenai Peninsula Food Hub? (renamed Alaska Food Hub in spring 2018)

Mark only one.

- |                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No                |
|                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Never heard of it |

28) If you have shopped using the Kenai Peninsula Food Hub, what did you like about it?

Check all that apply.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Easy, convenient online shopping   | <input type="checkbox"/> Chance to buy locally raised meat                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Freshness of products  | <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce miles my product needs to travel; carbon footprint |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Variety of products  | <input type="checkbox"/> Chance to buy fresh local fish                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reasonable prices  | <input type="checkbox"/> Season is longer than the Farmers Market                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Knowing /choosing which farm my product is from; supporting preferred farmers            | <input type="checkbox"/> Other:  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chance for my purchasing dollars to stay in the local economy; support agricultural boom |  |

**29) Have you run into any barriers in using the Kenai Peninsula Food Hub?**

*Check all that apply.*

- Lack of knowing how to access Kenai Peninsula Food Hub (now Alaska Food Hub)
- The software was too difficult to use
- Need for packaged or fully refined/washed products
- Producers are unable to deliver product when needed
- Limited variety
- Inconsistent quality
- Limited volume
- Inconsistent prices
- Prices not competitive
- Lack of convenience
- Inconsistent supply
- Lack of year round availability
- Lack of predictability
- Other:

**30) What would make it easier for you to get local products?**

*Check all that apply.*

- Knowing what products are available
- Centralized distribution center
- Farmer-led distributor or other delivery option
- Affordable prices
- Website where farmers list expected product availability before harvest
- Opportunity to pre-order
- 
- Consistent volume and availability
- Open house to meet farmers and see products
- Long-term storage option
- Increased coordination and pre-planning with farmers directly
- Clear invoicing from farmers
- Other:

**Comments**

**31) If a local producer is interested in selling directly to your business, what is the best way for them to contact you?**

*Check all that apply.*

- Come by your business during business hours
- Come by your business before or after business hours
- Visit your website
- Contact you through Facebook/social media
- Call you on the phone
- Contact you via email
- List their items on the Food Hub
- Other:

**Comments**

**32) At what point in the year would you prefer to communicate with a producer about your needs for local fresh products? (i.e. if you use a pound of basil each week all summer long, when could you communicate your needs with a producer so they can plan to grow it for you)**

*Mark only one.*

- 10 to 12 months before I need it
- 7 to 9 months before I need it
- 4 to 6 months before I need it
- 1 to 3 months before I need it
- I make weekly purchases only

**Comments**

## WRAPPING UP!

**33) Do you separate out food waste from other trash?**

*Mark only one.*

- No
- Yes

**Comments**

**34) If you don't already, would you be willing to separate out food waste to be collected by others from your site for things like compost or pig feed?**

*Mark only one.*

- No
- Yes

**Comments:**

**Would you like to be emailed the results of this survey once all the responses from buyers in our community are in? (If yes, make sure to include your email in "About You" on page 2)**

*Mark only one.*

- Yes
- No

**(Last one!) Do you have any suggestions that would help local producers to better serve your needs?**



# **Homer Soil & Water**

**CONSERVATION DISTRICT**

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