

‘Buy Local’ Marketing Messages for Solano County: Focus Groups
Conducted

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1 Summary of Findings from Focus Group Interviews Conducted at a Sustainable Solano Cooking Class Taught on April 4th, 2025

Attendees of a Sustainable Solano cooking class were interviewed regarding their purchasing habits and preferences for local and organic production. The focus group interviews were conducted with two groups of four to five people. Attendees learned about the cooking class through the Sustainable Solano website, newsletter, and word of mouth from coworkers. One participant has previously attended these classes. Overall participants wanted to improve their cooking skills and learn something new. Most cook the majority of their meals at home, and only eat out for special occasions.

Participants of the cooking class purchased their produce from a variety of grocery stores, with the most popular being Trader Joe's, Safeway, Costco, and Nugget Markets. Almost all mentioned Costco and indicated that they buy most of their groceries there. However, several participants mentioned shopping at different locations, especially for produce. These included Larry's Produce, Soul Food Farms, Sam's Local Produce, and Whole Foods, and two participants subscribed to a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) box.

Participants reported being price-sensitive and indicated that price is an important factor in their food purchases. Participants also mentioned freshness, the absence of pesticides and additives, nutritional content, the ingredients in processed food, the origin of produce, and sustainability considerations are influential factors in their purchasing decisions. One participant reported that they only buy organic produce now that they are able to afford it.

All participants agreed that they wanted to buy more local produce, with the most common limitation being the high price of produce in general. Participants also mentioned knowledge, availability, and accessibility (e.g., knowing where to find local produce, knowing which produce is locally produced, and retail outlets selling local produce being too far away or having inconvenient hours of operation). Participants specifically mentioned being unable to shop during farmers' market hours, and that local produce bought at smaller retail outlets tends to spoil faster.

When asked if the store they frequently shop at sells locally grown or produced food, responses were mixed. They believed that Nugget Markets sells local products, but were unsure regarding Costco and Trader Joe's. One participant shared that they believe Costco sells locally grown produce with additional labels indicating its origin.

Participants shared a common perception that local foods taste better and are fresher (due to shorter

distribution channels), and all had a sense that purchasing local foods directly supports local businesses and their communities. One participant emphasized the importance of focusing on small-farm and organic production, and stated that they are influenced by their concern for the environment and their own experiences in making purchasing decisions. Finally, participants had varying opinions about what a local label or claim means. Several participants interpreted local to mean that food was grown or produced in California, while one interpreted it as produced somewhere in the United States.

All participants of this cooking class also expressed interest in buying more organic produce but also agreed that higher prices limit their ability to do so. This is despite the fact that all stated a higher willingness to pay for organic produce because they associate organic production with being healthier, fresher, and more environmentally friendly than conventional production.

Lastly, some participants were already involved in volunteer activities and attended events aimed at supporting their local communities. Some reported having worked with UC Cooperative Extension, Granges, and local library programs, while others work with specific organizations and businesses, such as the Master Food Preservers and Wolfskill Orchards. Others regularly attend concerts, Nugget food celebrations, and wine-tasting events. All were already familiar with Sustainable Solano, although not all were certain what this nonprofit does, and many expressed an interest in and a need to be more informed about local production and food businesses.

2 Summary of Findings from Focus Group Interviews Conducted at the Food Is Free Giveaway on June 11th, 2025

In collaboration with Food is Free Bay Area, we conducted additional focus group interviews with Solano residents waiting in line at an advertised food giveaway event at the Fairgrounds in Vallejo. Lines started forming an hour before the official start of the event. We interviewed between 30 and 40 people waiting in line to receive donated food items regarding their eating habits, purchasing habits, and views on locally produced products. All participants interviewed resided in Vallejo and reported hearing about the food giveaway event through word of mouth, including friends, family members, and coworkers. It was also reported that individuals found the event through websites (e.g., the Red Cross, Facebook, and the Contra Costa Food Bank Website).

When asked what they were looking for, many participants stated that they were hoping to pick up fresh produce, as well as meat (chicken was often mentioned) and shelf-stable items such as beans. Some participants mentioned they were looking for bread, and many reported wanting whatever was offered to

them. When asked about their food preferences and favorite dishes to eat, most respondents mentioned popular dinner choices (e.g., pizza, pasta), as well as rice stir-fries. Immigrants expressed preferences for foods and dishes that coincided with their cultural backgrounds and traditions in their home countries.

A high percentage of participants reported that they exclusively cooked food at home, either for their families in family households or for themselves in single-person households, with the primary reason being the high cost of eating out. Very few of the interviewees reported eating out and going to restaurants on a regular basis.

Participants reported shopping at various retail locations. Many Participants were focused solely on price as the most important determinant of their choice of retail outlet and purchase decisions. The most frequently mentioned outlets include: FoodMaxx, Grocery Outlet, Walmart, and Safeway. Others mentioned Costco, Smart & Final, Foodmart, Seafood City, and a local Filipino grocery store. A smaller percentage mentioned attending farmers' markets occasionally, particularly for produce. Many explained that they shop at different stores to take advantage of sales and find the best deals, often referencing advertisements or newspaper specials to guide their choices. Shopping frequency varied, with participants reporting routines ranging from once a month to twice a week. Several respondents noted barriers to shopping at certain locations, such as store closures due to theft, the cost of memberships (e.g., Costco), long distances, or the lack of nearby locations (e.g., Trader Joe's).

Participants consistently identified price and affordability as the most influential factors in their purchasing decisions, often outweighing quality considerations such as appearance, freshness, and healthiness. While some expressed interest in buying organic foods, they noted that these foods are often too expensive, and purchasing them competes with affordability as a primary purchasing determinant. Organic production is often given a lower priority or overlooked. Several participants were indifferent between organic vs. non-organic production and did not consider any food labels or claims when making purchase decisions. While many named price as the food attribute they look for the most, some said that they consider quality attributes like freshness, ripeness for produce, tenderness, and leanness for meats, and are willing to make price-quality trade-offs. Several of the interviewees expressed frustration that poor-quality items are still very expensive. Although labels like "organic" (most frequently mentioned), "no-preservatives," "low-sugar," and "free-range" were mentioned, many noted that these considerations should be weighed against potential price differences. When asked what they would like to know about the food they buy, most only mentioned price. One interviewee in particular wanted to know "everything", including where it was grown (state, city or town, transportation) and the quality of water.

When asked about perceptions of "local" and "organic" produce, the majority of participants shared that "expensive" is what came to mind. Some indicated a relative preference for organic over local, expressing the

common simplification or misconception that organic produce does not use any pesticides. However, while several interviewees expressed a desire to buy organic if they had more money, others were more skeptical, citing concerns about pollution more broadly and a distrust of the label. A few indicated they would be more inclined to trust organic products if they were grown indoors in a controlled environment. None mentioned “Locally Grown” or “Grown in Solano County” as a label they intentionally looked for, and when prompted, they expressed that they would prefer to purchase locally grown produce, but that it was too expensive. Moreover, most interviewees shared that they would be motivated to purchase foods labeled as Solano Grown if they were affordable, available, and of good quality.

More generally, the term “local” was interpreted in various ways; some associated it with nearby areas, while others included regions as far as Mexico. Many did not perceive a quality difference between locally produced food and food produced elsewhere, while others expressed a desire to buy food produced in California, and some specifically wanted to support Vallejo businesses. Several participants grow their own produce and consider these foods to be local.

Most participants expressed a desire to eat healthier foods, including fresh fruits, vegetables, fish, and brown rice. However, many reported that financial limitations made it difficult to prioritize fresh or healthy options. Participants often alternated between fresh, canned, and frozen foods to stretch their budget. Some adjusted their diets due to health conditions such as diabetes or heart disease, and some mentioned growing vegetables at home to make healthy eating more affordable.

Participation in community or social activities varied. Some participants reported involvement in programs that support formerly incarcerated individuals or attending events, such as food giveaways, particularly those organized by religious groups or the military. Others mentioned attending large community events, such as the Solano County Fair, while some said this food giveaway was their only form of community engagement. Several respondents stated that they were not involved in any community activities.