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Maintaining a way of life: trials and tribulations of farmers' market families

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ABSTRACT

Never before in our nation's history has there been so many ways for consumers to purchase food. From grocery stores, to super centers such as Wal-Mart and Costco, convenience stores, online purchases, community supported agriculture (CSA), and farmers' markets, Americans have a multitude of venues to choose from. Although many Americans currently purchase their foods from grocery stores, a growing number of them are buying locally at their farmers' markets and from CSAs. As the sustainability movement takes a greater foothold in the American household, local products and local foods are becoming ever more important and prevalent. Yet with all of the statistics surrounding local agriculture, the human element is often lost. A majority of small farmers and their spouses, often the ones who sell at a local level, have to work full time both on and off farm to support their families and farms. This case study examines the professional lives of five local farm families who choose to sell their products at the Fayetteville, Arkansas farmers' market. It seeks to understand farmers' reasons for farming and selling locally, as well as their biggest challenges and rewards. In addition, it seeks to fill gaps in literature regarding farmers' motivations for selling at a local level.

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MEET THE STUDENT-AUTHOR



Megan Lankford

I am from Oxford, New York, and now reside with my husband in Fayetteville, Arkansas. I graduated in May 2015 summa cum laude with a major in Horticulture and a minor in Sustainability. I am a Dale Bumpers Scholar, and have also been named the Outstanding Graduating Senior of the Horticulture Department. During part of my undergraduate career I had the pleasure of being the Vice President and Garden Manager of GroGreen, the student-led organic and sustainable garden. I have also worked part time through my academic career at the University of Arkansas, and currently work as Lead Gardener at the Botanical Garden of the Ozarks. I will continue on my career path there after graduation. In my free time I enjoy growing food for my family, hiking, reading, and relaxing under an old oak listening to the birds.

I would like to thank Dr. Catherine Shoulders for her guidance and mentorship through this journey. Her expertise, countless revisions, patience, and passion have made this a memorable and pleasurable experience. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Curt Rom, Dr. Jennie Popp, and Dr. Elena Garcia for guiding me through this process.

INTRODUCTION

There are a variety of ways to define local foods; however, there is currently no official consensus on the definition. According to the Food, Conservation, and Energy act of 2008 and the United States Congress, local food can be defined by distance: “the total distance that a product can be transported and still be considered a ‘locally or regionally produced agricultural food product’ is less than 400 miles from its origin, or within the State in which it is produced” (Clark et al., 2010). Other definitions for local food include market arrangements such as direct-to-retail, direct-to-foodservice, and direct-to-consumers via farmers’ markets, on-farm stores, and roadside stands (Clark et al., 2010).

Direct-to-consumer sales increased by 8% between 2007 and 2012 (USDA, 2014a). In 2012, sales of fresh produce sold directly to consumers totaled \$1.3 billion (USDA, 2014a). The number of farmers’ markets had also increased. In 1994 there were 1755 farmers’ markets in the United States, in 2009 there were 5274 (Clark, et al., 2010), and by 2012 there were 8268 farmers’ markets (USDA, 2014b). Additionally, in 1986 there were two community supported agriculture (CSA) organizations in operation in the United States. By 2005 there were 1144 CSAs (Clark et al., 2010), and by 2012 there were 12,617 CSAs operating in the United States (USDA, 2014a). As demonstrated by these statistics, local farming, local

food, and direct-to-consumer sales have been increasing substantially. While the motivators for consumers to purchase locally have been well documented, little research has been done to determine the reasons farmers choose to sell their products locally.

According to a survey by A.T. Kearney reported in *Buying into the Local Food Movement*, consumers had various reasons as to why they purchased locally produced food. Nineteen percent of respondents chose to purchase locally to increase organic or natural production, 66% did so to help their local economy, and 60% purchased local produce to deliver a better and broader assortment of products (Ruehle and Rushing, 2013). Another survey conducted by the supermarket industry association found that consumers purchased local food for other reasons as well. Fifty-six percent of respondents purchased foods locally because the taste was better, and 83% said that it was the freshness of the produce (USDA, 2015). It was clear what consumer’s reasons for purchasing local foods were, but no literature was found on why farmers chose to farm and sell produce at a local level.

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of local farm families, local food and farming systems, farmers’ decisions to sell at a local level, and to fill gaps in literature. This project was a case study of five local farm families and their reasons for farming and selling locally, as well as their biggest challenges and rewards. It also explored the perceived outcomes (motivational factors)

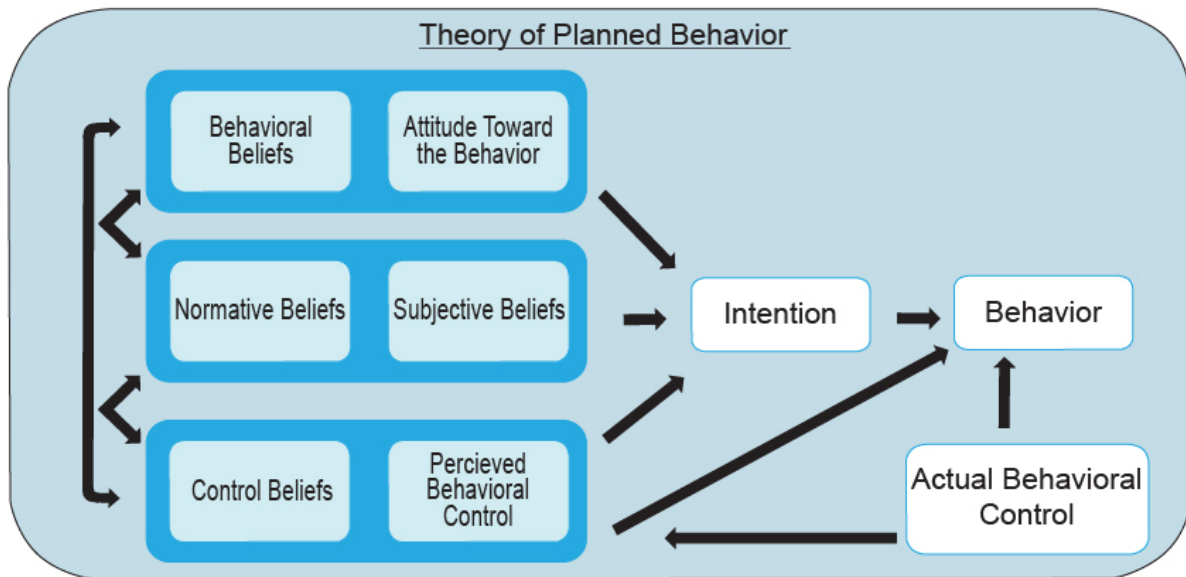


Fig. 1. Theory of Planned Behavior. Adapted from Ajzen (1991).

of the farmers selling at the local farmers' market. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are farmers' reasons for farming?
2. Why do farmers sell at a local level, rather than at a regional or national level?
3. What are the biggest successes and challenges of local farm sales?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To obtain the required data, five local farm families were interviewed independently of the other participating farm families using a structured interview. The information was obtained at a time and place convenient for each farm family, and an audio recording was utilized. Transcription and translation took place once the interviews were complete by using the audio recordings. The constant comparative method of data analysis was used (Glaser, 1965).

In order to collect data, initial contact was made through a local farmers' market manager who assisted in introductions to the farmers. The local farmers' market had a Hmong population, thus a translator for the Hmong farmers was also contacted and assisted in translation and introductions. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed into a Word document at the conclusion of the interviews. Four of the five interviews took place on the farmers' farm. The fifth interview took place at the farmers' market per the request of the farmer.

Participants were selected from the Fayetteville Farmers' Market, which consisted of over 120 vendors. The

participants were chosen from this pool based on their willingness to participate. The participants consisted of two Hmong farm families and three Caucasian-American farm families. The translator and market manager dealt with these farmers on a regular basis; therefore, they were depended upon for assistance in making initial contact with families believed to be most likely to participate. There was no discrimination between produce or protein producers.

The constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) was used to analyze the data obtained in this study. The interviews were analyzed to develop codes and to categorize the responses, and at the same time look for trends in the codes and answers. Then to further the developing theory and understanding of the data, the categories derived from comparing and coding were integrated. Next, the theory was delimited and the data were analyzed further to write the theory. By delimiting the theory, we were able to determine if there were any limits to the theory. The use of the constant comparative method allowed a sound theory to materialize (Kolb, 2012).

The theoretical framework used in this study was the Theory of Planned Behavior, which has been used to predict human behaviors. This theory asserts that human behavior is driven by people's perceptions of self-control and personal attitudes, as well as social norms and pressures (Ajzen, 1991). As displayed in Fig. 1, the Theory of Planned Behavior asserts that ability (behavioral control) and motivation (intention) determine whether or not a behavior would occur. There are six constructs in the theory that influence a person's intention: attitudes, behavioral in-

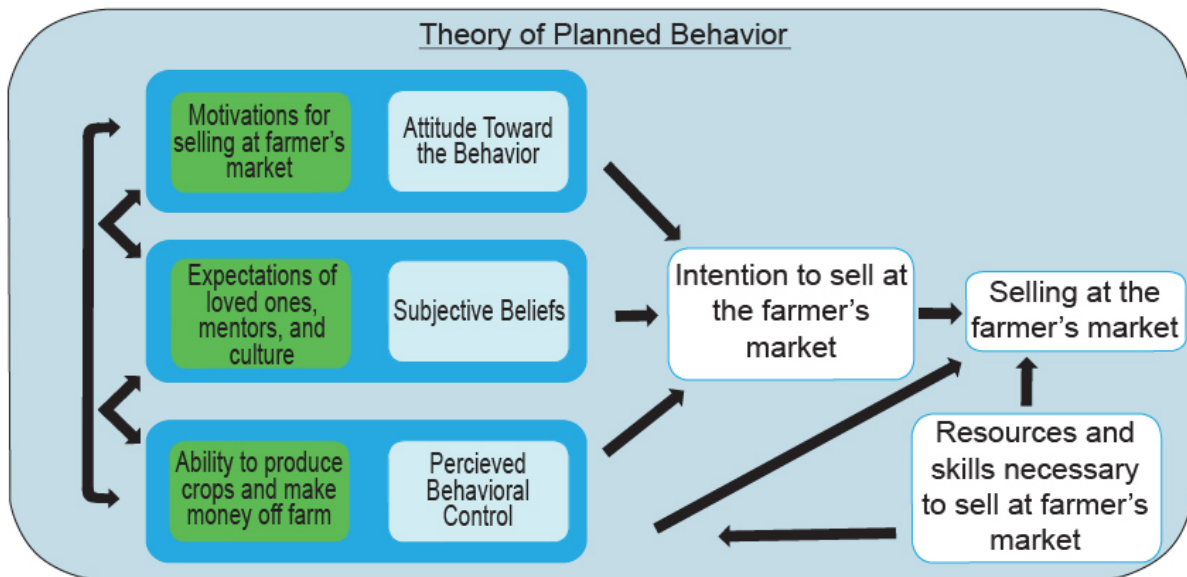


Fig. 2. Theory of Planned Behavior, applied to this study.

tention, subjective norms, social norms, perceived power, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). All six constructs influence a person’s intention regarding a particular behavior and thus the actual behavior.

The actual behavioral controls of the farmers studied included the resources and skills that were necessary to sell at the farmers’ market. The intention implied in this study was that the farmer intended to sell at the farmers’ market. The behavior being studied was the farmer selling at the farmers’ market (see Fig. 2). The three items furthest to the left are those defining the population of interest, and the three furthest to the right are the subject of examination within the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis brought to light seven themes, which are discussed below. The first theme revealed that farming was a way of life for these farmers. Three farmers initially began selling because they produced more food than their families could consume. The farmers’ relationships with their customers were key reasons they sold at the local level. To help form relationships with their customers, they grew and sold quality produce. Along with selling quality produce, they also grew and sold a variety of vegetables and fruits. Challenges included competition at the farmers’ market and weather conditions. There was no hierarchy to the findings discussed below.

For all of the farmers in this study, farming started at a young age and was a part of the fabric of their families. Farmer One talked about how it was part of his/her com-

munity, “Well in Hmong community there are a lot of people farming. Mostly [our] background is farm[ing]. In Laos and over here.” For Farmer Two, a husband and wife team, the husband’s journey in farming started early in life and carried over into his higher education, “I grew up on a farm and was interested in horticulture early in life, and when I went to college my major was in horticulture.” Farmer Three, another husband and a wife team, stated, “We’ve always farmed, and my family owned small farm, basically backyard gardening. His family is from Jonesboro, so they were into more commercial, larger farms.” Farmer Four’s experience with farming was imprinted as a young child, “My family was into organic farming in California when I was a little kid. You know that was kind of my first memories, and I guess it kind of imprinted on me.”

Three of the five farmers interviewed started selling because of an excess of produce. They had started out growing food for their families, but ended up with more than they could eat or process for later consumption. Farmer Three stated that they started selling at the farmers’ market because:

We had an excess in the first year that, you know I said the boys came, and we had more than we could eat, more than we could freeze. So we started out at smaller markets. This is our only our second year at Fayetteville.

All farmers interviewed in this study found the relationship they formed with their customers as rewarding. This was one of their motivations to sell at the farmers’ market. Farmer Two stated:

There's something about knowing your farmer and knowing your customer, and seeing, that you don't get that in the supermarket. To know who's behind [what] you fixed, who was successful at getting that and what goes into all of that.

Farmer Five enjoyed the bonding experience with their customers, "The biggest rewards we get are probably bonding, like we have a bond with our customers."

Four of the five farmers stated that having fresh, quality produce was an important part of selling at a local level. It was something that their customers wanted, and that the farmers wanted to provide for them. Farmer Four summed it up well when he/she stated:

The external qualities, the internal qualities of you know texture, flavor, usability, shelf life and all that, is what brings people back. If people know that you're selling quality, especially the repeat customers, that really, really reduces the amount of promotion and advertising you have to do.

All of the farmers in this study stated that they grew a variety of crops. This was due in part to the fact that they felt they faced competition at the farmers' markets where they sold their produce. Some farms grew mostly vegetables, while other grew a variety of vegetables, fruits, and protein products.

Farmer One grew, "everything from asparagus, okra, zucchini squash, cucumbers, strawberries, potatoes, tomatoes, you know everything." Farmer Three sold a variety of vegetables, but also included honey products, "tomatoes, broccoli, corn, cabbage, yeah the 23 hives of honeybees, flowers, cauliflower, broccoli, lettuce, kale, arugula, [incoherent] squash, lots of squash, cucumbers." Farmer Two was investing more in fruit, while still retaining a wide variety of vegetables and protein products, "We have 65 acres. We have sheep, chicken, pigs and a garden with, with a variety of vegetables and we're leaning more towards fruit."

Three of the five farmers interviewed cited competition with other farmers at the farmers' markets. This is one reason they grow and sell a variety of products. As Farmer One stated, "at the farmers' market at Fayetteville, there's a lot of competition so you have to have a lot of different varieties of produce to be there." Additionally, according to Farmer Four, competition hindered sales, "Like tomatoes, a lot of times everybody has tomatoes at the same time and it's hard to move tomatoes. And knowing that we're only going to sell a percentage of what we have produced and brought."

Weather was a challenge that three of the five farmers in this study stated they faced. Put succinctly by Farmer

Four, when asked what the biggest challenge in farming was they replied, "The weather." Farmer One explained that, "when you have very good plan, but the weather is not cooperative, then you lose a lot of your crops."

One of the primary questions for this study was why small, local farmers farm and sell at the local level. For all of the farmers in this study, farming was a way of life and something that has been a part of their lives since childhood. This study also explored the motivational factors of farmers selling at the local farmers' market. Motivational factors to begin selling included farmers having excess produce. Motivational factors to continue selling were the relationships the farmers had built with their customers. Additionally, this study focused on farmers' biggest challenges and rewards. Their biggest challenges were competition and the weather. Their biggest rewards were the relationships they built with their customers.

All of the farmers in this study grew up farming, gardening, or had early and prolonged experiences with family that imprinted on them. These experiences formed an affinity for farming, an activity in which these farmers could not only participate in, but also enjoy. Three of the farmers indicated that it was part of who they were. As Farmer Four stated, "It's kind of in your blood."

The farmers' biggest challenges in farming were weather and competition at the farmers' market. Some farmers depended on the rain for irrigation; thus if it did not rain, crops were not irrigated. Additionally, some lost crops to various weather events. Three of the five farmers cited competition as a challenge they faced. Although all of the farmers grew and sold a variety of produce, much of the produce from booth to booth was very similar.

For three of the five farmers, their initial motivation for selling at the farmers' market was an excess of produce. They had either eaten or preserved all that was possible and needed another outlet for their produce. Motivational factors to continue to sell at the farmers' market were the relationships they had built with their customers.

The farmers' relationship with customers was one of the farmers' rewards for selling at local farmers' market. Getting to know their customers as more than customers, even as friends, was something that was rewarding to them. Beyond the monetary transactions that took place between farmers and customers, there was a bond, a type of friendship that formed. These relationships built into opportunities; for example, when a customer offered to counsel one of the farmer's children in regards to college. The same farmer is also a real estate broker, and has assisted customers from the farmers' market with real estate contracts.

As stated in the introduction, this study sought to fill gaps in literature regarding farmers' motivations for farming and selling produce at a local level. Although literature

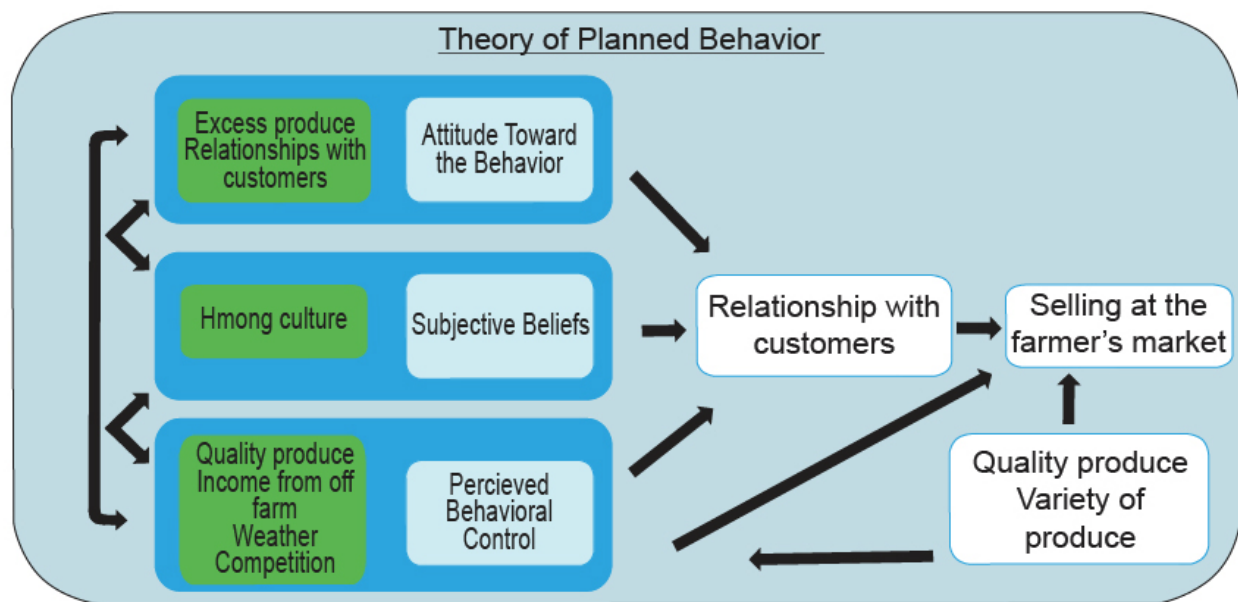


Fig. 3. Theory of Planned Behavior, applied to findings.

exists regarding local foods and farming, no literature has been found that explores farmers' motivations for farming and selling at a local level. For example, the United States Department of Agriculture initiative *Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food (KYF2)* is a 'USDA-wide effort to carry out President Obama's commitment to strengthening local and regional food systems' (USDA, 2015). While this initiative focuses on connecting local farmers with consumers, it does not seek to understand farmers' motivations or challenges when farming and selling locally. A joint publication from the Economic Research Service and USDA sought to understand the scale and scope of local food systems. Within this report, *Local Food Systems: Concepts, Impacts, and Issues*, the authors attempted to understand the characteristics of local food suppliers (Clark et al., 2010). Characteristics explored included the size of farms that sell directly to consumers, entrepreneurial activities other than farming, and barriers that farmers may face when trying to enter or expand a market (Clark et al., 2010).

While both the initiative and publication above sought to understand or enhance the connection between consumers and farmers, they lacked an understanding of the motivations of small farmers to sell at a local level. They also did not explore farmers' biggest challenges, things that could potentially harm their enterprise. This study was a starting point to fill in the gaps of understanding why farmers farm and sell on a local level. This study gives future researchers, and policy makers a starting point to understand farmers' motivations and challenges

on a qualitative rather than quantitative basis. It also allows for further studies of this nature to be conducted, and could potentially assist policy makers understand what farmers need assistance with most.

In specific regard to the Theory of Planned Behavior, the farmers' attitude as to whether the behavior being performed was favorable or unfavorable was explored (Fig. 3). Farmers perceived selling at the farmers' market as both favorable and unfavorable. They perceived that the relationship with customers was favorable, and had a motivation to sell at the farmers' market. However, three perceived competition as unfavorable, and a hindrance to overall sales at the farmers' market.

The behavioral intentions explored were the perceived outcomes (motivational factors) of selling at a farmers' market. Three farmers stated that their initial motivation for selling at the farmers' market was an excess of food they had grown for their families. Additionally, all farmers were motivated to continue to sell at the farmers' market because of the relationship they had with their customers.

The social norms explored in this study were the expectations of the farmers' loved ones, mentors, and culture in relation to selling at the farmers' market. The researcher did not find any social norms or expectations that influenced farmers to sell at the farmers' market. However, it was found that the social norm of blemish free, high quality produce influenced four farmers to ensure they were able to provide this to customers. Additionally, it was found that the culture of the Hmong community encouraged them to farm.

Perceived power, circumstances that could aid or deter a behavior occurring, was explored in this study. It was found that three farmers perceived providing quality produce as aiding in their ability to sell at the farmers' market. The circumstance that could potentially deter farmers from selling at the farmers' market was competition.

Recommendations include that farmers find technologies to assist in mitigating damage that can be inflicted on produce from adverse weather events. Additionally, farmers should find ways to mitigate competition. Further studies should be done at the local, regional, and national level. Information gleaned from these studies should then be utilized in public awareness campaigns or marketing campaigns to increase the sale of local produce.

Although the weather cannot be controlled, there are steps that farmers can take to mitigate damage to their produce from weather events. Hoop houses and high tunnels can be utilized to extend the farming season in both the spring and fall (Orzolek and Sánchez, 2015), protect crops from freezing temperatures (Cregg and Fernandez, 2012), and even reduce hail damage when a 'thick translucent fiber cloth instead of thin high tunnel plastic' is used (Schweser, 2013). Farmers can utilize mulch to reduce the amount of water evaporating from the soil, thus reducing the amount of water needed for irrigation (Stein and Welsh). Additionally, mulch can reduce disease pressure by preventing splash up from the soil onto plants (Stein and Welsh).

Competition was identified by three farmers as being a challenge while selling at the farmers' market. Therefore it is suggested that farmers research ways to mitigate competition. Independent research, formal education, and communication with extension agents can provide farmers with appropriate strategies to address this factor.

It is suggested that additional studies be completed, not only locally, but in other areas of the United States as well. A larger scale implementation may determine if the themes hold true throughout the small farmer population. The interview could potentially be an Internet questionnaire in which farmers could input the information. The information received from farmers could then be compiled and used in public awareness and marketing campaigns to increase sales of local produce. This could be accomplished via a public marketing campaign to encourage consumers to get to know their farmers on a more personal basis by reading their stories.

In conclusion, direct-to-consumer sales have grown as the number of outlets for the sales, including farmers' markets and CSAs, have expanded in number and size, increasing accessibility for a larger consumer base. This study was a starting point for understanding the motivations and challenges of farmers who sell at a local level. For the farmers in this case study, farming was a way of

life, and part of who they were. Three of the farmers initially started selling at the farmers' market because they had excess produce, and all of them farmed and sold at a local level because of the relationships that they built with their customers. The farmers' biggest challenges were competition and the weather. Farmers can utilize the knowledge of extension agents, research independently, or receive formal education to assist with mitigating competition. Additionally farmers can use technologies such as high tunnels to mitigate damage from weather events. By better understanding farmers' motivators for selling locally, researchers can assist them by helping them communicate their relationship-driven goals with potential consumers, thereby strengthening the local food economy.

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