What is this research about?

Authenticity refers to something that is real or legitimate. A problem occurs when trying to determine what it means to be a ‘real’ or legitimate farmer’s market. This research addresses the debate in Ontario’s Farmers Markets around the idea of authenticity. The disagreement is over opposing ways of thinking. The ‘top-down’ approach wants to regulate farmer’s markets so that only food grown in Ontario, or items made from Ontario products, can be sold. This forbids the re-selling of products that a vendor has bought and did not grow or produce themselves. The top-down approach wants to certify all farmers that participate in farmer’s markets to make sure that they meet this standard. On the other hand, the ‘bottom-up’ view is based on the reality and experiences at individual farmers markets. Considering the short growing season in Ontario, market managers and vendors have to consider the needs of customers over the winter months. The bottom up approach is concerned with business, operational costs and pleasing customers. Re-selling products that they have been bought from outside of Ontario allows farmer’s markets to stay open year-round.

Keywords:

Local food, Farmer’s market, authenticity, re-sellers, regulation, CertificationOntario.

What you need to know:

The idea of authenticity is hard to define in terms of Ontario Farmer’s Markets. However, consumers do not need confirmation of the ‘localness’ of farmer’s market food and products. Instead they put trust in the vendor to sell fresh, quality items. For most customers, the sense of community and the belief that the food is fresh and local seem to be the most important.

About the Researchers:

John Smithers is the Chair of the Department of Geography at the University of Guelph. This article, “The trouble with authenticity: separating ideology from practice at the farmer’s market”, is published in the Journal of Agriculture and Human Values.

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What did the researchers do?
The researchers observed buying and selling patterns and interviewed customers, vendors and managers at 15 farmer’s markets in Ontario. The researchers examined the meaning of local, the needs of the customers and the perspectives of vendors and managers. Customers were asked about how they decided what to buy and what they expected from shopping at farmer’s markets. Vendors and managers were asked about their thoughts on re-selling and producer/vendor regulations.

What did the researchers find?
The researchers found that in their interviews and survey responses most consumers mentioned the benefits in farmers markets being an alternative to the retail food industry and the importance of supporting local production. However, rarely did customers define the boundary for local or what it meant in any exact, definitive terms. The researchers found that the explanation most often given for shopping at farmer’s markets was a feeling of trust in the vendor selling high quality products and a sense of community. The researchers found that whether the person selling the food was the same as the person who grew it, did not affect many consumer’s shopping decisions. This goes against the ‘top-down’ approach which argues that customers insist on the person selling the food or product being the direct producer. While local products are certainly favoured, there is acceptance of food produced anywhere in Ontario and even beyond. The authors argue that working toward the goal of maximizing Ontario products through outreach to local producers is better than regulating it through a certification process.

How can you use this research?

Policymakers can use this research to gain a better understanding of the needs, expectations and experiences of farmer’s market shoppers to design policies to meet the needs of the public.

This research is also important to farmer’s market vendors and managers who wish to learn more about the buying patterns and beliefs of market customers. This information impacts farmers who are currently selling products or who may want to sell products at farmers markets in the future.

This research is significant for the average citizen and for consumers at farmers markets who want to be fully informed about where products are coming from and who is producing them. This information is particularly important for people with allergies or special dietary needs.

The researchers encourage consumers and other researchers to be critical of the idea of realness and to continue research and further discussion on this debate.

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