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What Do People Want to Know About Their Food?

Measuring Central Coast Consumers' Interest in Food Systems Issues — Details of Methodology

As part of a study on the California Central Coast's food systems,¹ social science researchers from the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems at the University of California, Santa Cruz asked consumers what aspects of food production, processing, transportation, and retailing they were most interested in knowing more about.

Our research involved two phases—a series of 5 focus groups, and a random sample mail survey of 1,000 households. A focus group is a structured roundtable discussion with a small group of people (usually 6 to 10) designed to elicit in-depth information.

Focus group participants were recruited in person from two large supermarket chains, a discount grocery store, a farmers' market and a natural foods store. We chose these sites in order to ensure a diverse group of participants that reflected the population in this region. To be eligible, participants had to be the primary food purchaser for their household and at least 18 years of age. A total of 27 people participated in these discussions in April and May of 2003. Participants were more likely to be women (table 1) because they were encountered more often at the recruitment sites, and research suggests 69% of food purchases are made by women.² Participants also had lower incomes and educational attainment when compared to 2000 Census figures for the region.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of focus group participants and mail survey respondents

	Focus Groups Participants	Mail Survey Respondents	2000 Census
Non Hispanic White	70%	58%	46.8%
Asian	0%	19.8%	20.1%
Hispanic	15%	10.5%	27.1%
Women	70%	52.3%	49.5%
Over 65	11%	17.0%	10.3%
High school diploma	100%	96.8%	81.7%
Bachelor's degree	30%	54.6%	36.9%
Median income	\$20-40,000	\$75-100,000	\$68,193
Sample size	27	475	3,100,344

The questions asked included, "If you could find out anything about your food, or any of the steps involved in getting food to your plate, what would you like to know?" and "How would you prefer to get this information?." Many of the participants expressed surprise that their input was being gathered, and were thankful for the opportunity to provide their opinions.

Themes identified in the focus groups informed the design of the written survey. This survey was sent to households in April 2004 using names and addresses randomly sampled from the study area, which were provided by a marketing firm-. The instructions indicated that the primary food purchaser for the household was to complete the questionnaire. The final response rate was 48.3%. Respondents' demographic characteristics were similar to those identified in the 2000 Census, although reported income and education levels were higher, and the number of Hispanic respondents was lower than would be proportionate for the region (table 1).

¹Social issues research on consumer interest in the food system is part of the Center's Central Coast Research Project, an effort funded by the US Department of Agriculture. The project explores ways to improve the sustainability of the food and agricultural system on the California central coast. Also included in the Central Coast project is research on water quality and ways of decreasing nonpoint source pollution from the region's farms.

²Food Marketing Institute. 2003. Key industry facts. May. Washington DC. www.fmi.org/facts_figs/keyfacts/whenshop.htm