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Empowering local fresh produce sustainable actions: Will consumers follow?

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Local fresh produce consumption has become a popular growing trend as consumers often perceive them as fresher, and more sustainable due to the short transport distances and greenhouse gas emissions while promoting landscape and biodiversity conservation. However, in addition to the many challenges in a highly competitive food market, local fresh produce growers should also consider truly differentiating their products with respect to conventional varieties to sustain higher prices. To start this marketing strategy, fresh produce growers need to know the value consumers place on their locally grown products, and the willingness to pay (WTP) for their characteristics. The aim of this research is to study consumers' acceptance of a locally grown potato and measure the WTP for the most important product characteristics. The unique characteristics of this potato is that it does not burn and does not absorb oil during frying, and does not dissolve or harden thus absorbing all the flavors of the stew.

The data collection consists of an artefactual experiment with actual shoppers conducted in the largest town in the producing region (Northeast Spain) in spring 2018. The sample includes 151 participants older than 18 years, who are the primary food purchasers and cooks in the household.

The experiment was divided into three stages: i) Respondents visually inspected and evaluated various unlabeled potato packages with different characteristics and prices (washed/unwashed, different sizes, etc.) as in a real supermarket; ii) Respondents evaluated a choice experiment with three alternatives (A, B and non-buy) based on the extrinsic information: price, presentation (washed/unwashed), and product origin (locally or non-locally grown) selected based on market research on supermarkets; iii) Respondents filled a questionnaire reporting demographic information. The data were estimated using mixed logit models that capture consumer heterogeneity.

The results showed that consumers' utility and the WTP increased for locally compared to non-locally produced potatoes. Most consumers preferred the washed over the unwashed potatoes. However, they were willing to buy unwashed potatoes if they were sold 20% cheaper than the washed ones. The results highlight growing opportunities for selling local foods, but the success depends on how they are marketed. This knowledge can help local growers and stakeholders design successful marketing strategies and pricing policies.