

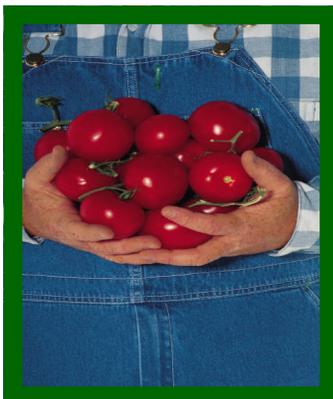
## **Niagara Food: It's Nutritious, Delicious, and Available But We're Not Buying It...Why Not?**

The Niagara Peninsula is home to over 7,000 farms that produce peaches, nuts, plums, cherries, apples, blueberries, and vegetables. This produce is used to create awarding winning wine, cheese, locally crafted jams, jellies, apple cider, and other specialties. Niagara is also a major chicken-producing region in Ontario.<sup>1</sup>

Niagara is also home to 435,000 well-educated, health-conscious consumers who want nutritious, delicious, high quality food at reasonable prices.

Buying produce locally diversifies agriculture and promotes a twelve month market for local products thus helping to sustain year-round agriculture-related employment in Niagara.

So, if we have the food and educated consumers who understand the economic and environmental impact of buying local, why do farmers export a large percentage of their crops out of Niagara?



## Niagara Food: It's Nutritious, Delicious, and Available But We're Not Buying It...Why not?

### ■ What is local?

In the Niagara Region local can be understood as ingredients grown and produced in Niagara while still supporting other parts of Ontario and Canada. Buying local in Niagara means supporting growers, producers, and local businesses in this area.

### ■ Buying local challenges

The main deterrents from purchasing local produce are accessibility and price. Convenience-minded consumers have become accustomed to shopping in large chain grocery stores so rarely purchase from local markets. In addition, people who are buying from the large chains may believe that they are buying locally due to unclear labeling.<sup>2</sup>



Trade agreements and lucrative North American and off-shore markets limit how much grocers can and will provide to people in Niagara. Retailers experience a higher cost to their bottom line when sourcing and handling local versus imported fruit and vegetables.

### ■ Just who are Niagara's consumers?

Niagara's consumers are:

- Highly conscious of nutrition, quality, safety, and price;
- Well educated and focused on foods that will assist them in managing their health and preventing disease;
- Aging and interested in food diversity;



- Not well versed in food preparation techniques;
- Reliant on convenience, one-stop shopping, and prepared or semi-prepared meals;
- Sporadic eaters who eat on the run; and
- Interested in buying local but only if it is convenient, of high quality, and comparable in price to imported food.<sup>3</sup>



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### ■ Do we buy local?

Consumers are becoming interested in local food because it means supporting the local economy and providing a sense of pride in what this region, province, and country have to offer. The importance of taste and freshness as well as environmental concerns have led consumers to consider buying local. However consumers continue to purchase processed, easy to prepare, non-local foods. Busy lifestyles dictate a reliance on large one-stop-shopping grocery chains rather than local farmers' markets.

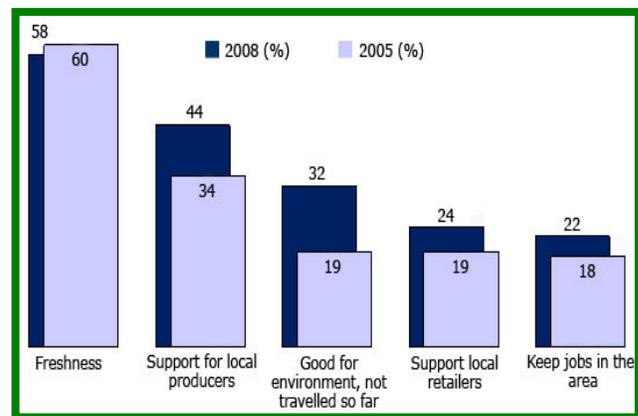


Many factors play a role in local produce being featured in large chain stores. These factors include the limitations of climate, economics, availability, Canadian and foreign public policies, and trade agreements.<sup>4</sup>

### ■ Where does our local food go?

Consumers have an expectation that their grocery stores will maintain a variety of foods all year round. These pressures drive the food economy which ultimately connects all corners of the globe to local food stores. The agri-food system is global in nature. Goods and services are not exclusively obtained from the local area. The Regional Agricultural Economic Impact Study explains that 40% of farms export products outside of Niagara.<sup>5</sup> For example, some greenhouse and horticultural operations obtain many of their inputs (e.g., seeds, bulbs) from Europe, and then distribute their product to various locations in Canada, the United States, and Mexico.<sup>6</sup>

#### Consumers' Reasons for Buying Local



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### ■ What do consumers want?



While consumers recognize the shared role of governments, food manufacturers, supermarkets, and the food service industry, they are becoming more aware of their own personal responsibility in making health-conscious choices. The quality of the food they purchase is also important since consumers often associate freshness and nutrition with food safety.<sup>7</sup>

When looking for quality, consumers concentrate on the actual contents of the food and specific aspects of the product itself. They want food that is healthy, low in calories and fat, and meets specific dietary needs. An increased emphasis is being placed on the consumption of fruits, vegetables, and organic foods.



The *Canadian Food Trends 2020* report suggests that consumers also want to cut down on preparation and cooking time.<sup>8</sup>

As each generation spends a little less time in the kitchen, the passing down of traditional food preparation methods gradually slips away.

As a result, consumers may want limited involvement in the food preparation process, for example, simply adding fresh ingredients to semi-prepared, portion-controlled foods.

Niagara's consumers are also demanding diversity in their food. The Canadian cultural mosaic has stimulated our interest in a variety of herbs and spices, sauces, and fresh produce.

Travel and job mobility has influenced our palates as we incorporate fusion and blended versions into our cuisine.



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### ■ Local food and economic impact

*Buy local* initiatives support local farmers, food markets, and manufacturers thus creating a predictable market for producers in Niagara. A 2008 study by Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation suggests that buying local food encourages consumers to spend their money within the community creating a spillover effect into other sectors of the local economy.<sup>9</sup>

The Niagara Culinary Trail suggests that eating local also allows for interactions between farmers and consumers. This group notes that if the 435,000 residents of Niagara spent just \$10 of their grocery budget on local food each week, there would be a \$226 million influx into the local economy each year.<sup>10</sup>

Purchasing directly from the farmer ensures that money gets into the pockets of the grower.<sup>11</sup> By getting to know the growers the consumer becomes more comfortable discussing farming methods. Ideally, farmers will be less likely to cut corners to drive down prices if they have a relationship with their consumers.

### ■ Local food and environmental impact

A food-mile is the distance travelled between producer and consumer.<sup>12</sup> It is a good measure of environmental impact. If a person consumes a diet comprised of local foods, he or she would consume 17 times less oil and gas than a typical diet based on food shipped across the country.

Food-miles are not the only consideration, when assessing environmental impact.

Consumers can also pay attention to personal travel to and from stores so as to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>13</sup>



Niagara's farmers are also worried about monetary and environmental costs due to transportation. Their concern has led many of them to participate in the Greenbelt Farm Stewardship Program whereby they undergo an environmental assessment of their operations and take action to protect water sources and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

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### ■ What is Niagara currently doing?

Regional Niagara is committed to promoting local food by supporting agriculture through various means such as strong urban area boundary policies meant to preserve agricultural lands and the establishment of the Agricultural Sub-Committee/Agricultural Task Force.

The Region recently launched its Local Food Action Plan (LFAP) to support the production, processing, distribution, and consumption of Niagara products. The Agricultural Task Force will oversee the implementation of this plan in conjunction with specific local food groups.

The LFAP (<http://www.niagararegion.ca/government/initiatives/lfap/Pdf/FinalLocalFoodActionPlan.pdf>) also provides consumers with information about local food products such as how to find, grow, or prepare them, knowing that food consumption is a consumer-driven endeavour that needs to be supported.<sup>14</sup> The supports being suggested include the development of community gardens, urban gardening, resources on how to eat healthy, local food-related festivals and events, and a commitment to buying local products.



Another important initiative is The Niagara Culinary Trail ([www.niagaraculinarytrail.com](http://www.niagaraculinarytrail.com)), a group that supports the development of local food, local food products, and farm-to-table culinary events. It encourages local restaurants to feature dishes that are prepared with local food and works to link agriculture, tourism, and farmers to promote sustainable cuisine by celebrating the joys of local, seasonal, and artisan cooking.<sup>15</sup>

The Niagara Culinary Trail is committed to a healthy greenbelt, launching the “Buy, Eat and Drink Local Challenge” to inform consumers about making better food choices by seeking out local produce every time they grocery shop.

Other community-based networks in Niagara work to provide co-operative product development, marketing, and distribution support to independent Niagara-based growers and processors of specialty foods. These networks have set up resources to educate consumers and provide information on farmers' markets and local food producers.<sup>16</sup>

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Growers are crucial to the development of a diverse and well-supplied local food initiative. There are a variety of techniques used in Niagara that enhance the diversity of local products. For example, Niagara's Trees & Twig Heirloom Vegetable Farm is dedicated to maintaining the diversity of vegetable varieties without the use of pesticides, herbicides, or fungicides.<sup>17</sup>

The Vineland Research and Innovation Centre (VRIC) working with Brock University and Niagara College focuses on enhancing local agriculture through horticultural research. Research and development offers benefits to Niagara growers as they strive to improve the quality and yields of their crops.<sup>18</sup>

Niagara Presents ([www.niagarapresents.net](http://www.niagarapresents.net)) provides co-operative product development, marketing, and distribution support to independent Niagara-based growers and processors of specialty foods. The network behind the development of this company began preserving Niagara's fruits and vegetables in 1997 by assisting home-based processors to market their products through gift baskets.<sup>19</sup>



The Niagara Local Food Co-operative ([www.niagaralocalfoodcoop.ca](http://www.niagaralocalfoodcoop.ca)) is an innovative marketing and distribution system for local farmers, agricultural producers and consumers that is thriving as a virtual farmers' market.<sup>20</sup> Instead of driving to the market on specific days, or driving from farm to farm, consumers order online at their convenience. Every second week they pick up the food they ordered from a central location based upon where they are located in the region.



Brock University and Niagara College are also committed to supporting local food initiatives. Alphonse's Bistro, located at Brock, recognizes the importance of food and agriculture to the Niagara Region with their farm-to-table program.<sup>21</sup> Both educational institutions prepare their menus based on what producers in the Niagara Region and surrounding areas are able to provide.

Niagara College's Culinary Institute encourages student chefs to use fresh herbs from the horticulture school and wine from the Niagara College Teaching Winery. Their menus are based on food grown in the Niagara Region.<sup>22</sup>

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The Good Food Box provides Welland residents with local vegetables and fruits every third Thursday of the month.<sup>23</sup>

Residents sign up ahead of time and choose between two box sizes, small for 1-2 persons and large for a family of four. Locals pick up their fresh produce at various host sites across Welland.

The concept behind the program is that consumers and farmers can benefit by buying locally so this program makes it easier to distribute fresh, inexpensive food through the use of a significant number of volunteers and government grants.

The program also promotes healthy eating by including recipes and instructions on cooking healthy meals. Niagara-grown fruits and vegetables are supplemented with Ontario-grown organic produce for a service that sustains consumers year round.<sup>24</sup>

### ■ What could Niagara do?

Consumers can get a sense of how much local food they are purchasing by looking into their cupboards. They can also begin to read labels consciously and carefully to ensure they are buying food grown in Niagara or other parts of Ontario. The first step might be as simple as buying a bushel of apples from the local farmer.<sup>25</sup>

By sustaining local farmers, consumers provide opportunities for employment in the growing and processing of food. This economic boost extends into other sectors of Niagara's economy. For example, the health and social service sector benefits from the tax dollars that are generated from increased economic activity.<sup>26</sup>



Consumers can also be proactive by asking their local grocery stores to increase the amount of local food that they purchase.<sup>27</sup> In conjunction with this request, they need to think about a commitment to buying this food.

Consumers can educate themselves about the local agricultural economy by visiting farmers' markets where they can meet these local producers and their families creating a sense of community.<sup>28</sup>



*Note: References are available electronically at [www.brocku.ca/nco/pb03](http://www.brocku.ca/nco/pb03)*

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