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# Local Food at Italian Farmers' Markets: Three Case Studies

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**Abstract. Despite the massive industrialization of the world agri-food system and the consequent detachment of food production from its consumption, several studies, conducted in Italy as well as in other European countries and in the United States, have shown growing consumer interest in recent years towards the local attribute of food. In this framework, farmers' markets are perceived increasingly as key institutions in the trend towards a less industrialized agriculture and as vital developers of a strong link between urban consumers and rural food producers. Although a plethora of theoretical and empirical research on farmers' markets can be retrieved in academic literature, important questions still remain concerning the demand and supply of locally produced goods at these forms of direct sale. The current article, presenting the results of consumers' focus group discussions, in-depth interviews with vendors and direct observation at three Italian markets (Montevarchi, Naples and Potenza) provides empirical support that the desire to purchase locally produced food is not high on the list of surveyed shoppers' priorities.**

## Introduction

Over the last century, there has been increasing industrialization of the world agri-food system (Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Senauer and Venturini, 2004) in combination with the constant convergence in food expenditures among high-income countries in the last few decades (Davies and Flemmer, 1995; Regmi et al., 2008). In recent years, however, increasing interest in local food has been observed worldwide. Several studies, conducted in Italy as well as in other European countries and in the United States, have shown growing consumer consideration for local food products (La Trobe, 2001; Boyle, 2003; Morris and Buller, 2003; Ilbery et al., 2005; Stefani et al., 2006; Darby et al., 2008; Brown et al., 2009). Other recent literature provides

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substantial evidence that many consumers are willing to pay premium prices for food characterized as locally produced (Brown, 2003; Giraud et al., 2005).

The market success currently encountered by local food products is due to their inherent ability to respond to modern consumer demand for rediscovering regional and cultural traditions, along with enjoying home-made, authentic food products in place of industrially processed foodstuffs (Fabris, 2003; Henseleit et al., 2007). Moreover, a wide range of benefits are ascribed to food sold to consumers living close to the production area (Brunori and Rossi, 2000; Feenstra, 2002; Guptill and Wilkins, 2002). In addition, it has become progressively more complex for consumers in developed countries, mainly due to small production volumes and poor marketing/distribution capabilities of farmers, to find genuine local food products (Nomisma, 2007).

In this framework, farmers' markets (FMs) are perceived increasingly as key institutions in the trend towards less industrialized agriculture (Weatherell et al., 2003; Hinrichs et al., 2004) and as vital developers of a strong link between urban consumers and rural food producers (Gale, 1997). Undoubtedly, consumer desire to re-establish a bond with local products, alongside other factors, has been an important driver for the incredible renaissance of FMs occurring in the last few years in the United States, United Kingdom and many other Western European countries. Italy, despite being a country with a long tradition of direct agricultural markets, has rediscovered recently an interest in this type of sale.[1] Despite a great deal of attention to FMs in the country's non-academic media, especially in farming, life-style, culinary, and travel magazines as well as in newspapers, television and radio, there is scant specific academic literature. Furthermore, most of the studies in question were completed by historians interested mainly in the cultural and anthropological features of the markets (Montanari, 1994), or by scholars concerned by its normative aspects (Colaneri, 2008; Rossi et al., 2008). Furthermore, attention has often been focused on public markets that cannot be considered fully genuine FMs (such as the Rialto market in Venice, the Porta Palazzo market in Turin and the Central market in Florence).

As described effectively by Feagan et al. (2004), there are two main strands of literature within which FM studies are commonly considered: the analysis and critique of the modern food systems, and those oriented around the discussion of local food systems development. The objective of the current study is to afford an insight into the relation between Italian FMs and local foods, seeking to verify the assumption that the contemporary FM is strongly based on the semantics of local food and new cultures of consumption. Drawing on the work of prominent scholars (e.g. Hinrichs, 2000; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Kirwan, 2004, 2006; Brunori, 2007; Smithers et al., 2008), the research investigates the importance of the local attribute of food in three Italian FMs, relating shopper and vendor data simultaneously. In this particular article, the emphasis is reversed to examine whether the Italian FM phenomenon relies heavily on the *relocalization* of food (Winter, 2003; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006; Brunori, 2007; Feagan, 2007) or encompasses a variety of consumer and farmer motivations. Moreover, the study examines how the empirical outputs accord with previous findings and conjectures in both FM and local food studies.

The work is organized as follows. First, the relation between FMs and local foods is discussed briefly. Second, the methods and results of a qualitative analysis on consumers and vendors of three diverse Italian FMs are presented. Finally, the main implications and major limitations of the results are argued and future research avenues are projected.

**Local Foods and Farmers' Markets**

With increased purchasing power, new consumption possibilities (eating out, tourism, fairs and festivals) and under the pressure of recent food scandals, new consumer food demands have emerged (Carbone, 2003; Romano and Rocchi, 2006). From an almost exclusive focus on product attributes (such as nutritional values, organoleptic characteristics, attributes of shape, size, etc.), there is growing attention nowadays to process attributes (such as links with the local production area, traditional production techniques, the greening of production processes, animal welfare, corporate social responsibility), with consumers becoming constantly more demanding, more critical, and more fragmented in their food choices, leading to situations where quality differentiation of food products proves essential (Grunert, 2005). However, as noted by Ilbery and Kneafsey (2000), quality is a complex and contested concept, whose significance varies according to the socio-cultural context concerned.

In this scenario, interest in local foods has been widely detected in many developed countries, since consumers perceive them as having higher quality standards and as tools for the preservation of traditions and local know-how. Nevertheless, there is an abundance of ways in which the term local food has been defined. As pointed out by Fonte (2008), Holloway et al. (2007) and Goodman (2003), there is a fairly clear distinction between the North American and the European perspectives on local food, the former being based on the principles of social justice and environmental sustainability, the latter focused mainly on incorporating small rural farms and marginal agricultural economies into economic development. In both cases, however, a major problem in examining and estimating market size and share of local foods is that studies tend to define the term *local* in many different ways. While place-based definitions are the most frequent (though there is no clear agreement on an unambiguous limiting distance) other criteria are often used, such as product type (where local food is thought to be fresh produce), production technique (expected to be traditional), farm size (allegedly small and family owned) and recipe (specific to the area). Furthermore, an important distinction has been proposed between local and locality food products as separate attempts to link foods with their place of production, the former referring to foods produced and consumed within a certain (short) distance, the second related to products from further away but with an identifiable geographical provenance (Ilbery and Maye, 2005). In addition, as some scholars have observed, studies have emerged primarily from the fields of rural sociology and geography, with modest contributions made by consumer research

(Tregear and Ness, 2005). Besides, most of the existing research is related to specific case-studies and does not provide abundant empirical data on the numbers of farms and consumers involved (Marsden, 2004; Ilbery and Maye, 2006; Venn et al., 2006). Table 1 summarizes the most recent contributions to the topic.

Furthermore, while a profusion of research on FMs can be found in the USA and Canada, quite surprisingly, limited economic literature is available on European FMs, which is also mostly recent. Broadly examining the numerous recent studies on FMs in North America (for an extensive inventory of FM growth and development in the US, see Brown, 2002), we note that scholars have mainly focused on two topics: socio-anthropological issues of FMs (Hinrichs, 2000; Guthman, 2002; Allen et al., 2003) and economic issues, investigated primarily through descriptive consumer and/or vendor data, with clear marketing purposes. The latter studies have involved surveys identifying shopper characteristics and purchasing habits (Govindasamy et al., 2002; Wolf et al., 2005; Onianwa et al., 2006), exploring the linkage between consumers' motivations for patronage and their beliefs concerning local food (Feagan et al., 2004; Smithers et al., 2008), and analysing farmers' motivations (Griffin and Frongillo, 2003). By contrast, most of the studies found in the European literature have focused on different subjects: exploring alternative food networks (Sage, 2003; Winter, 2003; Watts et al., 2005; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006; Brunori, 2007), revealing the diverse potential benefits of local food systems and short supply chains (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Marsden et al., 2000; Verhaegen and Van Huylenbroeck, 2001; Renting et al., 2003) and enlightening the social aspects of FMs (Kirwan, 2004, 2006). Despite the portrayed abundance of theoretical and empirical works, important questions still remain concerning the demand and supply of locally produced goods at FMs.

The current work sets out to provide some empirical contextualization and evidence for conceptualizing the relation between FMs and local foods. Furthermore, while previous studies have demonstrated that there appear to exist both social and economic reasons for increased market participation by consumers and vendors, this article shows clearly that local origin is not a major issue for the surveyed shoppers and stall operators.[2] On the basis of the analysis undertaken, the contemporary Italian FM does not appear to encompass many of the presumed characteristics and concerns reflected in the literature and in public discussion. This outcome is especially relevant given the abundance of discourses concerning the current role of FMs in re-spatializing food in contradistinction to the conventional, globalizing food system.

## Methods

Three strategies were employed to explore the relation between local food and Italian FMs: observational inspections of the markets, focus groups of shoppers, and semi-structured interviews with vendors (drawing on Kirwan, 2006). Additional details on the methodology are presented here.[3] Qualitative analysis of FMs in central-southern Italy led to selecting the markets of Montevarchi (known as Mercatale del

**Table 1**. Synopsis of some recent empirical studies on local foods.

| Study | Sample | Method | Main Results | Observations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Guptill and Wilkins (2002) | Seven representatives of grocery stores in a New York county | Open-ended interviews | Most of the interviewees stated that locally grown or produced foods are important to their customers and their organizations. | Authors suggest that the marginalization of conventional grocery stores signals a new opportunity for integrative collaborative relationships. |
| Weatherell et al. (2003) | Urban and rural residents of UK | Six focus group discussions and 734 face-to-face interviews | Found a homogeneous group of people who stated great interest in buying local foods. This group rated other factors more significant than origin. | Product intrinsic factors and moral and health concerns appear more important than origin. Many consumers chose supermarkets as their first choice for local foods. |
| Winter (2003) | 736 residents from five regions in England and Wales | Face-to-face interviews | Reasons to purchase local food were related to supporting local farmers and the local economy, freshness and known origin. | The author raises important questions related to associating either the turn to quality or the turn to localism as the first steps to an alternative food economy. |
| Tregear and Ness (2005) | 734 English consumers | Focus groups and face-to-face interviews | Attitudinal factors tend to explain variations in local food interest better than demographic factors. | Results are ambiguous concerning the stronger association between local foods interest and ethical/ecological features over pragmatic or product intrinsic features. |
| Ilbery and Maye (2006) | 42 retail enterprises in the Scottish-English borders | Interviews | An increasing consumer demand producing commercial interest in local food and a commitment to improving local routes to the retail market. | Surveyed retailers revealed no single consensual definition of local food. |
| Roininen et al. (2006) | 55 Finnish consumers | Word association interviews and laddering interviews | Locally produced food was considered to support the local economy, was related to short transport distance, freshness and trustworthiness of its origin. | Both association and laddering methods gave similar descriptions of local foods. |
| Darby et al. (2008) | 530 shoppers at 17 Ohio (USA) locations | Conjoint analysis from face-to-face interviews data | Consumer demand does indeed exist for locally produced foods and this demand is independent of other attributes. | The study concentrates on a single way of describing local production (specifically state origin). |
| Smithers et al. (2008) | 15 FMs in Ontario (Canada), 237 respondents | Inferential statistics on direct interviews | Customers wish to support farmers and producers (preferably local) through the expenditure of at least some fraction of their total food dollar. | The notion of local emerged as uniformly desirable in principle, but variable in its importance as a food quality. |
| Fonte (2008) | 10 European countries | In-depth case studies | Examining the dynamics of knowledge in the valorization of local food identifies two perspectives on local food networks: reconnection perspective and origin of food perspective. | Different agri-food contexts strongly influence the forms of local food networks. |

Valdarno), Naples and Potenza as models of reference for their respective geographical areas. These three markets capture a wide range of agricultural, economic and cultural contexts and also different histories of FM development.

While a fair number of FMs are now found throughout Italy, the markets considered in the current study stand out for several factors: strict definition of saleable products, year-round operation, number of farmers involved, total turn-over and integration into the local economy. At the same time, these markets represent profoundly different types of FMs: a metropolitan market (Naples), a town market (Montevarchi) and a city market with a strong agricultural background (Potenza). Besides, each market has its own operational system, its particular management organization and policy. Indeed, rural area FMs were not taken into consideration at all since their importance in the Italian food sector appears quite meager, mainly due to the strong links still existing between farmers and rural residents (Fonte, 2008). The three FMs were visited several times to observe the amount and type of foods sold, vendor participation, market attendance, operational mechanisms and product prices. To broadly assess economic convenience for consumers who purchased at the three markets, the average price per kilogram of a basket of 15 food products sold at the FMs was recorded and compared with those directly recorded at modern distribution sales points (supermarkets or hypermarkets) surrounding the markets.

As previous studies have indicated (Krueger, 1988; Kuznesof et al., 1997; Chambers et al., 2007; Luomala, 2007), focus groups are particularly appropriate for understanding food choices, due to their ability to encourage participants to explain themselves and interact with others, as well as being flexible, fluid and contextual. Six focus groups, two for each FM, with a total of 37 respondents were held between August 2008 and September 2009. Participants were recruited at the markets, and were screened so as to include only those individuals with at least partial responsibility for food purchases in the household, and with no direct personal involvement in farming. The Montevarchi groups consisted of seven and six participants, the Naples groups of seven and five and the Potenza groups of six participants. The participants comprised 19 women and 18 men, whose ages varied between 21 and 77 years of age (see Table 3 for further details). Prior to holding the actual focus groups, pilot test interviews with consumers (n=6) were conducted at the three markets to ensure that the analysed themes were easily understandable by the respondents.

The focus groups were held in the afternoons of market days; recruitment was carried out at the markets and the randomly[4] selected respondents were residents of their respective localities. A brief questionnaire with demographic information was administered before each focus group was held (see Table 2). To ensure consistency, every group was moderated by the same interviewer; the average length of the focus group discussions was 60 minutes; all discussions were recorded and transcribed.

The discussions addressed three core topics:

- main reasons for people to shop at the FM;
- general interest in buying local foods;
- role of the FM as a good source/the only source for local foods.

**Table 2**. Main features of the markets.

| Farmers' Market | Year of establishment | Frequency | Location | Number of vendors | Products sold |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Montevarchi | 2005 | Once a month | Town centre | around 50 | Fruit, vegetables, wine, oil, cured meats, cheeses, fish, bread and bakery goods, preserves, honey, soaps. |
| Naples | 2007 | Twice a month | City centre | around 30 | Fruit, vegetables, wine, oil, cheeses, chocolate, preserves and honey. |
| Potenza | 2007 | Three times a week | City outskirts | around 15 | Fruit, vegetables, preserves and honey. |

In general, participants were very informative in their views on the above themes, although in the Potenza groups the discussions were less varied and rich in ideas.

It is important to point out that, due to the limited number of respondents, the conclusions that can be drawn from the qualitative analysis developed in the current article cannot, obviously, be representative of the entire Italian population.

To better frame the investigated issues, following the focus groups, direct semi-structured interviews were administered with farmers selling at the markets. All interviews were audio recorded for transcription and supplemented with hand-written notes. Since the opportunities for engagement with vendors were more difficult to negotiate, the interviews were carried out over several days, either at the FM or on-site. In all, the final sample consisted of 16 randomly selected food vendors from the Montevarchi FM (8) and the Naples FM (8),[5] all of whom were selling only their own products. The effective duration of vendor interviews was generally 20–30 minutes. An interview guide was developed[6] to ensure that certain questions were covered during the interview.

Specifically, we asked the farmers:

- if they considered the food sold at the FM as local;
- their opinion on consumer concern towards local foods;
- their opinion on FM development in the Italian food system;
- general information on annual turn-over, amount of products sold at the FMs and farm size.

To investigate the producers' belief in the development of farmers' markets in the Italian food system, respondents were presented with four statements and were asked to rate their agreement on a five-point Likert scale. Finally, it is important to note that the empirical research from which this article draws was undertaken between 2008 and 2009, during the economic recession. In other words, the respondents in the current study were likely to be very concerned about their household food expenditures.

While the findings of this study highlight several significant variables, some limitations should be stressed. Specifically, the small sample size and limited coverage area warrant great caution when extending the results to other geographic areas. Despite such limitations, the results may be useful for vendors to increase the profitability of their operations and improve policy-makers' strategies and actions. The main findings are reported below.

## Results

*FM Observations*

In Italy direct selling by farmers was established under Article 4 of Legislative Decree 228 of 18 May 2001, which is still in force. This opportunity for farmers was reinforced by Art. 1, paragraph 1065, of the 2007 Finance Act: 'to promote the development of markets with direct sale from farmers, by decree of the Minister for Food and Agricultural and Forest Policies'. Nevertheless, in Italy there is no official regulation of the characteristics for a FM, nor is there (as in other European countries) a national association that sets common rules concerning the maximum distance of producers/growers from the market and type of foods allowed. Each FM has its own specific principles.[7]

The Mercatale del Valdarno is an FM held in the town of Montevarchi,[8] in the province of Arezzo in Tuscany, on the second Saturday of every month for direct sale by growers or foodstuff producers. Mercatale is the result of a collective project that involves public and private companies and associations, local authorities and area entrepreneurs. The market started in June 2005 and is an integral part of the Mercati della Terra project launched by the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity.

The Naples[9] FM is held bi-monthly (every first and third Sunday) in the Villa Comunale Park in the city centre. It was established by the local Coldiretti[10] at the beginning of 2007 and currently comprises around 30 farmers and growers from the provinces of Naples and Salerno (a south-bordering Province), selling fruit, vegetables, extra virgin olive oil, honey, jams, wine and baked goods. The FM in Potenza,[11] the regional capital of Basilicata, was set up by the provincial Coldiretti at the end of 2007 and has been particularly successful. The market takes place in a building


**Figure 1**. Location of the examined farmers' markets.

resembling a normal grocery store three days a week (Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays); operating hours are 8.30AM to 7.30PM. All products sold in the market (vegetables, fruit and honey) come exclusively from farms in the region of Basilicata, and all the producers/growers operate in the Agro Metapontino area.[12] Although retail activity is delegated to Coldiretti employees, since there are no farmers selling directly at the Potenza market, the management and organization are typical of an FM.

To broadly assess the economic convenience for consumers who purchased at the three markets, prices of a basket of 15 food products sold at the FMs were recorded[13] and compared with those at modern distribution sales points surrounding the markets.[14]

As shown in Figure 2, average prices at FMs were always lower than those of supermarkets, with considerable savings for shoppers, in particular at the Naples FM (40% lower).

*Consumers*

Considering the totality of respondents (13 from the Montevarchi FM, 12 from Naples, and 12 from Potenza), women accounted for a larger fraction of the sample (57%) than men (43%). In terms of age, shoppers were mainly over 56 years of age (64%), with respondents between 36 and 55 accounting for 22%; the remaining 14% were younger shoppers (under 35 years of age). While 46% of the respondents had a

**Table 3**. Demographics of respondents.

| | Gender | Age | Education | Annual income |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Montevarchi | Female: 54% | 46–55: 31% | High school diploma: 46% | € 20 000–40 000: 46% |
| (number of | Male: 46% | 56–65: 23% | Bachelor's: 39% | € 40 000–50 000: 23% |
| respondents: | | 36–45: 23% | Master's/PhD: 15% | € 10 000–20 000: 15% |
| n: 6+7) | | 25–35: 15% | | > € 50 000: 8% |
| | | < 25: 8% | | < € 10 000: 8% |
| Naples (n: 7+5) | Female: 67% | > 65: 50% | Bachelor's: 50% | € 10 000–20 000: 50% |
| | Male: 33% | 56–65: 25% | High school diploma: 25% | € 20 000–40 000: 33% |
| | | 25–35: 17% | Master's/PhD: 25% | > € 50 000: 17% |
| | | 46–55: 8% | | |
| Potenza (n: 6+6) | Female: 50% | 56–65: 50% | High school diploma: 83% | € 10 000–20 000: 67% |
| | Male: 50% | > 65: 50% | Middle school diploma: 17% | < € 10 000: 33% |

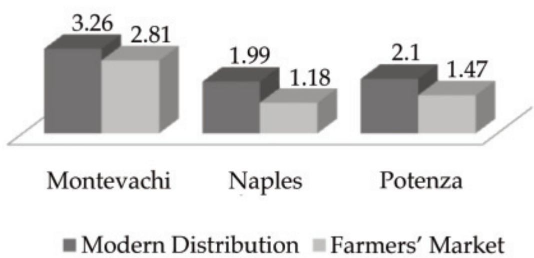


**Figure 2**. Average price per product at the farmers' markets and modern distribution sales point.

high school diploma, 30% had a Bachelor's degree, 13% a Master's degree or Ph.D., and 11% had completed middle school.

The prevailing annual income range was € 10 000–20 000 (43%), followed by € 20 000–40 000 (27%); 14% of respondents stated they earned less than € 10 000 per year, while the two classes of € 40 000–50 000 and over € 50 000 each accounted for 8%.

Significant differences can be distinguished in market demographics: Montevarchi and Naples FMs were attended by a larger number of consumers with higher annual incomes and a high education level, while the Potenza FM was chiefly patronized by those with low incomes and a low/medium education level (see Table 2).

The main findings of the six focus groups are summarized below together with the most explanatory statements (the specific source in parentheses). Clearly, the results of this study are limited in terms of breadth: based on only 37 respondents, representativeness is far from being achieved.

*Main reasons for shopping at an FM*

Respondents from the three FMs stated a number of different reasons to explain their participation in the markets. That said, we can observe that consumers of Naples and Potenza FMs tended to indicate price as their top motivation, while Montevarchi FM respondents rated the local factor as their main incentive to shop. These outcomes are not so surprising given the broad dissimilarities between the average annual incomes of the three markets' customers. Other important reasons, for patrons of Montevarchi and Naples FMs, were the quality and freshness of the food products. Our results corroborate previous studies indicating that FM customers are attracted to this form of direct trade for a complex mix of reasons (Hinrichs, 2000; Griffin and Frongillo, 2003; Feagan et al., 2004; Wolf et al., 2005; Onianwa et al., 2006).

> 'The main reason I buy at the market is because the products are all local; besides, many of them are impossible to find anywhere else' (38-year-old male, Montevarchi FM).

> 'Previously, I supported the FM because of the general good quality of the products; now my prime reason is local origin and traditional production methods' (49-year-old male, Montevarchi FM).

> 'I like the market because I find fresh fruit and vegetables at very competitive prices. Moreover, I can actually talk to the farmers and establish a sort of relationship with them' (61-year-old female, Naples FM).

> 'The market has become an important source for grocery shopping: it is cheap, conveniently located and the food is always fresh and savoury' (57-year-old female, Naples FM).

> 'The main reason I come to the market is because the prices are far lower than those at supermarkets and traditional fruit and vegetable stores, even if the overall quality of the food is not always consistent' (66-year-old male, Potenza FM).

*General interest in buying local foods*
At the Montevarchi and Naples FMs, there were clear signals of renewed consumer interest to buy local products. However, the incentives behind this desire differed greatly: in the former FM, respondents were generally interested in developing the community where they lived and in supporting local farms (which they felt to be in economic decline); in the latter FM, people approached local foods for the greater quantity of information available about the production system and farm location. By contrast, consumers at the Potenza FM showed extremely little concern for local foods. These findings amply illustrate that the relationships between food supply process/farming community concerns and interest in local foods are somewhat multifaceted and complex (see also Tregear and Ness, 2005).

> 'Buying at the market makes me feel I am supporting local farms and (broadly) the entire community' (29-year-old female, Montevarchi FM).
>
> 'I actually never asked myself where the food I bought came from. Now [buying at the FM] I am glad to know the origin of food and even more pleased to know that it comes from my region' (71-year-old female, Naples FM).
>
> 'After recent problems [food scandals], I am much more concerned about the origin of foods… The market is a form of insurance that I am buying good products from reliable people' (34-year-old female, Naples FM).
>
> 'I am not concerned whether the food comes from Basilicata, Puglia, Morocco or New Zealand; I am worried I can no longer buy the products I want as prices are continually rising' (72-year-old female, Potenza FM).

*The role of FM as a source for local foods*
In general, consumers of Montevarchi and Naples FMs were very pleased by the abundance of local products found and their overall high quality. Shoppers at these FMs also expressed strong appreciation for the amount of traditional, regional products available at the markets. Consumers at Potenza showed that they did not perceive the FM as an unambiguous source of local foods. However, all focus-group participants stated a common dissatisfaction with modern distribution outlet policies to cater for an extremely limited range of local foods and traditional specialties, demonstrating simultaneously a favourable disposition towards buying foods through short distribution channels. In addition, the focus groups confirm previous studies that state the difficulties locating such products in urban/metropolitan grocery stores (Fabris, 2003).

> 'I support the market because it is a source of local foods that are rapidly disappearing… They taste better and are much fresher' (44-year-old female, Montevarchi FM).
>
> 'Thanks to the market I have discovered some incredible local products, such as Tarese cured meat and Abbucciato Aretino cheese' (48-year-old male, Montevarchi FM).

> 'Most of the products I buy at the market are not available elsewhere in the city, because they are typical or traditional local/regional foods' (70-year-old male, Naples FM).

*Vendors*

Eleven of the 16 interviewed vendors (12 men and four women) were fruit and vegetable growers, three were cheese-makers, one was a cured-meat manufacturer and one was a honey producer. Fourteen farmers had inadequate production volumes to meet the requirements of supermarkets and wholesalers. The vast majority of the respondents (11) were over 45 years of age, three farmers were older than 60, while only two respondents were under 30 years of age. The entire sample worked full time on the farm during the growing season. Average farm size was 2.5 ha, and vendors' mean annual turn-over was slightly under € 34 000.

All the vendors defined the products sold at the FM as local foods. However, despite agreeing on a geography-based definition (the distance between producer and market), there was no clear conformity on a limiting distance. Four farmers considered the Province as the boundary; two respondents assumed the Region as the optimal perimeter; two others believed that food products sourced from wider areas (such as central or southern Italy) could be reasonably termed *local*. These results come as no surprise since, as previously described, a wide variety of definitions can also be found in the academic literature and in the professional sphere.

Only two vendors considered local food as the main reason for consumer support for the markets; nine farmers stated that the quality of products was the customer's principal motivation; three cited freshness and two low prices. Nonetheless, most of the farmers (11) noticed growing consumer concern toward the food source, expressed mainly through a higher demand for information on farm location and history. Most of the same vendors (9) also stated that they recently decided to increase the amounts of typical products grown/manufactured, sensing renewed interest and curiosity in the FM visitors. As clearly shown in Figure 3, the majority of respondents expressed a neutral or positive attitude towards the increase in FM number and their importance for small entrepreneurs, while interviewees were much more skeptical about the possibility of FMs becoming an important source for consumers' everyday grocery shopping and the possibility of receiving public support in the near future.

The following points emerged from the interviews with farmers:

- the quantity of products sold at the FM was steadily increasing over time;
- there was a general impression that the FM could be a first step toward a rise in direct food selling;
- a widespread sense of community appreciation for their work;
- a growing willingness to upgrade and develop more effective forms of collaboration among vendors and with local consumer associations, local non-profit organizations and other organizations to strengthen local food marketing;

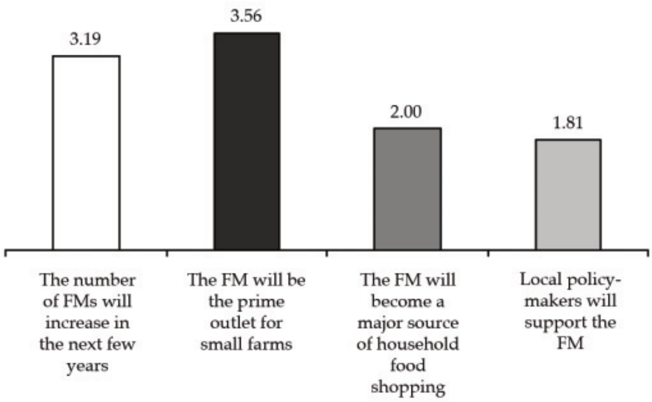


**Figure 3**. Vendors' average agreement rate (1=very low, 5=very high).

- the need to find continuously innovative and original ways to reach the final consumer and to successfully market their products.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The results of consumers' focus-group discussions, interviews with vendors and direct observations afforded a number of key insights into Italian farmers' markets. Although the three markets in question offered food products that were grown or farmed in a narrow, well-defined geographical area in addition to a considerable number of regional, traditional foods, findings provide empirical support that the desire to purchase locally produced food is not high on the list of surveyed shoppers' priorities.[15] Indeed, as reported elsewhere in the literature (Kezis et al., 1998; La Trobe, 2001; Wolf et al., 2005; Smithers et al., 2008), a large share of consumers stated that they patronized the markets mainly due to price, freshness and quality of the products; these attributes appear also quite conjoined. By contrast, consistent with other studies (Weatherell et al., 2003), only a minority of consumers considered local food as the main market feature, thereby disproving the rhetoric of promotional communications that emphasize the relationship between FMs and local food, and corroborating, once again, the hypothesis that pragmatic needs and ethical/civic factors often overlap and coexist (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Weatherell et al., 2003; Darby et al., 2008). In addition, upon analysing the three markets significant differences were revealed in terms of customers' concern for local foods and general motivations to attend the FMs. Nevertheless, some results can be explained by the considerable dissimilarity in shoppers' demographics: more educated, high-income customers at the Montevarchi FM revealed more attention to local foods. This was reinforced by their desire to support the local community and reconnect with their culinary roots. Montevarchi consumers also demonstrated great awareness of the vast array of local and traditional products in their area. This distinction also relies on the specific characteristics of the promoters: in the case of Montevarchi, a non-profit organization involved in biodiversity conservation, in the other two cases a farmers' association.

However, some elements suggest that an alternative reason could be that, after a period of time, the FM shopper starts to shift the focus from product price and quality to location of the farmer/grower, production methods and typicality of the food. This phenomenon could be termed a learning process, in which the consumer slowly lends greater importance to the local origin of foods, taking other intrinsic product characteristics for granted, assured by her/his previous experience at the FM. Although there is no record of these changes over time, there is a fair amount of substantiation from statements by consumers and vendors that as shoppers become more committed to the market and develop more complex beliefs about local agriculture, their motives appear to become more ethically and ecologically based. Moreover, some findings, especially those from Montevarchi and Naples FMs, suggest that consumers are more attracted by the typical attribute of food instead of its local characteristic. The results of the focus-group discussions were also corroborated by vendors' interviews: only two of the 16 farmers considered local food as the main reason for consumer participation at the FMs, pointing to quality, freshness and low prices as the most significant incentives. On the other hand, most of the vendors noted growing consumer concern for food origin, which even lead many of them to decide to increase the quantity of typical products grown/handcrafted.

Our findings undoubtedly require further analysis and contextualization in a wider scenario. However, the three case-studies confirm that, although *local* has become the new mantra (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005), practical and socio-cultural dimensions still direct shoppers' choices, raising interesting questions on the role of Italian FMs in the widely debated trend in alternative food networks (Gilg and Battershill, 1998; Allen et al., 2003; Watts et al., 2005; Holloway et al., 2006; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006; Venn et al., 2006).

Limitations of the current work are related to the intrinsic problems of focus groups, such as dominating personalities affecting the discussion, reserved individuals not expressing their opinions and a certain physiological degree of observer dependency. Additionally, the explored sample is limited in terms of number of FMs and respondents, which are not statistically representative of the Italian population. A quantitative analysis would have given the final results more general significance. Besides, the FM customer cannot be considered the standard Italian consumer, being, most likely, more inquisitive about the manner in which food is produced and more willing to support small-scale and local family farms over large-scale enterprises. Moreover, findings cannot be generalized since, as earlier studies have shown, there are considerable differences between rural and urban consumers with regard to local preferences (Weatherell et al., 2003) and also regarding demographic characteristics of frequenters of farmers' markets (Wolf et al., 2005). Therefore further research should include citizens interviewed in different food-shopping locations (supermarkets, grocery stores, etc.) and gather a representative sample of the national population. Nonetheless, the present study offers some contribution to a limited national literature on the subject and suggests new research avenues.

## Notes

1. In 2007, 57 530 Italian farms engaged in direct sales (6.1% of national total), an increase of 18% over 2005 and 48% over 2001; sales were estimated at €2.5 billion, 4.1% higher than the previous year (Coldiretti and Agri2000, 2008).
2. With the caveat that, although the sample includes respondents with a wide variety of socio-demographic backgrounds, findings strictly refer to the sample and are therefore not extendable.
3. Since there is a dearth of reliable secondary data on Italian FMs no external source of information was used.
4. As an exploratory study, a random sample was considered appropriate (Tregear et al., 1998), in particular for the focus group methodology (Kirwan, 2006). People were approached randomly after purchasing at one of the stalls. Approximately, the overall response rate was 5%.
5. At the Potenza FM the vendors do not attend the market.
6. The guide was drawn up after analysis of previous studies, test interviews with vendors (n=2, not included in is article) and discussions with market managers.
7. Only the Slow Food Foundation Mercati della Terra project sets common basic standards for its six Italian FMs.
8. Montevarchi has a population of 23 495, while the total population in the province of Arezzo is 342 367 (ISTAT, 2009).
9. Naples has a population of 973 132 (ISTAT, 2009).
10. Coldiretti is the largest organization of farmers in Italy, numbering over 568 000 member farms.
11. Potenza has 68 013 inhabitants (ISTAT, 2009).
12. The main towns are Bernalda, Pisticci, Scanzano Jonico, Montalbano Jonico, Policoro, Tursi, Nova Siri, Rotondella, Valsinni, Colobraro and San Giorgio Lucano.
13. The average price was calculated from per kilogram prices of conventional garlic, carrots, cauliflower, yellow onions, snow beans, fennel, lettuce, lemons, long eggplant, potatoes, peppers, pears, tomatoes, plums and zucchini recorded during three visits to each FM. Other products, due to their specificity, were not taken into account in the final computation (such as organic vegetables and fruits, or traditional cheeses and cured meats).
14. In Italy, according to ACNielsen-ISMEA (2006), modern distribution chains account for 77% of total national food household shopping. The largest supermarkets in close proximity to each FM, namely the Coop supermarket in Montevarchi, GS in Naples and IperFutura in Potenza, were visited on the same days as FM operations.

15 Probably also because in Italy there is still a strong link with the tradition of regional agriculture (see Fonte, 2008).

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