

Deep Dish #3:
Buy Local: More Than Just a Trend
By Rebecca Clarke

The call to 'buy local' has become more prevalent in recent years due to the important role small and medium-size businesses play in strengthening the local economy, reducing emissions from transportation, and building community bonds (1). However, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic this call has become louder than ever before.

The Conference Board of Canada's Centre for Food in Canada defines local food as food that is consumed as close as possible to where it is produced, taking into account regional differences in seasonality and availability (8). Buying this type of food has advantages for the economy, the environment and society. Economic benefits include keeping money within the community, supporting local farmers and creating jobs. Buying local is also good for the environment as it reduces the number of miles that the food has to travel to before it is bought (2). Additionally, it promotes accountability, as the consumer is more aware of where their food is coming from and how it is being produced, which can encourage farmers to use more sustainable agricultural practices (2). The way local food can bring communities together and foster a sense of belonging and togetherness also has social and cultural benefits (2).

Although consumers have been made more aware of the benefits of buying local food in recent years, the number of 'buy local' campaigns, government initiatives, chamber of commerce programs and signs placed throughout communities has drastically increased with the onset of COVID-19 (3). The pandemic has definitely had an adverse effect on small and medium-size business owners and their employees in Ontario (7).

Interview Insight: An owner of a coffee, tea and candy supply chain explained that the first 4-5 weeks of the pandemic were very stressful because their customer volume drastically decreased and therefore had to decrease employee hours by about 50%.

Any support that consumers can provide small businesses during these challenging times could allow them to stay open and keep their staff employed. Many of the 'buy local' campaigns aim to motivate people to support local small businesses by placing online orders, purchasing gift cards to use at a later date, ordering delivery or takeout from restaurants and leaving positive reviews on business' social media pages (4).

Interview Insight: The owner of an artisanal bakery in London stated that the pandemic led them to introduce a local delivery business that caters to people in the surrounding neighbourhood.

It would seem that the effort to get Canadians to spend their money locally has had a degree of success. A key finding from a survey created by Leger in April was that Canadians are buying local products more often or for the first time (5). Additionally, a poll from American Express Canada indicated that in June, 83% of participants agreed that it was time to support the small business community and 76% stated that they were determined to shop more locally than in the past (3).

Interview Insight: The owner of a small grocery store explained how lucky they felt that they had such a loyal and understanding customer base that has supported their business throughout the pandemic. Their newly created delivery service has been in such a demand that they hired two new staff members.

However, it is also a reality that the pandemic has caused many people to lose their jobs. This has made it more difficult for people to focus on shopping for their food locally, rather than trying to find the best deals (6). Previous senior economist with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Armine Yalnizyan, states, “Everybody is trying to find a deal because they don’t know how long their money is going to last” (3). Therefore, although many people might have good intentions when it comes to shopping locally, they might not be able to put these intentions into action.

Interview Insight: A restaurant owner in Elgin County, expressed that from their view, a way to make sure that small restaurants are not forced out by large food giants, partnerships between tech companies, restaurants, and delivery services should be formed locally.

Overall, small, locally owned businesses in the food retail sector are the heart and soul of communities. If popular local businesses are to survive this pandemic, Canadian consumers should refocus their efforts to ‘buy local’ from small and medium-size businesses.

References

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