Don’t Fall For It: Ex Whole Foods Exec Calls Out ‘Locally Grown’ Marketing Claims

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Many Americans favor locally sourced foods because they’re environmentally friendly and ‘green.’ Plus, they mean you support your local community and farmers.

Whole Foods is popular with local food fans, and maybe you assumed that the ‘local’ products you’ve purchased there came from within 100

miles of the store. Or at least they're from your region, right?

Unfortunately, that may not be the case.

Sometimes, 'Local' Is a Marketing Ploy

Purchasing foods grown close to where you live helps minimize the greenhouse gas emissions created by food system trucks and other forms of transportation. But Whole Foods has been revealed to have marketed non-local foods as local, misleading its customers.

As reported in The Guardian, Errol Schweizer, a former Whole Foods executive, outed the company for inappropriate use of the local label. He explains, "Every retailer has a different definition [of 'local']. Even the retailers themselves will have different definitions, depending on where they are, and the original purpose of localization has totally gotten lost."

According to Schweizer, sometimes the "local" food label is simply "a marketing gimmick." We've all seen how much buzz buying local gets in the media and on social media, influencing our preferences.

Take a non-dairy yogurt labeled as locally sourced and sold at Whole Foods stores in Oakland, California, for example. Made from cashews, you'd assume that the nuts used to make this product were grown in California. Instead, they're imported all the way from Vietnam. Schweizer explains Whole Foods has used the fact that companies are based in California as a premise for the claim that their products are "local."

Whole Foods isn't the only retail outlet alleged to be misleading customers. The growing popularity of green options and staying local with our buying and eating has led other retailers to hitch their wagons to the "locally sourced" train.

Local Label Justifies Higher Prices

In 2021, the Statistica Research Department reported that 95% of single urban households in the United States were willing to pay higher prices

for locally sourced food. Significantly, 96% of Americans believed that food labeled as local was grown within 100 miles of where they purchase it.

The fact that they believe that local foods are fresher was the most common reason for the willingness to pay more.

However, there are other benefits to buying local. Home cooks and chefs alike recognize that local food has better flavor. Furthermore, experts say that local food is more nutrient-rich. As Rita Klavinski explains for the Michigan State University, the fact that truly local food ends up on your table much sooner after harvest means that it is fresher and still contains all of its original nutrients.

In many cases, your local farmers’ market is the perfect place to find truly locally sourced food. However, even in those settings, you should research each individual vendor. As reported in The Guardian, like Whole Foods, farmers market vendors understand the marketing value of the “local” label. You will want to verify the produce you’re buying really is locally sourced.

Don’t Fall For Greenwashing

Whole Foods falsely using the ‘local’ label as a marketing strategy is just one example of the greenwashing we so often see in marketing today. If you’re serious about enjoying the benefits of locally sourced produce, dairy, and meat, do your research and make sure that what you’re being told is true.

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