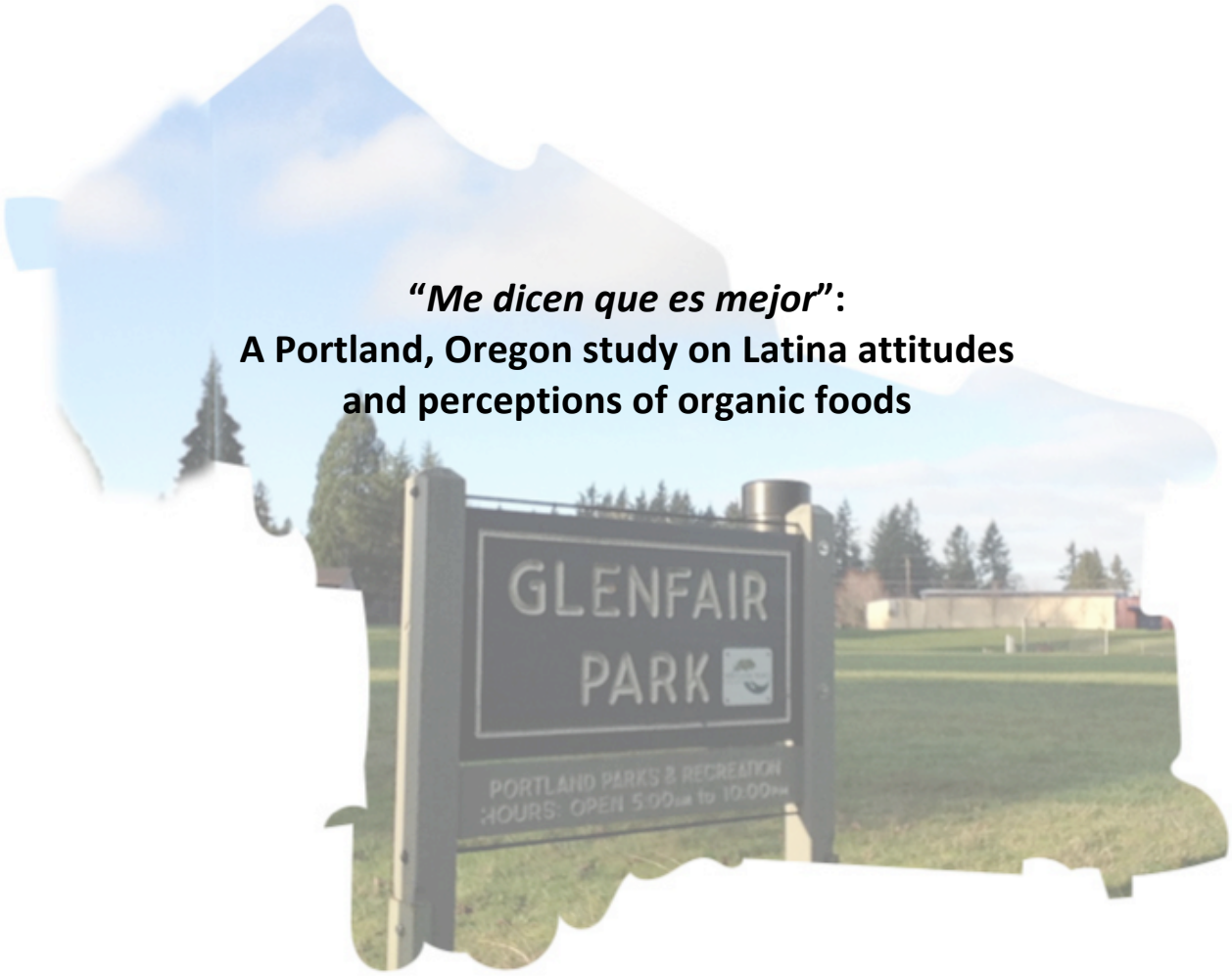
"*Me dicen que es mejor*": A Portland, Oregon study on Latina attitudes and perceptions of organic foods



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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates how Latina women perceive organic foods and what values they associate with organic foods. A clearer understanding of how organic foods are perceived may help answer bigger questions of what drives consumption, as well as how to approach organic education and outreach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the Glenfair neighborhood in Portland, Oregon. Key findings indicate that organic foods are perceived positively, though there is skepticism and mistrust around the organic label and questioning of the "betterness" of organic foods. Potential for education and outreach through Hispanic goods stores and other areas are examined.

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates how Latina women perceive organic foods and what qualities or values they associate with organic foods. It is important for both an understanding of Latino consumers and also to establish meaningful research data to begin examining the very basic question of how organic foods are perceived by the Latino community. This research can help inform marketing and outreach by growers, retailers and community organizations seeking to engage the Latino population around increasing organic food consumption.

Latinos have lately been the subjects of considerable research related to organic foods. This interest has generally centered on purchasing trends, that is, how Latinos consume rather than why (Cortes et al. 2013; Nielsen 2013). Although there are studies that investigate the values and driving factors behind organic foods purchasing (Dettman and Dimitri, 2009; Hughner et al. 2007; Raab and Grobe 2005), these studies have not explicitly focused on the Latino population. Moreover, there are few studies that examine associations or values and it remains an understudied area (Onyango et al. 2007). By establishing a clearer understanding of "organic," specifically among Latino consumers, we may be able to get at bigger questions of what does or doesn't drive consumption.

BACKGROUND

The organic market

As the fastest-growing segment of the US population and with an estimated $1.2 trillion dollars in purchasing power, Latinos represent a rich potential market for the growing organic food sector. Organic foods now represent a $35 billion market and are forecasted to continue double-digit growth over the next several years (Nielsen 2013). US food companies however, have paid little attention to the Latino market (Bernstein Research 2011) and the organic industry is no exception. There seems to be a general attitude among organic growers that Latinos are unwilling to purchase organic foods (Alkon and McCullen 2011), yet recent marketing studies have found that, in fact, the opposite is true. Latinos are consistently found to be the US minority group most likely to purchase organic (Li, Zepeda and Gould 2007; Dimitri and Oberholtzer 2009; Smith, Chung and Biing 2009; Dimitri anad Dettman, 2012).

One of the biggest challenges currently facing organic foods, however, is consumer confusion around the term. Variations among third-party certifiers and labeling further contribute to consumer confusion. The Natural Food Merchandiser reports that the organic label is one of the most confusing and little-understood labels among consumers (2013). Disputes around the definition and requirements for organic agriculture are well documented; conflict over criteria and requirements remains a central, ongoing debate in the US (DeWit and Verhoog 2007; DeLind 2000, Allen and Kovach 2000). The goal of this research is not to investigate whether participants correlate their understanding of organic to a specific definition or whether there is a correct definition.

One study, for example, found that an unclear understanding of the term “organic” is the most significant barrier to purchasing (Hughner et al. 2007). This confusion was particularly widespread among Latinos. Furthermore, a lack of understanding results in studies that are contradictory and are unable to adequately examine consumer behavior (Zepeda, Chang, and Leviten-Reid 2006; Hugher et al. 2007). This is problematic because, as Hughner et al. write, “if

consumers cannot distinguish organic from conventional food on reasonable criteria, it is not surprising that they do not purchase organics at greater rates" (13).

The Latino focus

While the focus on the growing organic market and Latino purchasing power is important, there are two other areas of research around organic foods that merit discussion as they indicate the broader potential impacts of this study. First, there has been considerable interest from public health researchers among the Latino population due to the high rates of obesity and cardiovascular disease the population experiences (Daviglus et al. 2012; Emond 2012; Horowitz et al. 2004). While public health initiatives to address non-communicable diseases center on fresh, healthy food, many initiatives specifically include organic foods as part of their intervention or mitigation strategies (Food Retail and Financing Initiatives to Address Obesity in Latino Communities 2013). These efforts seek to address health disparities by encouraging healthful eating habits such as organic food consumption (Cortes et al. 2013; Freudenberg et al. 2011).

Secondly, issues of food access further complicate the relationship between organic food consumption and the Latino community. Food studies, a fast-growing discipline, examines the relationship between communities of color and food, in particular the systemic inequalities of the US food system that put fresh, healthy food out of the reach of many communities of color. Much critique among food studies academics has been aimed at alternative foods such as organic, because they remain largely inaccessible to low-income communities and minority groups (Alkon and McCullen 2011; Valera et al. 2009). Critics of alternative foods point to the largely white-dominated culture and to their inaccessibility to non-white, low-income consumers (Guthman 2008; Slocum 2007). For example, large natural foods stores, among the largest purveyors of organic foods and certainly the most visible, are seldom found in communities of color further exacerbating inaccess to organic foods (Raja et al. 2008; Markowitz 2012; Moore et al. 2006). This study may help inform outreach into these

communities in order to alleviate some of the disparities in access to certain foods and further highlights the broader impacts of understanding Latino perceptions of organic foods.

Women in the Latino household

This study focuses on Latina women. The impetus for this is that Latina women overwhelmingly perform the majority of a US household's grocery shopping (PLMA 2013), which makes them a fitting focal point. Additionally, Latina women are the primary or joint decision makers in Latino household purchases, including groceries (Nielsen 2013). Not only do they perform the actual buying of food, but Latina women also make decisions based on what they believe *they* should buy not on other household members' preferences. Latina women and their beliefs and opinions about food, therefore, largely shape the food consumption of all others members of the household.

METHODS

Site Selection

Portland, Oregon makes for an interesting case study. On one hand, Portland is known as a food dining mecca (Asimov 2007) and a sustainable model city with clean streets, reliable public transportation and a green-friendly culture (Haight 2009). Yet one needs only to venture to Portland's outer areas, especially its southeast neighborhoods, to see that it is a city of contradictions. Portland faces a high degree of wealth inequality that has created pockets of urban poverty in this "model city" (Butz and Zuberi 2012, 359). Moreover, urban poverty disproportionately affects minority communities, such as the large Latino and immigrant communities living in Portland, and exacerbates food inaccess and health disparities (Breyer and Voss-Andreae 2013).

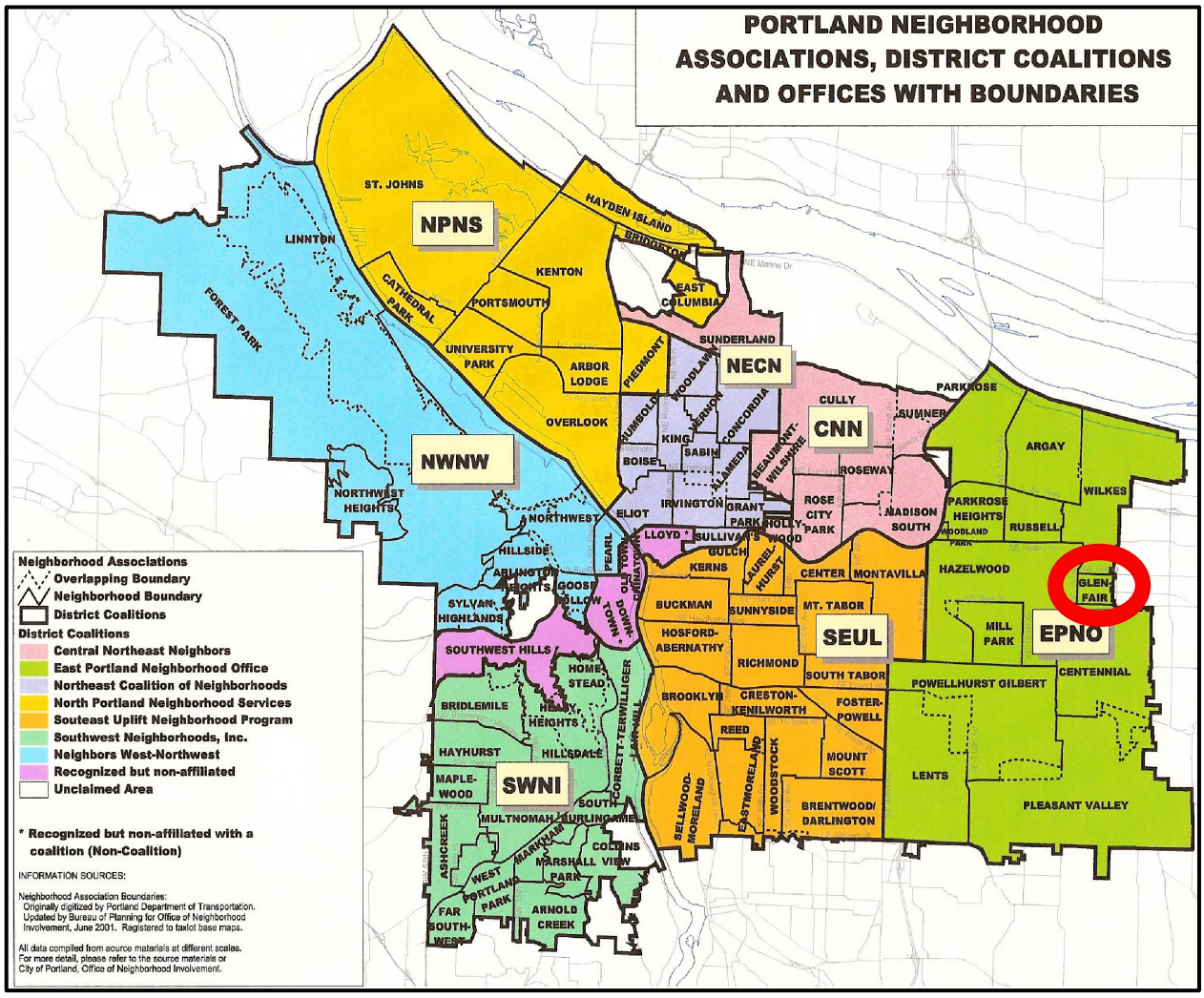
Neighborhood

Participants were selected from the Glenfair neighborhood (census tract 93.01)[1] in southeast Portland in the summer and fall of 2014. This site was selected based on information from the

[1] Census tract 93.01 encompasses the entire Glenfair neighborhood and the two are used interchangeably

2010 US Census[2], which showed this to be the most densely Latino neighborhood (26.6 percent Hispanic) in the city.

Figure 1: Map of Portland with Glenfair neighborhood
From the City of Portland Neighborhood Association



The Glenfair neighborhood is part of the East Portland Neighborhood, which represents the most ethnically and racially diverse area of the city with significant black, Hispanic, Russian, and Vietnamese populations, according to the Department of Transportation. While the East

[2] The US Census uses Hispanic and Latino interchangeable to mean any "person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race."

Portland Neighborhood experiences higher levels of poverty than the rest of the city, Glenfair in particular, has poverty rates exceeding 36 percent. The area has experienced significant growth over the last decade, much of it due to the relocation of families, especially immigrants, from the inner city to more affordable neighborhoods such as Glenfair. The gentrification of inner Portland has resulted in many families being unable to afford housing in the inner city (Griffin 2013).

Participants and sample

Participants for this study were women over the age of 18 who self-identified as Latina. The interviewer conducted door-to-door interview in the Glenfair neighborhood. The interviewer attempted contact (knocking on door) of every household in the site, including apartments within larger complexes and singly family houses. The interviewer contacted a total of 87% of households (n=1,892). Total occupied housing for the neighborhood based on 2010 census is 2,155. The discrepancy between households contacted and census household occupancy is unclear, though it may be that some housing units are not clearly labeled or visible to the interviewer. Housing may also have changed due to development or occupancy may have changed since the last census.

Households not contacted were those that presented difficulties (such as a guard dog). Households were manually marked on a site map to indicate 1) not home 2) no FHH 3) does not identify as Latina 4) not interested in participating 5) unavailable but willing to conduct interview at a later time. Two attempts were made to contact not-at-home households, once in the morning and once in the evening.

Households were asked whether there the female head of household (FHH) was available and if available, the FHH was asked if she identified as Latina. If the response was affirmative, the interviewer began the questionnaire. Participation was low, with only 32 households willing to participate.

Interviews

Semi structured interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Interviewer was fluent in both and each participant was asked which language they preferred to conduct the interview.

Interview questions contained short, single-answer questions and open-ended questions (see Appendix 1). Interviewer encouraged participants to describe their experiences and relevant information using prompts. Responses for short-and-single-answer responses were recorded and analyzed for statistical data. Data from open-ended questions was coded thematically using a systematic process of coding raw data and creating categories (Saldana 2012). These categories were then interpreted for larger themes. Raw data was coded manually; no software was used.

Results

Respondents were asked questions on issues related to organic foods purchasing and their opinions on organics. A total of 32 (n=32) women were interviewed. Average age for respondents was 36.5 (SD=11.3). Participants had an average of 2.5 children (SD=1.6)

Table 1: Stores most frequented

Store	Respondents	Percentage
Winco	28	33%
Walmart	13	15%
Casa Imports	12	14%
Fred Meyer	12	14%
Safeway	6	7%
Albertson's	6	7%
Tapatio	5	6%
Costco	2	2%

The top three most frequented stores were: Winco and Walmart. Third most frequented stores were Fred Meyer and Casa Imports. Case Imports is a Hispanic goods store stocked with produce, grocery items, a bakery and a meat counter.

Table 2: Organic foods purchasing frequency

Frequency	Respondents	Percentage
Never	10	31%
Rarely (once/month)	6	19%
Sometimes (1-2x/month)	9	28%
Frequently (3-5x/month)	4	13%
Not sure	3	9%

Table 3: Items most purchased organically

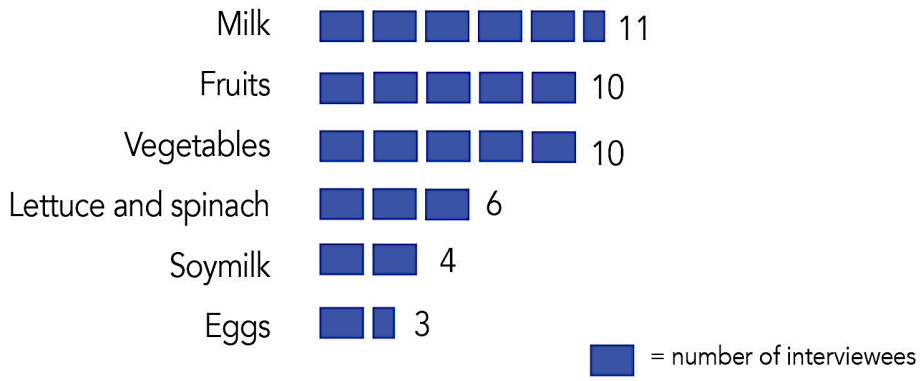


Table 4: Associations of organic

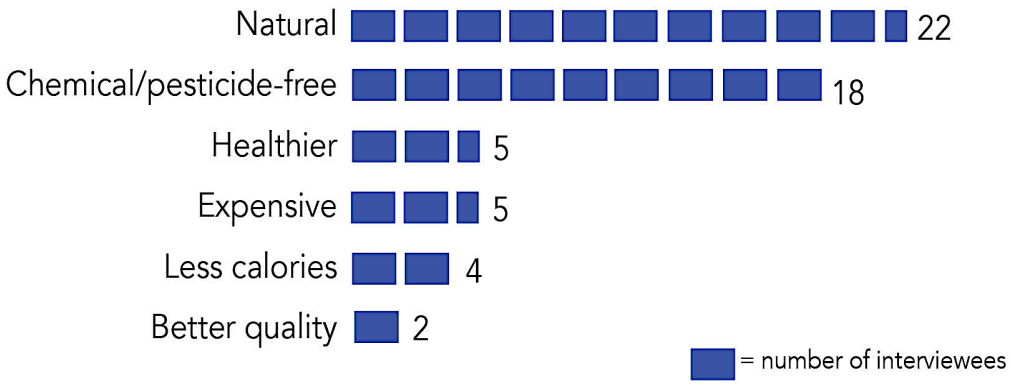


Table 5: Attitudes toward organic foods

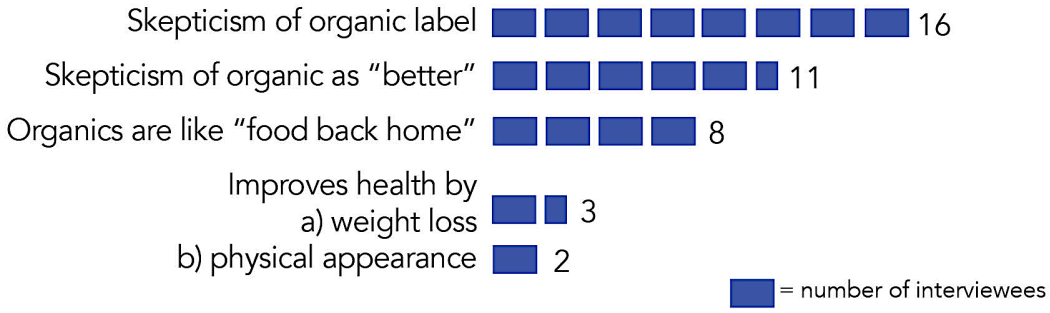
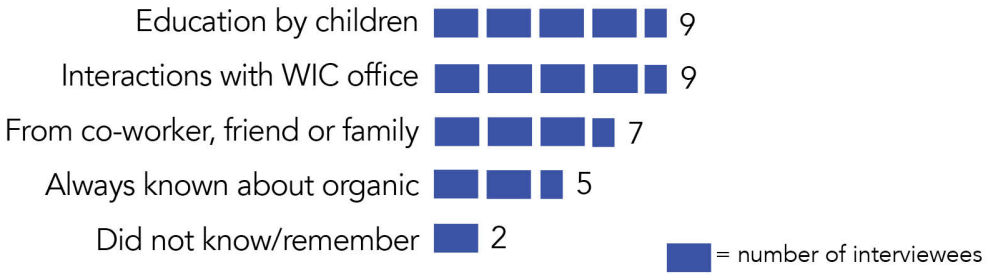


Table 6: How participants learned about organic foods



DISCUSSION

Stores and food purchasing

This study found that Latina women were most likely not purchasing organic foods, however, the number of women who sometimes shopped organic was nearly as much as those who did not (Table 2). On the whole, this study supports the findings of similar studies that indicate Latina women are increasingly purchasing organic foods. A 2012 study on Latina women conducted by The Nielsen Group indicated that health and nutrition is a primary concern for Latinas and that 34% of them look for "natural/organic" foods when shopping. A study by Smith et al. found that the "profile" of a likely organic produce shopper is actually consist with that of a West coast Latino household (2009, 742). While the numbers remain low, there is a growing trend among Latino shoppers to purchase organic and given their large representation in the US, have a large impact on the organic sector.

The question remains: how to get organic goods and products to the Latino consumer? Most women in this study shopped at Winco and Walmart (Table 1), two stores that offer low-cost, discount goods where organic foods are less likely to be found than at a Whole Foods or other natural foods store. The Glenfair neighborhood, in fact, is located at least 7 miles or a 20-minute drive from any mainstream natural foods store such as Whole Foods, New Season's or Trader Joes. Additionally, the Glenfair neighborhood has one of the highest poverty rates in the city, which coupled with the high price of organics cited by participants, creates barriers in terms of access and affordability.

However, the results of this study may shed some insight on potential strategies for reaching out to Latino shoppers. Participants also indicated that their third most frequented store was Casa Imports (tied with Fred Meyer), a locally-owned Hispanic goods store. Casa Imports, based on observations and a brief interview with the manager, does not carry organic produce or goods. One recent study showed that most Latinos are "indifferent" to the ubiquitous Hispanic goods aisle in major chain stores, instead preferring to buy ethnic goods at a *tienda*, or small, Hispanic grocery store (Food Navigator 2013). These stores are important community hubs in Latino neighborhoods with important cultural significance. *Tiendas* may offer a leverage point for introducing organic items to Latino shoppers.

Figure 2: Casa Imports grocery store

While purchasing decisions may be more complex at large chain stores, *tiendas* are generally smaller, locally-owned stores where managers or owners have increased flexibility for purchasing decisions (Ayala et al.) *Tiendas* could introduce low-cost, shelf stable organic items such as dried beans and rice. Organic items could also be offered in bulk at even lower costs.

While organic produce carries certain risks since it must be sold quickly, *tiendas* could offer certain popular staple products such as those participants indicated they purchase organically (Table 3): milk, eggs, soymilk, and some seasonal, low-cost fruits and vegetables. Purchasing seasonal items from local organic growers may also be productive for both parties as it would allow more flexibility with purchasing small quantities and price negotiations.

Naturalness

Participants overwhelmingly associated organic foods with "naturalness" (Table 4). The association is one that is often articulated in studies of organic foods (Onyango 2007; Shepard et al. 2005), however the idea of naturalness is complex. It is worth acknowledging the somewhat obvious, which is that in asking participants to explain their perceptions of a concept, the word itself cannot be employed. In this sense, natural may be the closest substitute for organic, rather than a deeply held association. Still, it is noteworthy that " natural" was expressed more than the idea that organic foods are free of chemicals and pesticides, though they are both terms that are clearly associated with organic foods.

In their examination of naturalness, Verhoog et al. put forth a framework that can help elucidate the connection between chemical-free and naturalness (2005). In their study, naturalness is understood by farmers and consumers through three different lenses 1) chemical-free, or a definition of organic closely tied to a USDA definition that prohibits chemical pesticides and GMOs 2) an agro-ecological approach that works with nature and 3) a method that respects and considers the complexities of an agricultural system. The majority of respondents in this study closely mirrored the no-chemicals approach – a perception of organic foods as natural with naturalness being closely tied to, if not defined by, a lack of pesticides and chemicals.

Interestingly, none of the respondents associated ecological or environmental criteria with organic foods. While studies that investigate organic consumer choices have shown varying results, a number have found that ecological motives are a primary concern for organic

shoppers (Honkanen et al. 2006; Nielsen 2010). While ecological considerations are not associated with organic foods, it does not mean that they are not important considerations for participants. Participants often tied the idea of naturalness to an agro-ecological approach that sought a return to older, traditional methods of cultivation. Eight respondents related organic agriculture to the way farming was done "back home" (Table 5). One participant said, "Organic food is natural like you grow food in Mexico. My mother always grew her food like that (organically). She used to compost using peels." The women in this study discuss organic methods not in terms of ecology or sustainability as English-speakers or even westerners might, but through an agricultural ideal that is based on going back to "old ways." This description of organic foods points to words, phrases or associations that may be more appealing to organic consumers when thinking about marketing to differentiate organic foods from conventional.

Skepticism toward organics

One of the most salient themes discussed by participants was a mistrust of organic foods. The women were overwhelmingly skeptical of purchasing organic foods because they felt it was not a legitimate product. The skepticism was directed at two separate aspects of organic (Table 5): 1) mistrust in the label and 2) skepticism that organic is "better" for them. First, participants were not fully convinced that the organic label meant that the food was produced according to regulations. One woman said, "Well, I see it... But I don't know how they grew it. Maybe they just put the sticker on and they don't do anything different." Another women relayed an anecdote about how she knew a store manager who took organic stickers from mangoes when they were purchased and put them onto conventional mangoes to raise the price. This mistrust is different than objections to third-party certifications raised by those who believe organic standards should be more stringent (DeLind 2000). This mistrust is rooted in an idea that there is label infringement and that the labeling mechanism can be used without any regulation.

Another site of mistrust was in the idea that organic foods are "better for you." Most participants felt that organics were in some way better (Table 5) defined as healthier, more natural or better quality. Some participants felt that this was what they were *supposed* to

believe, but remained skeptical as to whether it was true. Skeptical participant often used the word *supuestamente,* which translates to "supposedly." Others also indicated doubt with the phrase "*dicen que es mejor*" which roughly translates to, "people say its better," though it conveyed a belief that others, not the participants, held. This doubt is summed up by one of the women who explained, "They say it's better. But I don't know why. To me, they look the same. I don't see a difference." It seems that participants were appraising the purported "betterness" of organics by the physical appearance of the product. While there may be no physical differentiation between an organic mango versus a conventional one, the women needed more than just a label. In order to be convinced, there needed to be a physical superiority not in the processing or growing of the mango, but rather in the physical appearance of end product.

Organics and health

A number of women identified organic food as healthier (Table 4) and in explaining the association, participants often discussed organic foods in terms of making improved physical health and appearance (Table 5). Participants identified weight loss with eating organic foods though it was not clear whether this was strictly fruits and vegetables or whether this included processed foods. Interestingly, several women also correlated organic food consumption with an improvement in physical appearance. One woman explained that her friend started eating organic foods and after a while she began "looking much better." Another woman explained that a youthful appearance is preserved if one eats organic foods, as evidenced by her co-worker eating organic foods and looking youthful.

Organic education

All participants were asked when they first heard about or were introduced to the idea of organic foods (Table 6). Several responded that they had always known about it. Most of these participants identified their knowledge of organic practices with traditional agricultural methods in their home countries. In other words, organic methods were the same as the ones "back home" and therefore they had always known about organic, although it may not have been called that or presented itself with a label.

Another finding showed that participants were introduction to or educated about organic foods by their children. Studies have shown that households with children are more likely to purchase organic foods (Smith et al. 2009). This study, however, indicates that a contributor to this correlation is that children are educating their parents about organic foods, which may lead to increased purchasing. One mother, for example, stated that she only bought organics when her child explicitly asked for them. In this case her son asked for soymilk and certain fruits, which she happily purchased since it was, "better than other things he asked for." This finding merits further study in order to assess how children are learning and communicating this information.

Lastly, another common way participants were introduced to organics foods was through their interactions with Women, Infants and Children Program (WIC). WIC only allows the purchase of only organic fruits and vegetables, while all other foods are left to state discretion, which is then dependent on cost, availability and other factors. Very few non-organic fruit and vegetable purchases are allowed. The eligibility of food items is also often very confusing for program participants and creates barriers (Woelfel et al. 2004). In Oregon, all organic food items with the exception of one (non-refrigerated organic soymilk) are prohibited. These rules are laid out in the Food Item List, a pamphlet given to participants that states eligible and non-eligible items. The prohibition for organic items is repeated under every food item from peanut butter to cereal to milk.

It is not clear what sort of information regarding organics was provided to respondents in this study (growing methods, description, GMO information, etc.), though the women generally stated that communication was mostly regarding eligibility. One woman stated that she did not know what organic foods were (which indicates that there is no information on organics provided beyond stating prohibited items), but that the first time she heard the term was in the WIC office. "The official told me that we can't buy organic things except fruits and vegetables," she said. Another participant stated she heard about organic foods when she was told what not to buy. Generally, the communication around organic foods were negative and used to describe only prohibited items. For example, another participant stated that she also heard about

organic foods during a WIC appointment, but when asked if she was informed about fruits and vegetables being eligible she said no.

One potential way to increase awareness and perhaps sales of organic products is to increase communication and marketing around organic fresh fruits and vegetables as WIC eligible. This strategy could also be utilized by a smaller, local grocer such as Casa Imports. Of course, the transaction costs of WIC on retailers may be prohibitive but also may be worth the cost if retailers can sell organics at a premium and encourage WIC participants to purchase organic items.

Conclusion

The Latina women in this study represent only a small sampling, though the findings provide insight into the ways these women, and possible Latina women in other areas, conceptualize organic foods. While organic foods are perceived as generally good, there remains a distrust and uncertainty of organics that will be necessary to overcome if the organic sector seeks to attract Latino consumers. There are, as this study suggests, possible starting points that already exist within this community. An understanding of the how Latina women associate organics with home, for example, offers novels ways to differentiate organic food from conventional food in a way that resonates linguistically and culturally. The use of *tiendas* might also provide an opening for organics to enter Latino consumption in a way that is culturally appropriate and accessible. The organic sector, however, must be willing to further investigate these possibilities in order to approach Latino households in a manner that appeals to them on their own terms. If they can do so, organics growers and retailers would benefit from a new and growing sector that currently seems poised to embrace them.

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