

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Real Food Calculator: Fall 2010

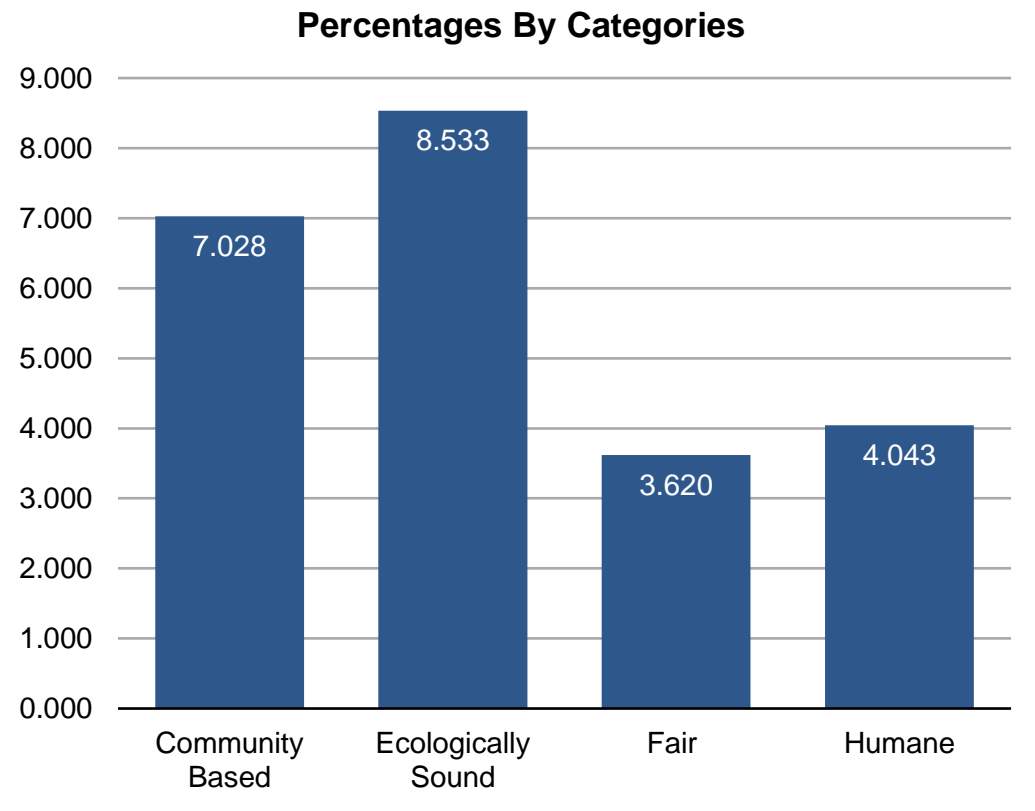
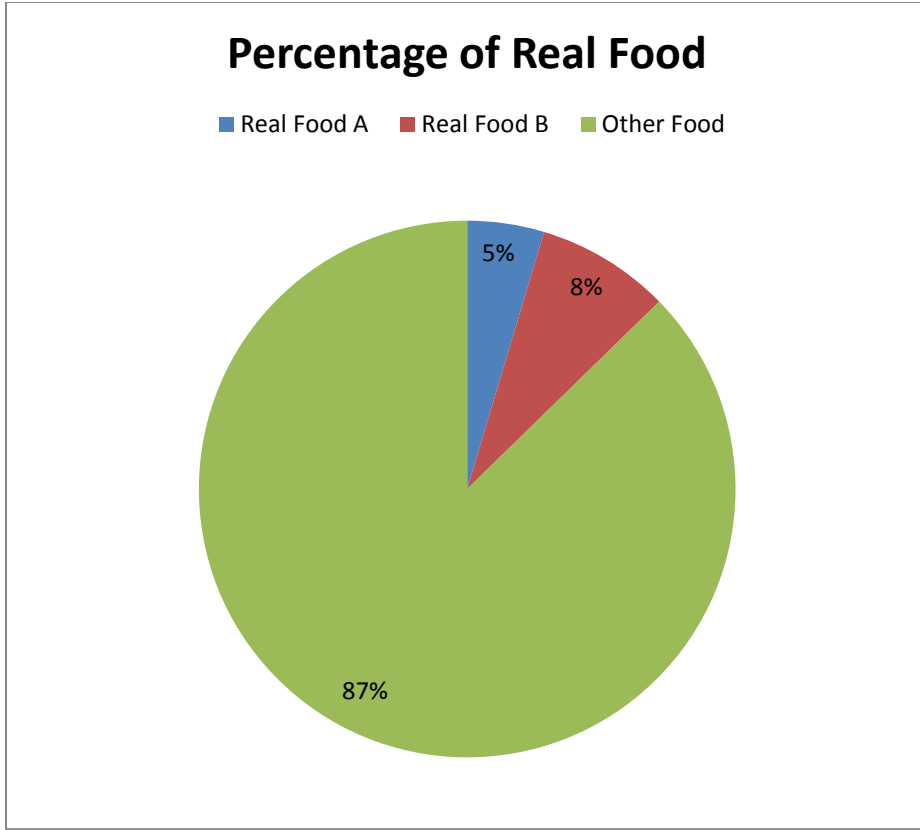
Suzanne Fleishman and Sara Skelton

Introduction and Abstract

The purpose of this research project was to quantify the amount of “Real Food” present in the dining halls at UNC and to evaluate the transparency of our commercial food system. We recognize that Carolina Dining Services created a sustainability report themselves and admire the initiative. However, we felt that this was an important endeavor, because the Real Food Calculator is an independent quantification that is nationally recognized. Its uniformity among schools allows for comparisons between different college campuses. The Real Food Calculator consists of four categories: Local and Community Based, Ecologically Sound, Fair, and Humane. If a food meets two or more categories, it is Real Food A and if it meets only one category it is Real Food B. Our final percentage of Real Food A was 4.63% and our final percentage of Real Food B was 8.06%. The total of Real Food is 12.69%. There are several ways that Carolina Dining Services can increase these numbers. Additionally, the calculator has many ways it could improve before it moves from its current pilot stage into a final technique.

Method

We piloted the calculator during a four week period from September 15, 2010 to October 12, 2010. This accounts for one cycle of the menu. The information on each invoice was copied to a Google document for organizational purposes. Our research of each company was mainly implemented through the internet. Any information that could not be identified on an invoice or a website was found through email, phone calls, or speaking with Ricardo Rascone of Carolina Dining Services for more information. If there was not an official label on the invoice for the ecologically sound, humane, and fair categories like “organic,” “local,” or “fair trade,” it was assumed the product did not meet these requirements. However, each company was still examined, and occasionally there would be a contradiction. For example, New Zealand stew lamb from a Sysco invoice gave no information, but after further research was found to be grass-fed and thus was real food B. The fair category is the most difficult and subjective to verify and this issue is elaborated later in the report. In order to err on the side of caution, only certified fair facilities or cooperatives were considered fair.



Analysis

The percentages show that there is a greater amount of real food "B" than "A." This means only about 4% of purchases are exceptionally sustainable, while the other 8% is encouraging but presents room for further improvement. There is a higher number of ecologically sound and local and community-based products than fair and humane. This could be attributed to the relative ease in defining these categories and to the direct statement of organic and local on the invoices. Additionally, the labels for fair are not in widespread use; this makes it difficult to verify a company's practices. Twelve other schools have applied the Real Food Calculator, and UNC, the first Southern school to pilot the calculator, falls in the middle with a total of 12.69% real food. This is higher than any other school with that uses Aramark. However, Carolina Dining Services does fall in the bottom half of public schools.

Special Cases

Because the Real Food Calculator is still in its pilot stage, there were certain cases for which the Real Food Calculator does not explicitly account.

Meat Processors

The meats we purchase from several companies (Smithfield, Perdue, Tyson) have locations in North Carolina. These companies are meat processors, however, they have contracts with all the farms they buy from. These contracts play a large role in the amount of control a farmer has over their practices. For these reasons we decided that these products must count both as processed and unprocessed foods. This means that meat processors must fall into a, b, or c in the local and community based category. This prevents them from being Real Food. Aside from using the specifics of the calculator, in our opinion these contracts, the pollution these farms and factories, and the awful working conditions are not healthy and do not promote the idea of a strong community.

Community Based Factories

There were several companies that lie in a "gray area" for the calculator. These companies include: Flowers Baking Co. of Jamestown, Heartland, Kikoman, PET, Texas Pete, Whole Harvest, and Tropical Nut & Fruit and Company. These companies fall in a gray area because they have local factories which are not locally owned. We have chosen not count them as Real Food, because in these matters we choose to err on the side of caution.

However, we would like to make note that this decision is not final, and more research must be done to verify the amount of money that is kept in the community in comparison to how much leaves in order to determine their community-based status.

Fish

Although sources from CDS have verbally confirmed that all the seafood is certified sustainable by the Monterrey Seafood Watch Guide, none of the individual companies' information indicates this. Also, the calculator states that no seafood can be air-flown, something which the depth of this research did not reach. After discussing the issue with an adviser from the Real Food Challenge, it was determined that we should, as always, err on the side of caution. However, it is noted that many of the companies did show some kind of commitment to sustainable fisheries, just not obviously under the Monterrey Seafood Watch Guide. For example, Inland Seafood sites involvement with the Southeastern Fisheries Association. The Real Food Calculator's uncertain position of seafood reflects the general public's knowledge as well. Meats which can be officially certified by the USDA are much easier to categorize as black or white. Fish is not only a gray in our research, but in the national psyche.

Fair

We chose not to extensively research this category beyond a Fair Trade Certified label, a direct relationship with the producer (Cane Creek Farms), or a cooperative, because this is such a vague area. How deep in to the system should one research to deem a product truly fair? Does a lack of access to information automatically disqualify a company as fair? These questions were heavily influenced by a recent service-learning trip where we were exposed to the conditions of the migrant farm worker community, a group which provides over 80% of the produce in the United States.

Unfavorable Purchases and Findings to Note

Smithfield

See above for explanations as to why this is a poor purchase. Additionally, Smithfield has violated the Clean Water Act in the past and has been criticized in the press several times for unethical treatment of both workers and animals.

Morning Star

This vegetarian option, which is advertised as "green," is considered a weak purchase in that it shows the complete lack of transparency from some companies. Even after phone calls and emails, the company would not disclose the location of its factories other than the USA.

Positive Purchases to Note

Cane Creek Farm

The grass-fed beef from the community-based producer Cane Creek Farms played a very significant role in real food percentages. Without it, real food "A" would be virtually non-existent, while the overall percentages would be much lower. This is the ideal meat provider. However, we understand that constraints of the producer's size could prevent more purchasing of such a sustainable beef. Grayson Natural Meat is another sustainable meat producer to consider to increase percentages. It is a group of farmers who use sustainable practices and whose combined size could provide for a large institution. This suggestion is in addition to the continued purchasing from Cane Creek Farms.

Usage of Distributors other than Sysco

Both Albert's Organics and Freshpoint provide transparency into the produce bought and easy knowledge of whether or not a product is local. The increase in the amount of organic purchasing in comparison with the invoices briefly viewed last spring is laudable.

Applegate Farms

Although CDS does not purchase any real food from this company, it is an example of ideal transparency. Applegate Farms provides a tool on its website which enables a customer to trace any product back to the original farm by using the bar code and giving the place of purchase. This is the most impressive system for tracking we have found, and it would be best if most companies implemented such a program.

Twin Oaks Tofu

This tofu applies to the three categories: community based, fair, and ecologically sound. It is essentially the example of a perfect processed product.

Improvements

Ways to Improve Calculator

The Real Food Calculator is still in its experimental/pilot phase, and only twelve schools have submitted official reports. Therefore, there are several ways the calculator could be improved in order to make its usage easier and more accurate. One of these is to explicitly state how to assign the “gray” areas that include local processors which are not locally owned. It also should include specifics on meat processors and how extensive the contract must be in order to disqualify it as real food. Another difficult “gray” area which needs more expertise is the seafood category. Finally, it would be helpful if the Real Food Challenge kept a database of companies which students and employees had previously researched, so that applying the calculator is less daunting thus more accessible, uniform, and efficient. For example, large companies like Stonyfield could officially be under Ecologically Sound and Humane in this database to avoid confusion.

Ways to improve the purchasing of the Dining Halls

We recognize that we are not experts in budgeting, nor the bureaucracy of the commercial food industry. (Although, this internship has been an important learning experience.) We also want acknowledge the admirable efforts to improve the sustainability of our dining halls. However, we would like to provide suggestions for improvement based on our findings. The most drastic change to increase real food numbers would be to buy more humane, organic, community-based meat and dairy. To seriously improve fair percentages, the dining halls could purchase fair trade coffee or entirely fair trade bananas. Smaller yet

effective changes include increasing purchases of current real food like Twin Oaks tofu. The research has also proven that the change to greater sustainability can occur within the distribution system and by using the same suppliers, eliminating transaction costs incurred from searching, certifying, and seeking approval from the parent company, Aramark. Many companies like Coleman Natural Meats and even Smucker's have organic options, an easy way to see real food percentages grow. A way to allocate money to purchase these items is to decrease the volume of meat or desserts purchased.

Opportunities for Error

This research ran for four weeks in the fall. Availability of local food will vary by season and month. For a true percentage that can describe the dining hall purchases a survey should be done over a year long period or with samples throughout the year.

Although care was put into checking the information copied from invoices into spreadsheets, any human error such as shifting a decimal point could affect the results. Although, large purchases such as Cane Creek Farm's beef, which could drastically affect percentages, were double checked for accuracy.

Acknowledgements

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Resources:

To access the spreadsheets we used and our calculations and the justifications for our decisions go to docs.google.com and sign in with the following information:

Username: [realfoodunc](#) Password: [realfoodcalculator](#)

For more information on the Real Food Challenge and the calculator visit: realfoodchallenge.org