

Wild Oats Helps Consumers Choose Local

by K_Guice

Walking down the long grocery store aisles many may not stop to think where the produce they are buying is grown, where their honey is harvested or from what town their tea originates.

That may be changing if Wild Oats gets their way. They are pushing for their local shoppers to support local product providers, thus enriching their own communities through an awareness campaign called "Choose Local".

"Wild Oats launched its shop local program to help our customers identify the products in the store that come from their area," said Sonja Tuitele, a spokesperson for Wild Oats Natural Market Place. "You are going to find a lot of local produce, local dairy, local eggs and a lot of local bakery items."

Perry Odak, president and CEO of Wild Oats Natural Market Place said, "We believe strongly in supporting the local communities where we do business, and we're dedicated to providing high-quality, local products whenever possible."

To illustrate its commitment to local products, collectively, Wild Oats buys more than 7,200 locally produced food items from approximately 3,500 farmers, food artisans and manufacturers based in all 50 states.

"For example in Oregon alone our stores carry 785 products from 235 local producers in Oregon," Tuitele said.

The food doesn't stop here. Local providers that perform well could actually end up on other Wild Oats communities.

“Because we see a lot of success with local products, those then may go into our chain nationally,” she said. “They proven themselves, they meet our standards and could end up in any of our 113 store in 24 states and Canada.”

Purchasing organic products from local growers, farmers and artisans appears to be a hot new trend in food. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, farmers markets have grown 79 percent since 1994 with approximately three million visitors each week in 2002.

More than 75 percent of consumers report they would like to know more about where their food comes from and how it is produced, according to a report from the natural product analysts at the Hartman Group.

Odak says that Wild Oats mission goes beyond the latest trend. “This local focus boosts area economies, reduces negative environmental impacts and supports sustainable agriculture. Our commitment to these efforts is long-term.”

For local economies, Tuitele says the long-term benefits can be tremendous. “That can bring back some upwards of \$30-million dollars into the local economy.”

In addition, she says there is a benefit for the environment. “The average produce travels 1,500 miles before it gets to your plate,” she said. “If you are buying local, it isn’t going to travel near as far.”

Less travel means less reliance on fossil fuels, less carbon monoxide and lower transportation costs. “When an item has to travel long distances it is typically picked before it ripe, Tuitele said. “If you are buying locally it is going to be picked at peak of ripeness and is simply going to taste better.”

To introduce shoppers to the “Choose Local” program, Wild Oats is hosting a Local Fest summer celebrations on August 11, from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Local farmers and artisan product manufacturers will be at the store to share their stories, answer questions and provide samples of their products.

Bend Weekly Newslink: www.WildOats.com

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