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# Latino groceries in the rural Midwest: An examination of food security, cultural identity, and economics

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# Latino groceries in the rural Midwest: An examination of food security, cultural identity, and economies

## Abstract:

Iowa's expanding Latino population patronizes tiendas (groceries) that offer products specially chosen for their cultural and culinary needs. This project explored how Iowa's increasing local food production potentially could become a part of the produce offerings at these specialty stores.

## Principal Investigator:

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## Co-investigators:

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\$29,021 for year one

**Q** What opportunities exist for Latino grocery stores (tiendas) to stock locally grown produce to enhance their current fruit and vegetable inventory?

**A** Findings showed that some tiendas may offer a limited selection of locally grown produce on an ad hoc basis. However, tiendas do not have formalized buying agreements with local producers nor do they have marketing efforts promoting “locally grown” produce.

## Background

Latino groceries (tiendas) in rural Iowa are vital to providing food access to Iowa's growing Hispanic population. Availability of healthy, culturally familiar products is a key component to improving their health outcomes. Locally owned tiendas typically are located in downtown areas, serve a critical role in rural economies and help maintain a vibrant Main Street. Although they are important food-access sites and contribute to local economies, most tiendas in Iowa sell little locally grown produce. Already central to the food system for Latinos, tiendas have the potential to play an important role in rural Iowa's local foods system by providing another retail outlet for agricultural producers.

This study investigated the barriers and opportunities for introducing locally grown produce into Iowa's rural Latino grocery stores. It sought to achieve a better understanding of the current situation for Latino grocers by determining:

- existing capacity, barriers, and opportunities to connecting and building relationships with local food producers and distributors,
- barriers and opportunities to providing nutritious local foods in resource-poor areas of Iowa, and
- barriers and opportunities to marketing local foods to existing and new customers.

## Approach and methods

Methods used in this exploratory study included GIS mapping of existing tiendas; interviews with tienda owners, community chamber of commerce directors and local food coordinators; and a store observation survey. The study focused on three stores, each in a distinct rural Iowa community. The populations of the communities ranged from 3,000–12,000 with Hispanics comprising between 15 and 40 percent of the totals.

The researchers visited each tienda multiple times during the study to further develop rapport with the owner and make observations concerning seasonal changes, merchandising, and customer service practices. Interviews with store owners were



**MARKETING**



conducted in the store, in Spanish, and lasted for approximately one hour. These stores were chosen as participants based on prior relationships with the co-PIs during their work with immigrant retailers in the state. Each store had a different operational capacity: high, medium and low.

Chamber of commerce directors were interviewed to provide information about the relationships Latino store owners may have with the Anglo business community and connections local retailers may have with local food producers. The team interviewed local food coordinators about the capacity of local producers in their networks to sell in retail environments and to gauge receptivity of

local producers to enter new markets.

## Results and discussion

The researchers learned that tienda owners, chambers of commerce, and local food coordinators all believe that they have little free time and resources to dedicate to new projects and ventures. Chambers of commerce and local food coordinators do not have the knowledge or skills to work across cultural differences with immigrant business owners. Meanwhile, tiendas and chambers of commerce indicated that they have limited connections with local food producers. All three components are necessary for success and support of new business ventures: 1) access to customer base, 2) community promotion and awareness, and 3) availability of product existed in relative isolation from one another.

Despite being located in distinct communities, the three tiendas shared characteristics that influence their readiness and ability to handle locally grown produce. In addition to not having consistent and systematic connections with local growers, the stores have limited human resources. None of the stores has personnel dedicated to maintaining, stocking, and marketing produce. The stores also have limited on-site storage, with no cold or dry warehousing capacity. Stores underutilize in-store promotions and community advertising and do not have the resources to educate customers on the benefits and rationale of buying local. Finally, the aesthetic and taste profiles of the produce that make up Mexican and Central American cuisines are culturally specific and do not always coincide with the taste and aesthetic preferences of the (primarily) Anglo local producers. Thus, store owners look elsewhere for produce to meet the expectations of their customers.

## Conclusions

Opportunity exists to bolster the sale of local produce in rural tiendas. The closest to regular ordering of local produce is that of tienda #1, where the owner also is moving toward production. Typically, a rural tienda offers local produce because of a developing relationship with a local producer; perhaps as a way of unloading unsold produce after a farmers market. Thus, sales are sporadic, owners are not inclined to reflect on the economic benefits of locally sourcing some of their produce, and no promotional effort is occurring. Tiendas and local producers are working unsupported by an institutional apparatus designated to market and support retail generally and local food retail specifically.

These recommendations will assist in increasing the presence and consistent



availability of local produce in rural tiendas. While some of the recommendations are specific to working with tiendas as a retail setting, many of them would also support general local food retail sales.

- 1) Work within current tienda capacity to increase the consistent presence of local produce for sale.
  - For smaller stores with limited human and financial capital, work to bolster sales of excess produce from growers to stores at the peak of season (i.e., in-season sales).
  - For higher capacity stores with more human and financial capital, encourage pre-season ordering through design of an ordering tool.
  - Work with tienda owners to make a cost-benefit analysis of purchasing local produce. Evaluate the current transportation and spoilage cost of shipping produce from long distances.
- 2) Build relationships between local food producers and tienda owners.
  - Where there are current relationships, encourage better understanding among producers of the aesthetic and cultural produce preferences for Latino consumers and the management and operations of both local farms and tiendas.
  - Work with local food systems coordinators and their networks to reach out to producers who may be interested in selling produce in tiendas.
  - Develop and pilot an ordering system for local produce based on the dialogue between producers and store owners.
- 3) Increase local food producer capacity to supply tienda produce needs.
  - Provide technical assistance to local food producers to meet 1) the cultural and aesthetic preferences of Latino consumers and 2) store owner needs.
- 4) Create a promotional network for local food sales in retail environments, with material in English and Spanish.
  - Develop a promotional campaign for local produce sales that is culturally and linguistically relevant for Spanish speakers.
  - Engage chambers of commerce and/or local food system coordinators to administer promotional campaigns.
  - Promotional campaigns could be a point of entry for chambers of commerce to work with tiendas and local growers.
  - Connect chambers of commerce and local food systems coordinators to strengthen the promotional message around local food sales in retail settings.
  - Increase local grower participation in chamber of commerce membership.
  - Bolster cross-cultural communication skills, understanding of cultural differences, and knowledge about immigrant small businesses operations among chambers of commerce and local food systems coordinators.

## Impact of results

At the end of the first year of research, the project has had the following impacts:

- Provided tienda #1 with initial technical resources to aid in vegetable production, including connections with ISU horticulturalist and the local USDA office.
- Raised awareness of participating chambers and local food coordinators about tiendas potential for local economic impact.
- Referrals made to researchers concerning Anglo local producers who are interested in supplying produce to tiendas.
- Influenced addition of questions about local produce availability in Latino grocery stores to the NEMS-Mex evaluation tool developed by Dr. Donna Winham.
- Identification of Latino produce and meat producers in the study area.
- Opportunity to include local produce as an option for year four of the Shop Healthy Iowa tienda project from Iowa Department of Public Health.

## Education and outreach

Study findings for consideration of future healthy retail initiatives will be presented and/or made available to:

- Regional and local food systems coordinators,
- ISUEO Local Foods Program,
- new community and economic development retail specialist, and
- Iowa Department of Public Health.

## Leveraged funds

Funds of \$500 were leveraged by ISU Extension and Outreach for a horticultural technical assistant who conducted an initial visit to land owned by tienda #1.

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