



## **FRESH AND AFFORDABLE:**

***Results from NOFA-VT's 2016 study on price competitiveness of products purchased directly from local farmers.***



photo by Maria Reade

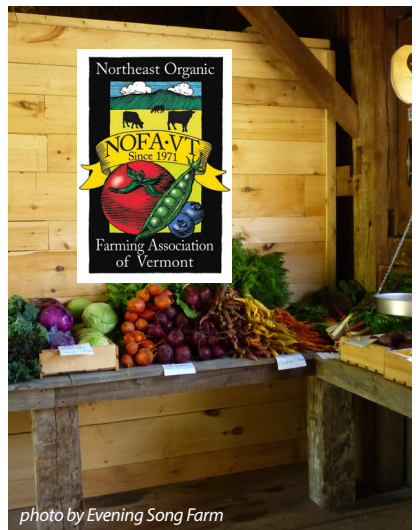


photo by Evening Song Farm

# From the farm or from a store: How do prices compare?

In the summer of 2016, the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT) undertook a study to compare prices of food products from local grocery stores with the same products bought through direct market channels at farmers markets, farm stands, and through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs).

The key finding of this study was that, for all the direct market channels, **55% of the certified organic products and 24% of conventional products were competitive\*** with grocery stores.



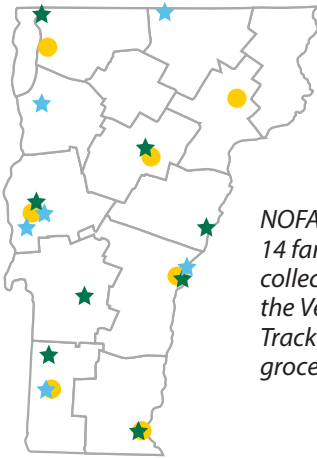
Products compared in this study:

- *Blueberries (per pint)*
- *Cantaloupe (per pound)*
- *Sweet corn (per ear)*
- *Cucumbers, slicing (per pound and per cucumber)*
- *Eggs, large, Grade A (per dozen)*
- *Mesclun (per pound)*
- *Head lettuces (per head)*
- *Snow peas (per pound)*
- *Green bell peppers (per pound)*
- *Potatoes, Yukon gold and red-skinned (per pound)*
- *Green beans (per pound)*
- *Yellow summer squash (per pound)*
- *Tomatoes, slicing varieties (per pound)*

## **\*What does “competitive” mean?**

For the purposes of this study, a direct market product is determined to be “competitively priced” if the product is less expensive than, or no greater than 10% more expensive than, the same product from at a nearby grocery store. For instance, if the grocery store price is \$5/lb, the direct market price cannot be more than \$5.50 to be considered competitive.

We chose this metric to be consistent with a study from the Vermont Agency of Agriculture (see back page for more info), but it has its limitations. It is especially tricky with very low-priced items, such as ears of corn, where 10% may only be a few cents.



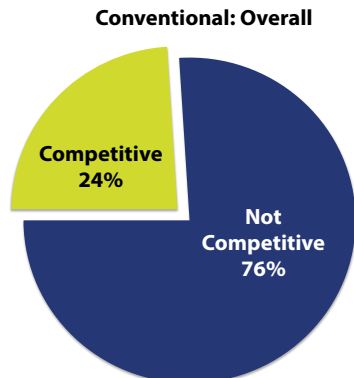
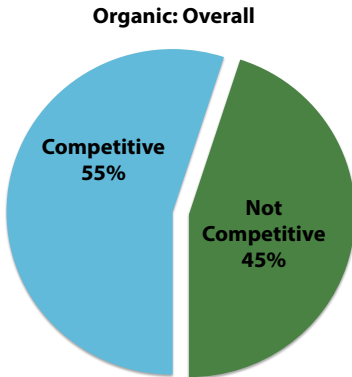
- ★ Certified organic farm
- ★ Conventional farm
- Grocery store

*NOFA-VT collected CSA and farm stand prices from 14 farms; for farmers market prices, we used the data collected from farmers markets across Vermont through the Vermont Agency of Agriculture's Local Food Data Tracking Program. These prices were compared to seven grocery stores throughout the state.*

This study built on two previous studies comparing farmers market to grocery store prices, one conducted by NOFA-VT in 2010 and one conducted by the Vermont Agency of Agriculture in 2015.

This study was expanded to look at farm stands and CSAs, and not just farmers markets. In addition, this study took price samples monthly from June through September, looking over the course of the growing season and not just at one or two months.

The results show that over the course of the study, 55% of certified organic and 24% of conventional products at direct markets were competitive with comparable products at grocery stores.

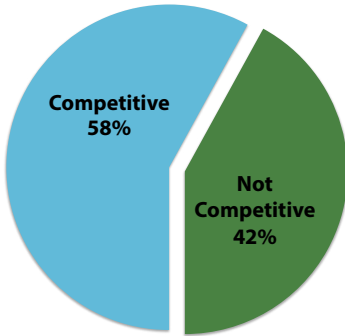


# FARMERS MARKETS

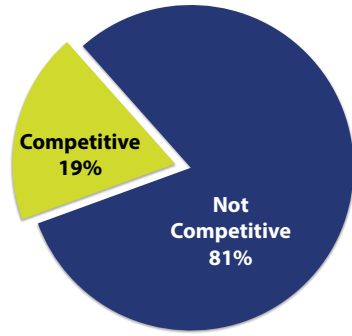
Farmers market competitiveness varied over the course of the summer, with the best prices for most products studied in August.

This supports data from the earlier studies, which found that in August, farmers markets were competitive with grocery stores most of the time – and sometimes better – especially for certified organic products.

**Organic at Farmers Markets**



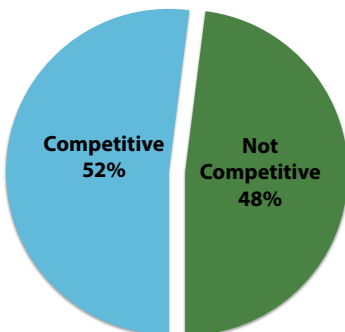
**Conventional at Farmers Markets**



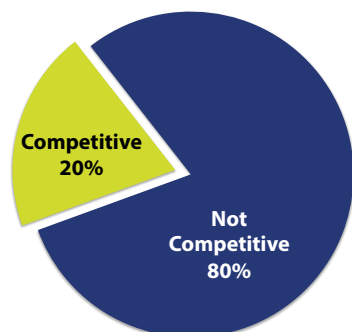
# FARM STANDS

Farm stand price competitiveness also varied significantly over the course of the season. This study found that overall, it was the least competitive direct market outlet for certified organic products. However, price differences were often quite small, and sometimes the farm stands had the better price.

**Organic at Farm Stands**



**Conventional at Farm Stands**

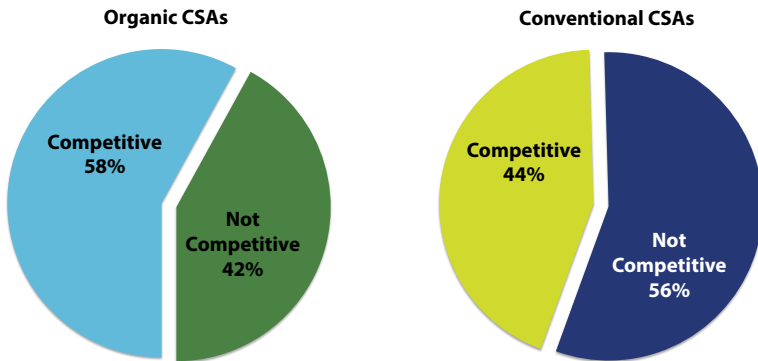


# CSAs

This study indicated that CSA\* shares are the most competitive of the three direct-market channels studied. One reason may be that many CSA farms offer a discount on the products in their CSA shares in return for a commitment to the farm for a whole season.

*Because of how the CSA model works, price comparison was not as straightforward as at farmers markets and farm stands. For each month's data, the weights of each product in the week's CSA share were gathered from the farm. Then the cost of the same weight of each product at the grocery store was calculated. Finally, the full cost of the items from the grocery store was compared with the weekly cost of the CSA share.*

*Since CSAs are not typically available for a single month, their monthly competitiveness is not broken down here.*



## \*What's a CSA?

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is the name of a direct relationship between farmers and subscription consumers. As the name implies, this form of direct sale invites people to directly support a farm or group of farms by enrolling in a seasonal share in the farms' operations.

While the terms of the membership differ from farm to farm, CSA shares are usually purchased for a set price early in the season in exchange for weekly boxes of mixed produce. The partnership allows people to share in the seasonal rhythms of diversified farms.

# SEASONALITY

This study covered the whole summer, from June through September. The prices of individual products varied during that time, especially in the direct market outlets (see graphs below).

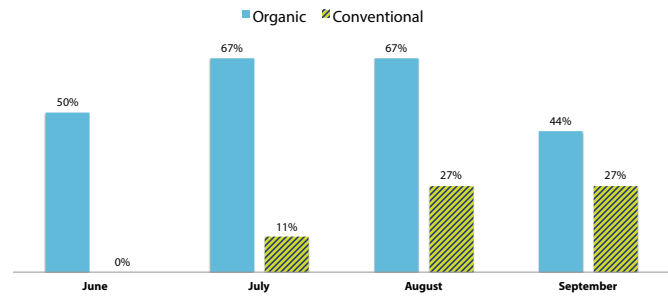
For example, farm stand tomatoes were not competitive in June, but in August they were. Buying produce in season gets you the best price, as well as great quality.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture's 2015 study compared prices at farmers markets and grocery stores in central Vermont in August.

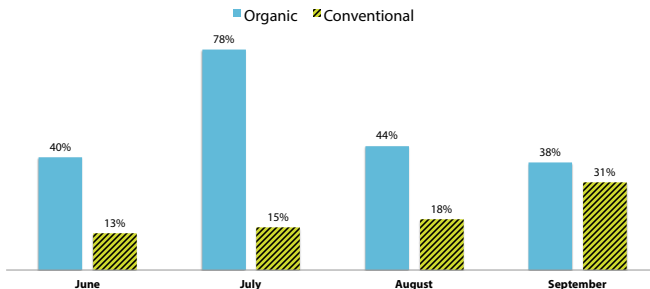
**That study found that 92% of certified organic produce was competitively priced with grocery stores!**



Farmers Market Competitiveness by Month



Farm Stand Competitiveness by Month





In addition to competitive prices, more than half of Vermont's farmers markets, and many farm stands and CSAs, accept 3SquaresVT (food stamps) benefits through EBT cards.

NOFA-VT also has programs that support limited-income Vermonters in accessing direct markets: the Vermont Farm Share Program provides subsidized CSA shares and the Crop Cash Program matches 3SquaresVT purchases at participating farmers markets. Learn more at [www.nofavt.org/buydirect](http://www.nofavt.org/buydirect) or call 802-434-4122.

## More great reasons to buy directly from a farm:

- Freshness
- Quality and variety
- Seasonality
- Support family farms
- Strengthen local economies
- Maintain working landscapes
- Know the story of your food

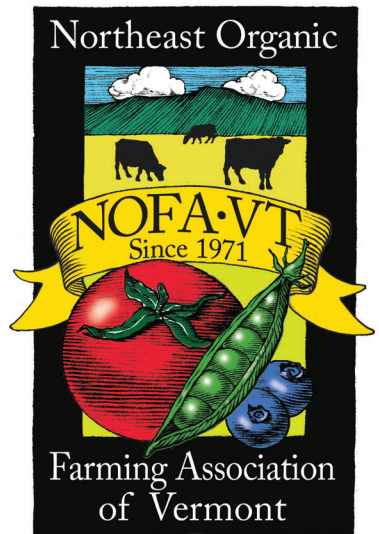


photo by Graham Waugh

# WANT TO LEARN MORE?

- Read the complete study at [www.nofavt.org/dmpricingstudy](http://www.nofavt.org/dmpricingstudy).
- Find more information about buying directly from farmers and NOFA-VT's programs for limited-income Vermonters at [www.nofavt.org/buydirect](http://www.nofavt.org/buydirect).
- Read the Vermont Agency of Agriculture's 2015 report, "A Comparison Study of Product Pricing at Vermont Farmers' Markets and Retail Establishments," at [agriculture.vermont.gov](http://agriculture.vermont.gov) (search for "retail pricing comparison").

**Find a farmers market, farm stand or CSA near you at [www.nofavt.org/buydirect](http://www.nofavt.org/buydirect).**



*Special thanks to NOFA-VT's 2016 summer intern, Chloe Kidder, for coordinating the study and to Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund's Jake Claro for finalizing the study results.*

*This publication was supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service through grant 14-FMPPX-VT-0169. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the USDA.*