

Lessons learned: TGRAINS household interview study

The TGRAINS Interview study is a longitudinal study to find out whether or not building relationships between people and the source of their food impacts household food culture. To do this, we have interviewed households that have recently joined a community-supported agriculture (CSA) scheme and we are following these households over time to see how they change the food activities. To compare, we have also interviewed households not a part of a CSA— we refer to these households as our Control Group. Below are some of our initial findings.



Comparing CSA members and our control group

As has been consistently found in other research on CSAs¹, the CSA members in our study tended to have a higher than average household income. CSA participants were also more likely to have dependent children at home and were, on average, slightly younger than the people in our control group.

CSA members and our control group both shopped in some **similar** ways:

- Approximately **90% of all participants** from both groups bought from **large chain supermarkets** (such as Tesco, Co-op, Waitrose, Sainsbury's, Asda, Morrison's, Iceland, Ocado, M&S).
- Approximately **50% of all participants** bought from **budget large chain supermarkets** (such as Aldi, Lidl, Home Bargains, B+M).



Photo: Ella Furness

Purchasing food from:	CSA	Control
Large chain supermarkets	88%	94%
Budget large chain supermarkets	51%	54%
Local market, Farm shops, Direct from farm	36%	10.5%
Local independent shop, corner shops	33%	9%
Health food, vegan & zero waste shops	26.5%	1.5%

But there were also some **differences**:

- **CSA members tended to also buy from independent shops** such as local markets, corner shops, health food, vegan & zero waste shops, farm shops, direct from farmers or from other specialist shops. See the table for more details.

CSA members tended to buy **organic** more often than the control group, but participants often expressed **ambivalence** about **organic produce**.

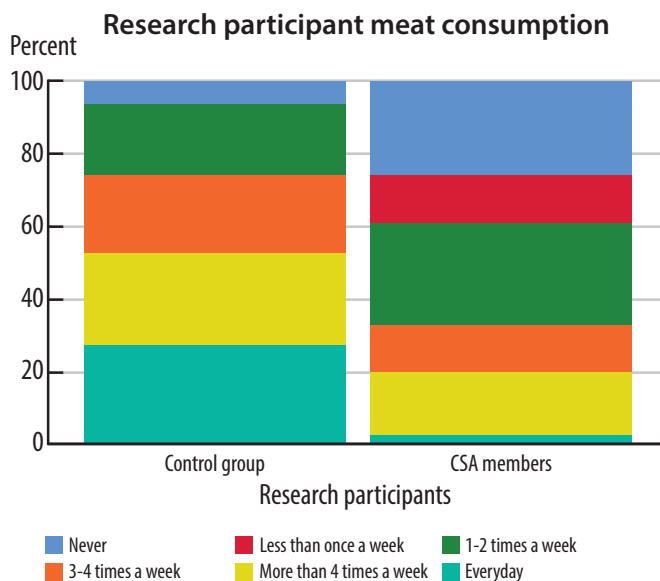
There was concern that although **organic produce could be produced in systems** that were understood to be **more environmentally sustainable** and ethical than conventionally grown food (small scale, local, with low carbon emissions and use of plastics, and with good conditions for livestock and workers), this was **not always the case**.

¹This article gives a list of other studies that have shown this: Galt, R. E. et al. 2017. What difference does income make for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) members in California? Comparing lower-income and higher-income households. *Agriculture and Human Values* 34(2), pp. 435-452. doi: 10.1007/s10460-016-9724-1

Some participants observed that **organic methods** could be “**almost as bad as conventional**”, therefore, participants often **prioritised locally produced food over certified organic foods that were not local**.

Both CSA members and the control group tended to spend a **similar amount of time cooking at home** and ate out or used takeaways similarly. However, the groups **differed in what they ate**.

CSA members reported having some form of dietary restriction more often than did the control group. **Most commonly they did not eat meat: 26% of the control group ate meat everyday**, whereas this was true of **only 2% of CSA members**. See the graph below for more detail.



CSA specific summary

CSA participants reported the following benefits of receiving a veg box:

- 37% eating a wider variety of quality vegetables
- 27% eating more vegetables
- 22% improved quality & taste of their vegetables
- 10% of participants mentioned putting the vegetables they receive at the centre of their meal planning

Health and sustainability

- 22% of participants feeling like they were eating more healthily – this was attributed both to eating a wider variety of quality vegetables, and to knowing that the vegetables were produced organically. Some participants commented that with receiving a veg bag, they had begun to shape the meal around the vegetables, rather than shaping it around meat, as they might have previously done.
- 26% of participants appreciated that receiving the vegetables had driven them to eat in a way that they perceived to be more seasonal or environmentally sustainable.

What is this?!

90% of participants received vegetables from the CSA that was unfamiliar to them.

The following vegetables were most often cited as unfamiliar:

- Kohlrabi: 35%
- Beetroot: 32%
- Chard: 25%
- Kale: 22%
- Unfamiliar greens: 16%
- Celeriac: 16%
- Unfamiliar varieties of squash: 16%
- Fennel: 14%
- Turnips: 11%

CSA repeat interviews

We carried out repeat interviews with CSAs in June 2020 and are in the process of completing our repeat interviews with our control group. Originally we had planned to carry out these interviews to see how people’s food habits changed over time through two growing seasons. However, COVID-19 has been the largest motivator of changes in people’s behaviour.

How have participants changed their diets during lockdown?

So far, data from the CSAs suggest that there were **not radical changes in what people were eating** or how they thought about what they were eating.

The main trend was that people were having **more treats, snacks, baking** and eating more and **drinking more alcohol**. 71% reported that the changes they had made were because of Coronavirus and lockdown.



Photo: Slade Farm. Taken by the active farmers, Polly and Graeme

Have people changed where they shop during lockdown?

86% of CSA members reported changes to grocery shopping.

Two narratives emerged: For some, lockdown was a period where they reduced the number of places they went to and were **relying more heavily on supermarkets**.



Photo: Sue Hall of Oak Tree Low Carbon Farm

The following comment reflects the feelings expressed by many participants:

“Yes, since lockdown, buying much more from Tesco. Before lockdown I was sourcing more from local producers. During the autumn I had started going to Cowbridge farmers market to buy stuff from there. Only odds and ends from Tesco, whereas now I can’t go around from shop to shop.”

On the other hand, other participants researched and **found local producers** who **delivered**, with most people getting more food from local suppliers that they were already sourcing produce from. These households were often using supermarkets too, but trying to fulfil as many needs as they were able to through delivery from smaller producers.

The following comment reflects what many people who were focussed on local producers commented:

“Since the coronavirus we are shopping even more locally in Woodbridge. Our green grocers started to do delivery. And our local fish shop is sort of a little kiosk in Woodbridge very near the car park. So we can drive down and pick up fish at 8 am when there’s very few people around. So not a problem with social distancing.”

- People tended to be **unsatisfied** with the changes they had made **if they had shifted towards supermarkets** and more **satisfied** if they had **found and were using local suppliers**.
- Many participants commented that they wanted to maintain or re-establish more sustainable behaviours post lockdown.

Among our **control group** participants, so far we have found that **20% of participants have tried out a new source of local food** and that **75% of participants started growing food for the first time**. This matches well with reports from local food producers of a dramatic increase in demand for produce during the lockdown period.

Amongst all of the participants, it will be interesting to explore how COVID-19 and the lockdown have impacted household food culture in the longer **term—which changes became habits and which ones didn’t stick** and how these changes impact the sustainability of our food system. **What do you think will be the biggest legacy of COVID-19 on your food practices?**

The information you have shared with our research team about your thoughts and practices around food have been so helpful for us to begin to understand how building relationships between people and the producers who grow our food can help improve the sustainability and health of our food system. We are still working hard to explore further the information that everyone has shared and will continue to make our results and conclusions available to everyone as they are ready. Thank you for joining us on this journey!

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend an *enormous* thank you to everyone who has participated in our interview work and to our CSA partners in South Wales and East Anglia. We would also like to recognise the great work done by our research assistants:

Mariana Broitman, Rosie Maunder, Jack Pickering, Kenza Ekua Podieh and Chiara Poletti.

The Cardiff University TGRAINS team leaders: **Angelina Sanderson Bellamy**



Ella Furness



Find more information at <https://tgrains.com/>