

COVID-19 Food Systems Part 1: Pandemic Purchasing and Proble...

Mon, 5/3 4:45PM 44:36

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, pandemic, food safety, lettuce, food, purchasing habits, restaurants, agriculture, michaela, farm, home, consumer, grocery store, greenhouses, seed, harvest, quarantine, questions, herbs, farmers

SPEAKERS

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Ricky Telg 00:04

This is Science by the Slice, a podcast from the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Center for Public Issues Education. In this podcast, experts discuss the science of issues affecting our daily lives, reveal the motivations behind the decisions people make, and ultimately provide insight to solutions for our lives.



Phillip Stokes 00:29

Hello, and welcome to Science by the Slice. I'm Phillip Stokes, Education Coordinator at the PIE Center and host of this podcast. Thanks for joining us for this two part series on how COVID-19 impacted the food system, where we are going to discuss some of the interruptions that were experienced from the producer to the purchaser. And first up, we're going to examine the consumer side of the food system. In our first segment, I speak with Michaela Kandzer, who conducted research on purchasing habit shifts across the U.S. during the pandemic. Michaela is a graduate student at the University of Florida studying agricultural communication, and is also a graduate assistant with the PIE Center. Towards the beginning of the shutdowns that were taking place due to the pandemic, Michaela new purchasing habits were changing. So she sought to find out exactly what changes were taking place. Here's Michaela laying out the purpose of her study, and what she was

trying to understand by conducting this research.

M Michaela Kandzer 01:34

So at the current time, whenever I conducted my study, there was really a lack of knowledge on what these purchasing habits were during COVID-19. And there was like a lack of knowledge on the changes that have taken place and a lack of knowledge on how agricultural communicators could effectively create messages about food purchasing habits, food safety behaviors and local food during health related crises. So my study really came out of out of that those needs and those questions. And so I was able to write questions and craft questions I were able to be put into the survey, which was a national survey, and be able to really look at and understand and examine how purchasing habits and how people were really behaving and how their behaviors had changed during the pandemic, on a national level.

P Phillip Stokes 02:16

Remind us the time period that you conducted your research that you took these samples from the public.

M Michaela Kandzer 02:22

So I collected data from July 24, 2020 to August 8, 2020.

P Phillip Stokes 02:27

July to August. Okay, so why don't we just go ahead and get into some of those findings. So based on what you found in your national survey, what were some of the main findings, and then we can kind of talk about some of the more specifics as well.

M Michaela Kandzer 02:40

So I think one of the most interesting things about the study and some of the things that you'll be able to see as I talk more about some of the results, and some of the data from the study is that, you know, COVID-19 affected everyone. No one got away unscathed, we all, you know, quarantines had been enforced, social distancing, we had to stop seeing our relatives start seeing our friends, people were getting sick, we were dealing with a lot of emotional things as well. And then we also weren't able to go to our grocery stores anymore. So we had to be a little bit more creative and figure out how we were going to get food from the farm from the grocery stores, to us and to our tables. And so I think

people had to get a little bit creative. And in fact, people I mean, also the industry. Thinking about some of the supply chain interruptions that took place due to facility closures or due to people getting sick. And seeing like on the news, some of the most shocking things were I think we're seeing in the grocery stores, like empty shelves and things we're trying to go get toilet paper, or go get, you know, whatever. And it wasn't on the shelf. And so we were having shortages there. But then at the same time, we could get online and we could look at the news. And we would see that there were people in farms having to plow up their their crops, because there was nowhere for them to go, we're seeing dairy farmers dump out their milk because there was, they didn't have anywhere to take your milk. And so I think this is really important to start there and to understand kind of where the consumer was whenever all of this data collection was taking place. So my instrument asked people to gauge their behaviors related to grocery store pickup for future delivery, dining in a restaurants, restaurant pickup and delivery, relying on food banks and growing food at home. And so they were asked to gauge their behavior from before, to during to after COVID-19. Interestingly, people indicated that they were going to participate in these behaviors more after COVID-19 than they did before COVID-19. And so I think that's interesting and kind of indicates how used we are to living the way that we do and how we really enjoy these things like going to a restaurant or going to the grocery store. I think that's something that people should keep in mind, especially industry. Something else that was really interesting is that 72% of people indicated that they were purchasing local foods that could indicate that people usually purchase that local, that much local food, or maybe indicates that people were maybe forced to purchase or make more local foods or really desiring to support their local economy during this time. And then lastly, another really interesting finding was that overall respondents in the U.S. seemed to be following the food safety guidelines that were being set forth by the CDC, which is good.

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Phillip Stokes 04:27

Yeah, yeah, of course. So I want to go back to your first point in mentioning that you were tracking things, you were tracking perceptions of these habits before, during and after, right? We're not at the after yet, but like what people would foresee themselves doing in the future. And you mentioned that there were some things that they stopped doing during that they would want to pick up after so what were some of those things, right? What were some of the things that were halted or at least reduced during the pandemic to start with?

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Michaela Kandzer 05:39

So from before to during, we actually, not surprisingly, probably saw an increase in people

using grocery pickup services or grocery delivery services, instead of actually going in the store to purchase their groceries, groceries. And then we saw a decrease in dining in a restaurants, which makes sense, because I know it was different from state to state. But in most states, restaurants either had to close completely or had cut down to capacity to be very little or outside only or delivery and pickup only. And so we did see a decrease in that. But interestingly, we also saw a decrease in people relying on restaurant delivery and restaurant pickup. So I think it's really interesting. My study didn't dive into this, but I would love to dive into it more into the future. But I don't really know why that was, I don't know if people were concerned about safety. And that's why they weren't wanting to get food from restaurants, or if they were just staying at home and not going out as much. So they didn't want to have to worry about those things. Or if it was just for convenience purposes, or maybe even necessity, maybe all the restaurants actually were closed. I'm not sure. But that's something I would like to look at in the future. And then we also saw an increase in people growing their food at home.

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Phillip Stokes 06:46

Did they say whether they might continue to grow food at home after the pandemic?

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Michaela Kandzer 06:51

Yes, they did. They actually said that they would. I know that my family and lots of other families around the world that they had had what they called quarantine gardens, and so they had planted gardens. So things that they wouldn't have to go to the grocery store for like, I don't know, onions, potatoes, carrots, those types of thing. And so it is interesting that people indicated that they would be willing to actually grow food at home more than during the pandemic and more than they would be willing to before COVID-19.

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Phillip Stokes 07:17

Yeah. It's maybe one of those things where Yeah, you're forced, your hand is kind of forced to do these things. And you think, hey, like, maybe it's not as hard or it's more doable than I thought it was previously. Yeah, that's another interesting thing you said about takeout. I think previously, before looking at your research, I also would have thought that takeout during the pandemic from restaurants would have been higher. But your while you don't know specifically why, as you mentioned, yeah, could be food safety related concerns. Did you receive a lot of input in your survey about food safety concerns as it relates to COVID-19?

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Michaela Kandzer 07:57

I don't remember the exact percentage. But there was there was a percentage of people that were really concerned about food safety. And there was also a percentage of people that were actually actively seeking out information related to food safety. I think that one reason that maybe people also weren't doing some of that restaurant pickup and delivery as much is because a lot of people were spending way more time at home. So they were having more time to get in the kitchen and experiment and cook things for their family. And so it also could have been more of a family experience. And it would be more time so you weren't rushing from thing to thing, you just got stopping by a restaurant and grabbing something to eat, and the normal hustle and bustle of things.

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Phillip Stokes 08:32

So I do want to take a step back and ask a question you alluded to at the beginning about how there were interruptions from a production side of agriculture. And I know we're, we're going to talk about this with other speakers in this podcast series. But can you just kind of give an overview? Because as a listener at home, and as people throughout the pandemic, you think, okay, there's all this food in the field, right? There's people are growing, farmers are growing just as much food as they would during whether there was a pandemic or not. Why can't that get to the grocery store shelves? Or why can't that get to the consumers to households? What's kind of the real What's going on there?

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Michaela Kandzer 09:15

Yeah, so I think that there are a lot of factors to consider when asking this question. And so it may not be quite as black and white as some would think or some people would have received previously. I think something is important to consider is that there was a lot of closures, a lot of shutdowns during COVID-19. So I was sent home for my office job but there are also cruise ship lines that were closed, there was restaurants that were closed school systems were closed. A lot of farmers, a lot of producers, they sell their foods, their foods, go to cruise ship their foods, go to schools, their foods, go to restaurants. And so whenever they were, you know, beginning of 2020 they were planting their crops, they were fertilizing them, they were getting ready to do what they do every other year and produce their crop and harvest it and send it off to wherever it needed to go wherever their final destination. Then, and then all of a sudden, that just came crashing down and there was a halt. So they'd already planted this food, they'd already put in all the inputs, they had done the hard work their blood, sweat, and tears. So then they get to this point where they have all of this food that they can't send to their final destination, because they're closed. And so I think, then you flip to the other side. So there are also several weeks between the farm and the grocery store a lot of times, and so there's like

packaging, and there's food safety stuff. And so some of those places were closed to or there were employee sickness, where people had to close down for periods of time on the farm all the way from the farm to the grocery store. And so some of those challenges that weren't present previously, were presenting themselves at that time. And so it was hard to be able to get that through from the field to the table.

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Phillip Stokes 10:46

So I know I'm jumping around a little bit. You mentioned one of the things about COVID-19, that people were spending more time at home. So that could have affected the way that they maybe cook food at home or they're eating out less or getting takeout less because they have more time at home to do that. Were there any other factors such as, you know, economic hardships that played into people's purchasing habits.

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Michaela Kandzer 11:11

As a part of my instrument, I did ask them questions about what people's experiences were related to COVID-19. And so 86% of respondents had indicated that they had experienced an increase in food prices due to COVID-19. And then there was also some percentage that indicated that they were also experiencing these food shortages at the same time.

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Phillip Stokes 11:29

I know one of the things you looked at was food safety. And you did ask people about whether they washed their fruits and vegetables. Right. So what did you find about that? Because there was a lot of a lot of different information going around on social media and in the regular media about that. So what were people actually doing with their fruits and vegetables?

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Michaela Kandzer 11:54

Yeah, so I thought that was really interesting. So I asked people four different statements about food safety, and ask them to indicate how true it was of them to practice these behaviors during COVID-19. And so those four behaviors were if they had washed their hands before preparing food, if they had washed their hands before consuming food, if they had made sure to rinse their fresh fruits and vegetables before eating them, and if they had washed their fruits and vegetables with soap, bleach sanitizer, alcohol or disinfectant. And so I remember seeing in the news that a lot of people have been washing their fruits and vegetables with soap, bleach, sanitizer, alcohol and disinfectants. So I dug

into that a little bit more online. And so I was able to find on the CDC website on their food safety page related to COVID-19 that they were specifically recommending that people do not practice this behavior. And so due to some of my other findings, I had known that 77% of respondents had looked for information related to food safety. And so it was interesting to see that people were overall, following the CDC guidelines for food safety. But there were still 33% of people that indicated that they were washing their fresh, fresh fruits and vegetables with soap, bleach sanitizer, alcohol or disinfectant,

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Phillip Stokes 13:02

which 33% is a pretty sizable number. It's not more than half. But it's a significant portion. I mean, a good portion of the US was doing that what would be some, some future research or places to look, places to expand on what you've already learned?

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Michaela Kandzer 13:22

Whenever I asked about people's behaviors related to their purchasing habits, I asked them to gauge their behaviors from before, during to after. But I didn't ask that same, I didn't ask the questions in that same format for local foods, I just asked like what they were doing now. And the same list of safety, I didn't ask what they were doing before COVID. And what they were going to do after COVID. I just asked what they were doing now. And so that's one thing that I regret, I wish I would have done differently, I wish I would have really asked for those behaviors before, during and after all the way across the board. So to really understand have a fuller picture, a bigger scope of the whole pandemic and what was going on in all of these areas, and how things have really changed from before to during, and then how we can expect for them to change from during to after. Something else I think would be really interesting. As I talked about in the beginning, one of the main purposes and one of the reasons that this research even took place is because there wasn't information or data collected about these things at this point in time. And so agricultural communicators didn't know how to create effective messages about food supply or about the supply chain or how to communicate about access to food during pandemics or during health related crises. And so I think something that would be really interesting to test is some of the messaging that was going on during during COVID-19 and see what was effective, what resonated with people what didn't, or even creating messages, messages to test and see how those resonate, and then being able to analyze those existing COVID-19 or those new COVID-19 messaging efforts for their effectiveness. And so we can learn lessons from that as well and take those into future potential pandemic situations.

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Phillip Stokes 14:57

That's really interesting. But I think that's a good segue to ask you, what were some of the recommendations from your research? Whether it's on messaging or anything else, what would you recommend to maybe first we'll just say the agricultural community agricultural producers.

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Michaela Kandzer 15:15

Yeah. So for communicators, I would really emphasize that they communicate about the supply chain, that they find ways to educate people about where their food comes from as that was an interest that we really saw during the pandemic, and people being curious about how does their food get from the field to their table. There was also, throughout my research, I was able to really see this continual theme of concern for food safety, and this concern for price. And so I would encourage agriculture communicators, to find ways to talk about food safety, and to talk about best practices or to talk about how food safety regulations are made, and also didn't really talk about price and about helping connect them with places where they can get food that is affordable. For the agriculture industry, one of my main takeaways and something that I think needs to be taken into future, potential pandemics and potential health related crises, or just crises in general, is to find a way to connect directly with the public. So find ways to through farmers markets or through your own business, to find ways to get the food that you are piling up in your field, instead of having to throw it out and create food waste, being able to sell those products directly to the public.

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Phillip Stokes 16:23

Yeah, something that I heard in another presentation that we've we've done through the PIE Center, is the producers that had some of those pieces of their infrastructure already set up kind of being able to sell to local markets and things and not just those larger kind of food retail companies that might go for tourism or school lunches and things like that. So so maybe, like it sounds like what you're saying is having at least a piece of your production, kind of geared for that just to be to be ready for shifts in the market or unknown circumstances like this. Is that right?

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Michaela Kandzer 17:06

Yeah, for sure. I think just being able to be resilient, being able to be adaptable, and being able to be creative in the way that you move your product from the field to the final end consumer, whether you have to, whether that be the cruise ship, whether that be the

school, or whether that could be someone in your local community.

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Phillip Stokes 17:24

Sure, sure. So Michaela, you spoke with a producer in here in the state of Florida, about some of these things. So could you just kind of introduce your conversation? Well, first introduce who you talked to, and then a little bit about your conversation.

M

Michaela Kandzer 17:39

Yeah, of course, Phillip. So I'm actually really excited about this conversation I was able to speak with Sarah Carte from Dasher Farms in Suwannee County, Florida. And her family, they have a farm where they grow hydroponic lettuce and herbs. And they primarily sell these products to their local school systems and also to local restaurants. But during the pandemic, they, you know, just like, just like the rest of us were living this in real time. And so they had planted their seeds. And then the pandemic hit, things were shutting down. And so they had to figure out what to do with all these products. So I'm really excited for you guys to hear from her next and to hear about how her family and her family farm combatted these issues and how they were able to create a positive solution.

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Phillip Stokes 18:25

Well, Michaela, I want to thank you for being on Science by the Slice, and sharing your thesis research really fascinating. And for conducting the interviews for this segment the series I think viewers are really gonna be interested in the conversations that you you had in this episode, and then of course, part two as well, that you know, I guess people will just have to stay tuned to find out more about

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Michaela Kandzer 18:52

Thank you, Philip. It's been a blast. As we mentioned a few minutes ago, my next conversation will be with Sarah Carte from Dasher Farms in Suwannee County, Florida. Sarah is the fifth generation of farmers in her family. Her grandfather bought their plot of land in 1946 and they have been farming there ever since. Sarah got her first start on the farm when she was just a freshman in high school. She used her money to purchase a combine and she used it to start harvesting grass seed for those in her community. Sarah is still an instrumental piece in her family's farming operation today. She currently wears a lot of hats from human resources to accounting to managing food safety. She's still an integral part of what's going on at Dasher Farms. Keep listening to hear Sarah talk about her family's farming operation and what it looks like today. So you get you mentioned that

you guys have a seed processing plant, but can you tell me a little bit more about your family's operation and what it looks like and what all you guys are doing there?

S Sarah Carte 19:52

I said we in 1977 dad built those seed processing plant we started out with a seed cleaner and we just clean and bag and sell small grains our main, our main small grains, you know, we can do other things depending on what's being grown in the area. And then we also have hydroponic greenhouses where we grow herbs and produce.

M Michaela Kandzer 20:16

Okay, and then those hydroponic herbs, and how what do you guys do with those?

S Sarah Carte 20:20

They are, we have been in the herb business since the early 2000s. And they are wholesaled to different companies. And then they either send them into food service or send them into grocery stores, is how the herbs are marketed. And then our produce mainly was lettuce and that was going to our school system, or is still is going to our school system and a few local restaurants.

M Michaela Kandzer 20:44

That's really awesome. I didn't realize that that's super cool. Um, so how did you guys get started doing that?

S Sarah Carte 20:49

In the mid 80s. It was a we started with greenhouses, tomato, hydroponic tomatoes, were a very popular thing. And we were looking to diversify the farm. And it fit our operation, it fit with what dad was doing, and at the time, and it was something that we could all help with. And so we started into tomatoes. The next year was when we started lettuce, then we got into the herbs in the late 90s.

M Michaela Kandzer 21:15

So do you always have like fresh herbs in all of your, in all of your recipes and all of the things you cook?

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Sarah Carte 21:21

The worst part is, is you get home and you realize that you didn't get anything from the farm. You're like, I didn't get that. But yeah, it's definitely something we learned back when we first started with herbs, you know that that was before the Food Network and, and all the different. You know, you knew the basic herbs and stuff. But so it's definitely changed some of the way we cook. And we've learned different ways. But yeah, it's always fun, just be able to grab what you need, and take it home and use it.

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Michaela Kandzer 21:49

So can you tell me a little bit how about how you and your family were affected by COVID-19?

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Sarah Carte 21:54

Well, with COVID-19, like I said, the herbs were wholesale. So those kept going but the lettuce was like our biggest wake up or hit that we took in the beginning was because our lettuce was sold to the school systems and to restaurants, which all shut down. And the way the lettuce works is it's a six week process from seed to harvest. So once the school shut down, and the kind of the way they phased us here was we should we were shutting down for two weeks. So at that point, two weeks isn't as far as our timing process. And there were only nine weeks left of school. So as far as our timing process to be sure that we had lettuce if they came back into school, we had to keep seeding. So two weeks isn't really enough to skip. One week into that two weeks it became we're going out for another two weeks. Okay, that's four weeks, we've backed off on seeding at that point, because we knew at the time they if they came back in by the time they came back in, it was gonna be near the end of the nine weeks. So that was the point we backed off. But the problem, the issue we were having was we were still having to harvest, we had to like I said it's six weeks from seed to harvest, we had to make room for the new plants to come on. And so one week, you have one week's worth, and you're just you just start giving to friends and family and here's extra lettuce. And that two weeks, you start getting a little backed up. And the point where we got to where we kind of changed things was when we were fixing to put the third week into the cooler and we didn't have room for it. So we then had that much lettuce that we had no home for. And so there's still six weeks worth is already planted and ready to go. So that was probably our biggest, you know, besides just the personal side of things, like it's the biggest. And what you'll see different about our operation is our lettuce was our biggest hit there in that beginning parts of COVID-19.

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Michaela Kandzer 23:43

So I know that you guys started doing weekly lettuce sales. So did that start as a result of COVID-19? Or how did that get introduced? And then are you guys still doing that? Or what does that look like today?

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Sarah Carte 23:54

Yeah, it was a direct result of COVID-19. It was something that we had talked about, we had never gone direct to the consumer, other than like I said we were going to the schools and to restaurants. And like I said our herbs are wholesale. We had talked about it several times, but had just never with manpower and everything. So it was a direct result of COVID-19 like I said, we were at that spot where we were fixing to have to completely throw away one week's harvest to make room in the cooler for the next week's harvest. So it I kind of say on a whim, but it wasn't really on a whim. It was just that moment. We're like, Okay, we got to do something, what can we do? And we sit in we had a Facebook page, it was a very inactive Facebook page. Our operation and our business model just didn't really warrant a lot of social media at that point. And so on a Wednesday afternoon, we put on the Facebook page that we were going to we had lettuce and it would be a first come first serve and we thought if we got rid of one week's worth, we would be doing good. Never expected the response that we got. You know, you hear things going viral you see things go viral. Never Had we experienced something go viral and it did get you started seeing the shares, and I started getting messages and I started getting comments and everything. And we never imagined we would actually empty the coolers that day, and have good if we had to actually stop people from we had to put posts like 30 minutes into it. Please, if you have not talked to us do not come. But yes, we still do it today. It turned into something that we enjoy the customers enjoy. I said it was a part of the business we had talked about, but just never really executed and what wasn't, you know, we just hadn't really figured it out. And it was we've kind of figured it out as we go and have been able to go direct to the consumer and still do this Friday, we will have another sale.

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Michaela Kandzer 25:45

So when did you guys start replanting lettuce again so that way to make sure you could keep doing this direct to consumer sales?

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Sarah Carte 25:52

Well, we knew we had you know, we recovered for six weeks. And so in that timeframe, the way we did it is we because we needed to comply with COVID rules and social

distancing. And everything, we took a page out of the restaurants, manual, and we created a drive thru service. And so people literally just drive through, we pull their order and hand it to them through their car, but they never get out of their car. And we still do that today. So it's a but you still had conversations. And a lot of people thought it was gonna be temporary. We were just doing it to get through COVID and stuff. And they're like, so they would start making statements about two or three weeks in, boy, we wish you all would keep doing this, we wish you all would keep doing this. And we're like, well, okay, we will. And so we just thankfully, that's the beauty of the greenhouse, we went right back to planting and seeding we never really, we kind of cut back on our seeding but we never stopped. So we could continually have lettuce. We warned them that during the summertime is tough, it's a tough, that's generally why we do our lettuce goes to the school system, because it grows best during the school year, but we could do it and we would limp along. And so during the summer was probably the only time that we really had to watch you know, inventory and, and cut everything off. Or, you know, say we couldn't do it. But um, we have been going every Friday since then. It was just a request. So customers kept requesting, that we keep going and we we said we'll keep trying and we're a year later, and we're still trying.

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Michaela Kandzer 27:22

So can you tell me what that felt like whenever you guys had that overwhelming and positive reaction from the community wanting to pour in and support you guys and also get access to your fresh produce.

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Sarah Carte 27:33

It was honestly humbling to and at a time, because there was so much response going on and so much focus on agriculture at that time. You know, because especially for Florida being with so much winter stuff, you know, we had different we had a blueberry farm just down the road. That was and so people were able to come, they come get blueberries and then come get lettuce, then we put the lettuce in the trunk and you'd see all the flats of blueberries in there too. And you know, it was a great thing. But it was humbling and, and that people were willing to, you know, go out in time, and a lot of them used to come into the farms to get the produce or whatever, whether they were going to the blueberry farm or coming to us, they used that as they're out to get out of the house. Because you know, everybody was in quarantine. So it was fun. They're like, yeah, this is our weekly venture out of the house. So but you know, it was, it was touching that first day, that first Friday when it was all over with after we were exhausted. And getting through and it was crazy from Wednesday to Friday. And I immediately kind of changed the way we do things now everything's on a pre order system. So that we completely can control inventory. And

nobody comes for something that isn't here. And and you know, it means a lot. And it's been great to be able to meet the customers talk to them, you learn a little bit about their families, and they learned about us different things going on with us. And because there's been different times we've had to adjust our hours for maybe something that the kids were an event with the kids or something like that. So, you know, it's been a humbling rewarding experience. It's been great to have a dialogue with the customers, you know, we're able to have a lot of dialogues. And you can tell that sometimes they they have a question they want to ask you and they've asked about different things that they've heard in agriculture, and so we're able to have that conversation with them too. And so it's been humbling and rewarding, all at the same time.

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Michaela Kandzer 29:25

That's really awesome. That's like also just really encouraging. I saw on Facebook too like during that time, a lot of farmers having to switching to that direct to consumer sales, and just the outpouring of people that were interested and they wanted to support and they wanted to get the fresh produce. And so that was just also just a really the experience just like secondhand to just see online and to experience and so I can't imagine like how awesome and great it would have felt like in your guys's position like getting that direct, you know, outpour of support. I think that's like one of the good things about coming from a small town to you is being able to you Have that tight knit community and, and from an ag rural community.

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Sarah Carte 30:03

Yeah, you know, it was, I said it was humbling and everything but it, it honestly I think helped everybody kind of get through you know because there was so much unknown at that time, and we didn't know the world, you know that one day was we were all walking along, we knew this, this virus existed, and then the next day the world stopped. And so to have, you know, that have people come in, and it kind of took your focus off of exactly what was always going on, because you had to focus on we still had a reason to work. And, you know, for a farmer, that's what we want to do, we want to feed people, we want them to be able to get their food, we want them, I mean, we're not out there, if they don't eat it, what are we growing it for. And so to be able to get it directly into their hands, and to be able to keep doing that kind of helped keep that positive in a time where things are so uncertain.

M

Michaela Kandzer 30:52

And I think you brought up a good point earlier, just about, you know, in the pandemic,

one of the biggest challenges for agriculture was that they had invested, you know, they, they had already planted their crops, they had already invested all this time and fertilizer and watering them and taking care of them. And then they reach the end, and they have all this produce and then or all these crops, and then they're like, we don't know what to do with them, we don't have anywhere to take them. And I think that was one of the biggest challenges. So is there any other challenges that you guys really experienced during COVID-19?

S

Sarah Carte 31:20

Yeah, I think you had the challenge, you know, the challenge is just that the virus brought itself to the workplace, you know, we had those, keeping our workers safe. making them aware of what was going, keeping, you know, keeping the business to where they had a job, you know, I can remember them coming in and asking, Are we going to have a job? How long because they saw people getting laid off, they knew what was going on. So you had all of that on top of while we had this positive going on. We also had those worries and, and the way the world kind of said it did cut into income, and how are we going to make things work and you had to get creative and, and but like I said, we also had to, as employers and business owners, we had to be sure that our employees were safe, our business was safe, all at the same time for them, and that they felt comfortable with what they were doing.

M

Michaela Kandzer 32:10

Will you talk a little bit more about that and about about your employees and like what that looked like and how you guys tried to keep them safe, and just kind of what that experience was like for you guys on the farm.

S

Sarah Carte 32:20

For us, when we started getting the recommendations on what to do for the employees, you had the extra sanitation the extra this, a lot of that we were already doing to meet our food safety requirements and meeting our food safety plan. So a lot of it, it was okay, we're just gonna increase this time, it's the same stuff you're doing all day long, but let's increase the timeframe that we do it this way, let's do it. You know, we're doing it three times a day, let's back that down. Let's do it five times a day, you know, do and, you know, they were already wore gloves and stuff. So it was things, you know, the masks those kind of PPE's and that kind of stuff were maybe the only things that we had to add for them. They spaced out in the greenhouse anyway, by the nature of the way they harvested. But we really you know, okay, pay attention to how far apart you are. Pay attention to your

surroundings and that kind of stuff. But, you know, in some places, I know, it was you they had to implement a lot of that. Whereas for us, it didn't feel as major because a lot of the protocol and the safety and the sanitation was already in place.

M

Michaela Kandzer 33:24

So did you guys ever have to like send people home at all? Or like halt operations or were you guys able to work all the way through?

S

Sarah Carte 33:31

We were able to work all the way through, we had one employee that had a compromised immune system and stuff he chose to stay home. And, you know, we were able to thankfully, there was ways that we paid him, you know, we self monitored, we told them to self monitor. And you know, we monitored, we definitely kept an eye, a closer eye, but we were able to continue to work all the way through, you know, they there was a, you know, a couple of times they had to self quarantine because maybe they were around somebody somewhere else. But and but we we constantly discussed you know, if when in doubt, stay home, we'll make it work. And but, you know, for all in all, we never had to shut down that we were able to continue to work in some way, shape or form.

M

Michaela Kandzer 34:14

Did you see other people in your industry kind of struggling with these same things or struggling with different challenges related to COVID-19?

S

Sarah Carte 34:21

I mean, as a whole, yes, it hit you saw everybody had their own their different struggles and some couldn't get labor. And there were some of them, you know, they'd had outbreaks to where it did take a large amount of their employees at one time maybe being on a quarantine. So everybody had different struggles, but the same struggles. I think you said it was one time you saw everybody was literally having the same problem at the same time versus maybe a weather disaster. And because sometimes weather disasters are more regionalized or localized, versus this was the pandemic so we were all getting it at the same time versus just one section of or one industry every every sector of the industry was getting hit at the same time.

M

Michaela Kandzer 35:08

Yeah, I think that also just this whole entire pandemic experience is something that's really been able to be seen by everyone. It's just the resilience of agriculture and just how everyone really was firing on all cylinders, and how they all just reacted, and they were able to continue their operations or continue to move their products. And they were able to continue to just be agriculture to feed the population in Florida and otherwise. So I also know that you're involved with Florida Farm Bureau. Were you familiar with any programs that were available to help farmers during COVID-19 as a response with either with Farm Bureau or either with other organizations?

S

Sarah Carte 35:43

The beauty of being involved with Farm Bureau and being a Farm Bureau member was the information that was given the flood of information, and having that the staff be able to get us information as quickly as possible as they could as it came in so that we were the best prepared and knew what was going on as far as what programs were available. Being a member of Ag organization or, you know, an industry, membership type organization. Those were key to me, it always is, but it was crucial during that timeframe because we were constantly kept away or as it was made available.

M

Michaela Kandzer 36:18

So looking back, how would you say that your farming operation has changed since last year's quarantines and lockdowns?

S

Sarah Carte 36:26

Well, our direct to the consumer part has definitely, that's our biggest when you look at our operation thing that has changed. Once school started, we were able to put in, we were able to go back to selling lettuce to the schools. And then once restaurants opened, we also had those so that that has changed. But if you look at us, from the outside looking in, the biggest change you'll see is our direct to consumer and that we, we continue that, and we're looking at ways to expand it, it's something that we enjoy, and the customers, you know, ask for the produce and ask for different stuff. So on and on. But that's our biggest change. And, you know, it's like anything that you you get through you kind of make adaptations along the way. Like I said, we now have a social media presence, and it's still not professional. But it's, you know, a presence that we didn't have before. The seed business kind of maintained itself, it didn't change a lot. And like, our biggest change that you'll see from outside looking in is our direct to consumer portion.

M

Michaela Kandzer 37:26

So I think there's just this cool dichotomy here, where you were able to see the community pouring into you guys and supporting you guys, but also at the same time, like you were able to support your community, like you were, it was like a two way thing, like you were both able to really support each other. During this hard time during this time of need.

S

Sarah Carte 37:43

It, it was a unique thing. And I said everybody was feeling their way through it. You know, nobody really knew we'd never experienced anything like this before. So nobody really knew. And so you just kind of got through it together. And you know, when you want, you can look at a lot of the negative side of things. But if you want to look at the pos, if you want to find the positive, you can find it there was you know, some changes. And like I said, it was an idea we had talked about, but never really pulled never really like well, maybe we don't have time for that. Or maybe we don't and then this kind of forced us to try it and realize, Oh, we did have time for it, we do we can make this work, it really can work. And we can do it. And so it kind of gave us that nudge, to do, you know, to expand in a way that we talked about, but had just kind of been a little apprehensive about jumping into.

M

Michaela Kandzer 38:37

So what do you think this means for the future of Florida agriculture?

S

Sarah Carte 38:39

I'm gonna say that as far as the future, agriculture is resilient, our people are resilient. Our workers are resilient. And so we're going to continue. Like I said, a farmer is not happy unless he's producing and, and getting producing and getting the what who's producing the food to the consumer. And so you know we're going to continue like I said, some of this changed, yep, and I think you'll see some of those changes be permanent, especially some of that, like the direct to consumer, I think it created a lot of dialogue that was needed in agriculture. And you we've always looked at the different ways to communicate and but there's nothing to me better than one on one sometimes and being able to get face to face with someone. You know, we have so many different ways and avenues to be able to communicate with people now. But you can never discount that one on one. And when you're seeing a person every week come by and get produced and you know, that they get unafraid to ask you a question and it kind of breaks that ice and, and you get a rapport with them to be able to communicate on a friendship level, not just a I'm telling

you, this is how I do it, you know, kind of more of a it's just this is this is how we do it. Kind of educate. And you kind fo get that friendship and that that knowing dialogue, which is different than maybe just when you're just educating the whole group of people. And so I think you'll see those things, you know, hopefully those will be the positive changes that we see.

M

Michaela Kandzer 40:15

So do you think this has really given you guys an opportunity to also educate your, your community, your personal community on agriculture and things related to agriculture?

S

Sarah Carte 40:24

Absolutely, I think it has given there's been so many people that have pulled up here and said, Well, I drive by here, all the time, our this road that we are farm is on has turned into a what we call a cut through road because it runs from two different county roads. And you know, people drive by here all the time, but I never knew what was in those greenhouses. I never knew what was going on. Up in the in the grain bins and stuff, you know, I didn't know now they've pulled through, and they've seen it, and they get to ask questions and, and stuff. But you know, a lot of people said, you don't have a chance I've driven by and I never knew what was out there. And what was made available. So I think it did you think you we take for granted that, you know, they drive by and they don't know, what is there. So I think it did create that dialogue. And I think it did that. And a lot of places not just here, you heard those stories all over in different places of that happening.

M

Michaela Kandzer 41:18

I think that is one of probably one of the really awesome outcomes also from COVID-19 and just this whole experience of farmers really connecting with their communities. So my last question, what lessons do you think can be carried forward into potential situations that are similar to COVID-19?

S

Sarah Carte 41:34

We definitely learned the lesson that when in need, people will step up and help that that part of us is still alive and well. And I think we know better how to get information and get information out, a lot of the practices will continue. So you know, whether it be an outbreak like that, again, or whether it be a disaster, you we've worked, our communication channels have, they got even tighter and better. I think we do a good job, even in disasters, we were doing a good job. But we've learned how to do that even better,

especially with ever changing information, especially when, like with COVID and the information was changing constantly, sometimes weekly and so it tightened up our communication levels. And so I think we've learned a lot of lessons and we'll continue to learn more. And that's you know, the fun part of life and this business is you're always learning and always doing things different and trying to figure out a different a different way or, or a better way, the best way to do it and it's always evolving. Um, you know, you'll never get there. And as long as we continue to do that, we'll be ready for the next challenge that comes along.

P

Phillip Stokes 43:00

Once again, that was Sarah Carte from Dasher Farms in Suwannee County, Florida talking with Michaela Kandzer. I want to thank Sarah for sharing a bit about her operation here on Science by the Slice. Be sure to listen to part two of this series. In that episode, two economists break down how the pandemic impacted both supply and demand. But more so they break down all of the links within the food supply chain. That is how food goes from field to fork and all the stops along the way. They're currently in the middle of a research project and one of the questions they're trying to gain insight on is if you increase the number of regional supply chains, which have fewer links and fewer stops, would that mitigate interruptions to the food supply chain, whether brought on by a pandemic or any other significant event with similar ramifications to the food system? Listen now to find out. I want to thank everyone involved in this podcast. Michaela Kandzer, Raychel Rabon, Ricky Telg, Sydney Honeycutt, Valentina Castano, Ashley McLeod-Morin and Alena Poulin. I'm Phillip Stokes. This is Science by the Slice.