

by A. Elizabeth Sloan

## Geographically Speaking: Regional Differences Make a Difference

Geography plays a major role in U.S. consumers' food preferences and purchasing patterns, several recent analyses show, underscoring the importance of regional marketing initiatives. Here's a look at some key demographic and geographic trends and some insights into the ways that where we live may influence how we eat.

Half of U.S. households (52%) are in suburban areas, 27% are urban, and 21% are rural, according to the U.S.

Census Bureau's 2018 *American Housing Survey*. The Census Bureau reports that the U.S. population breaks out like this: 126 million people live in the South; 78 million live in the West; 68 million are residents of the Midwest; and the Northeast is home to 56 million.

Over the past year, the number of dinners prepared at home each week in rural households has fallen from 4.9 to 4.4 meals, per the Food Marketing Institute's (FMI) 2019 *Power of Foodservice* report. More than one-third (36%) of urban consumers prepare three meals or fewer at home each week, per the FMI report.

Urban shoppers are the most likely to plan and shop for one meal at a time, while suburban consumers are more likely to make several meals at a time and refrigerate them for use during the week, according to FMI's 2019 *Power of Meat* report.

Urban dwellers also over-index for use of Instant Pots, air fryers, pressure cookers, and use of social media for meal inspiration, the FMI meat report notes. Along with those in the Northeast, they're most likely to buy a meal kit and to order at least some food online, per FMI's meat report.

Urbanites have the highest interest in chef-inspired items and limited-time offers; along with Northeasterners, they are most interested in made-to-order options, per FMI's foodservice report.

Rural frozen food use still lags other regions despite 40% of rural households having more than one freezer, according to the American Frozen Food Institute's (AFFI) 2019 *The Power of Frozen* report. Nearly half (45%) of urban households increased their use of frozen foods last year versus the national average of 35%, according to AFFI data.

Rural shoppers are much more likely to buy meat from the fresh meat case, while

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urbanites tend to opt for the full-service counter, according to FMI's meat report. FMI data also show that Western and urban consumers are the heaviest users of value-added meats.

Those in the Southwest and the Southeast are the most frequent users of fresh meals prepared at retail, according to a 2019 report from Packaged Facts titled *Eating Trends: Cooking & Food Shopping*. Westerners are most likely to make meals using only semi-prepared or fully prepared items, per FMI's 2019 *U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends* report.

According to Technomic's 2018 *Ethnic Food & Beverage Consumer Trend Report*, Westerners order ethnic foods/flavors at restaurants most often (73% versus 63% on average, across regions). They're most likely to have tried and liked Asian cuisines, except for Chinese; they over-index for Filipino and Japanese fare, Technomic's report indicates.

Bread and roll sales are nearly twice as high in the South compared with other regions of the country, per the International Dairy Deli Bakery Association's 2019 *What's in Store* report. Rural consumers are most likely to buy indulgent desserts, per the American Bakers Association's 2019 *Power of Bakery* report.

Behaviors related to health and nutrition vary from region to region. Northeasterners are the most interested in better-for-you-meats and better-for-the-animal products, per FMI's meat report. Westerners and urban dwellers are the most nutrition-focused shoppers. Southerners are least likely to report that their diet is healthier now than 10 years ago, per the 2019 *Food & Health Survey* conducted by the International Food

Information Council (IFIC).

Those in the West, Northeast, and urban areas are most likely to use organic food and to look for natural and

clean claims, per Packaged Facts' 2019 *Organic and Clean Label Food Shopper* report.

Avoidance of genetically modified foods is highest in the Northeast, followed by the West, according to IFIC's 2018 *Bioengineered Foods Survey*. Along with urban dwellers, these consumers are most interested in country of origin, ingredient sources, and manufacturing information, per FMI's foodservice report.

More than half of urban and Northeastern consumers seek out locally produced foods versus the national average of 44%, and Northeasterners are most likely to shop at farmers markets for produce, according to FMI's 2019 *Power of Produce* report. Seasonal items are of greatest interest in small town and rural areas (62% versus 53% of consumers overall), per the FMI data.

Urbanites are most interested in specialty diets (73% versus 59% overall), according to FMI's foodservice report. The Northeast and West have the largest vegetarian populations, per Gallup's 2018 *Vegetarian Survey*. **FT**



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