



Season 2 Episode 11 – Sweet Grown Alabama Part 1

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Speaker 1

Welcome to the Farming Basics Podcast with Olivia Fuller. We'll have sustainable farming tips from growers across the state and extension specialists at Auburn University.

Olivia Fuller

Welcome back everyone. It's your host, Olivia Fuller. And today we are gonna talk about sweet potatoes, everyone's favorite here in the southeast. We've got some exciting guests on today, one that we're hearing from, again, Wendiam. So happy to have you back. And we have two new people, Wendiam student Julia, and we also have Sweet Grown Alabama here today. And we're really excited to talk about all the things that they offer as a program. We'll do a future episode on the details of that, but I really wanna talk about this study that they collaborated on. And it does, it has to do with sweet potatoes and the market research that they've been conducting over the last year. Thanks for coming on everyone.

Aisling Fields

Absolutely. Thanks for having us, Olivia.

Wendiam Sawadgo

Yep. Glad to be on again.

Olivia Fuller

Tell us about the Sweet Potato Study. Who was involved? How, how did Sweet Groan get involved?

Wendiam Sawadgo

Well, you know, our goal overall was from conversations with Sweet Grown Alabama, was kind of to understand what the potential value of the brand was to farmers who might be willing to participate in it. And so we wanted to first look at it from the opposite angle, you know, the end, the end product. Are consumers gonna spend more money for a sweet grown Alabama product versus a product that's not part of that brand? And so for that, we started just by looking at farmer's markets as the first place to do this study. 'cause That's really a good place where local food is purchased in Alabama.

Olivia Fuller

And maybe it would be helpful to have a bit of a background on Sweet Groans role in this and like why it was important to highlight this for the farmers in the state.

Aisling Fields

Absolutely. So Sweet Grown Alabama is our state's nonprofit agricultural branding program. And so essentially we help farmers and farmers markets, farm stands, anybody who is producing a local agricultural product meet larger consumer bases, help them market their product through traditional marketing and things like that. So we just thought that it was very beneficial with this work that, that y'all were doing and that Julia conducted, you know, seeing how sweet potatoes are marketed and how consumers wanna find them. 'cause We think that that would help our farmers in the long run on how to better market their products.

Olivia Fuller

Nice. Oh, that's so exciting. And Julia, thanks for coming on. And thank, I know that this was like your, the reason you went in to get your master's. Yes. What, what excited you most about that?

Julia

Prior to hearing about this project? I had never considered getting my master's degree. And so the thought of being invited to conduct this project and lead it, and that was just really exciting to me. And it kind of opened up that opportunity of like, oh, I can do this. Like I can get a master's, I can do research. And what's really interesting is as we did this study, we realized like the research gap that there is with lack of sweet potato research out there and the sweet potato is Alabama's state vegetable. And so it it was just very cool where it's like, oh yeah, like we should do this. We can help get some more research out there for sweet potatoes and get some research for sweet ground Alabama. It was just, it was a very cool experience.

Olivia Fuller

I love that. What was your background in your undergrad? Why, why, why now? Horticulture and economics in this way?

Julia

So my background is I did my undergrad here at Auburn University and I studied agricultural business and economics. And I am, as I was going through undergrad, like you take a lot of very general classes, like you have your finance, your accounting, your managerial classes. And I just really, really, really liked my statistics course. And so that kind of like introduced me to like, oh, I can do this whole other thing with this degree where I can do like a bunch of research and analysis. And so that's kind of how I got really into it. And I was like talking with Wendy as an undergrad and he had like some opportunity for me to do data analysis with him. And so that's kind of how I met him and got introduced to the master's program.

Olivia Fuller

Oh, I love that. Thanks for sharing that. Wendy's incredible and like the work that you're doing, it's, that's what's so important to the farmers is knowing like if what they're doing is worth, I mean they've gotta pay bills, they've gotta make money. So that's just super important. Well let's get into like the details of the, the this study in particular that like the research project itself. What did that entail actually implementing that?

Wendiam Sawadgo

Well first, you know, it was a really cool project 'cause it brought together a lot of of our great stakeholders in Alabama. You know, we partnered with two farmers.

Julia

It was Crest Farms and Sermon Farms. Crest Farms is located in Coleman, Alabama. And then Sermon Farms is located in Daphne, Alabama.

Wendiam Sawadgo

Yes. And then five farmer's markets.

Julia

The five farmer's markets we visited was the coastal Alabama farmers and fishermen market in Foley, Ross Bridge Farmer's Market in Hoover Pepper Place in Birmingham and the Madison County Farmer's Market and the market at Mid-City, which are both in Huntsville.

Olivia Fuller

Shout out to all those farmer's markets

Wendiam Sawadgo

<Laugh>. And so that was a lot of fun working with them. And then we also had, you know, two undergrad students sort of like Julia was the year before who helped her really collect the data and Julia did a whole lot of work going back and forth with Sweet Grown Alabama, the farmer's market managers and the farmers themselves to just organize everything. So really was a great team effort and it was really cool for our department to be involved with that.

Olivia Fuller

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Julia

So we used real world experiment at farmer's markets throughout Alabama to understand the participant's maximum willingness to pay for differently labeled baskets of sweet potatoes. Participants placed bids on each basket and they were given a maximum of \$12 to bid. And because of this incentive, it was in their best interest to bid their true maximum willingness to pay. In particular, we asked about a basket of sweet potatoes from a farm outside of Alabama, a basket of sweet potatoes from a farm in Mississippi, a basket of sweet potatoes from an Alabama farm and a basket of sweet potatoes from a sweet grown Alabama farm. Lastly, participants completed a survey which gauged familiarity and beliefs about Sweet Alabama.

Wendiam Sawadgo

And so really our main goal was to make this as, you know, real life applicable as possible. You know, you're going to a farmer's market, you're buying produce and you know, you think, okay, how much do I actually wanna spend on this item versus where I'll go home without the item and be better off? And so we wanted to kind of put that into action and just have people at farmer's markets make decisions like they do, but also give us data for our research purposes.

Olivia Fuller

Such a cool study. I love the way that you set that up. What did it find?

Wendiam Sawadgo

So our main finding was that consumers were willing to pay more for local produce. No real surprise there. But for a sweet potato basket that was from Alabama versus one that was from a state outside of Alabama, they're willing to spend a dollar more for the one that's in state. But then when we add the sweet Grown Alabama brand label to it, they're willing to spend more for a sweet grown Alabama basket of sweet potatoes compared to one that was from a farm in Alabama without the label. So in essence, a farmer could almost make a dollar more per basket of sweet potatoes by joining the Sweet Grown Alabama program. On

Olivia Fuller

Average a dollar more on top of the already dollar more just by being in the state. Exactly. So potentially like \$2 more. Yeah.

Julia

And what was really interesting about that finding in particular is that through our survey we were able to figure out like the familiarity that people had with the brand and we found that a lot, like about 60% of our participants did not even know what se Corona Alabama was, but they were willing to pay, like after discussing the, like what the brand was and what it meant, they were willing to pay that premium for it.

Wendiam Sawadgo

And you know, I think being a relatively new program that's not necessarily surprised that there wasn't quite that level of familiarity. But I think with all the branding efforts, it'd be expected that that would grow over time.

Olivia Fuller

Oh, that's great. That speaks very highly to what Sweet Grown stands for and all of the other things that I know consumers are looking for when they're buying. I mean, 'cause my thing is you vote with your dollar and like, you know, speaking for things, I care to vote about food and food security or at the top of that list and I would much rather spend a little bit more money on something that is going to make a difference in the state, the state economics and the farmer's lives.

Aisling Fields

That's such a great way to put that Olivia. You know, we, we wanna tell consumers that when you are supporting local and you are, you know, putting money back into your local economy, you're supporting your friends that you may go to church with or your neighbors who your kids play at the playground with and just all of that is such a good feeling that like what you said about wanting to spend money with people that you can put a face with, you can actually ask them questions. You get to talk to them and know that, you know, they're feeding it to their family. So why, why wouldn't you feed it to yours?

Olivia Fuller

Yeah. And they're getting so much more. I mean, I, I just, I really push people to go to the farmer's market when they, when they can. And Julia, you highlighted earlier with where you did the study, just how many there are in the state that there's, that's like covering top to bottom. So I feel like there's one in everybody's area and people have this, I think preconceived notion. I would love to see really y'all dig into that and the economics of it, but the idea that the farmer's market is more expensive than the grocery store and I just don't see that to be true and my case without doing, you know, like true research gathering the data on that. But what's important there is if it's the same price, why not give that money directly to the farmer instead of having the grocery store take 40% at times of that percentage? So, and are

Wendiam Sawadgo

People agree with that? You know, we asked them, one of the questions was, why do you prefer to shop local or why do you think sweet grown Alabama as a brand would be something that people would be willing to pay for? And they say, number one, it's to support to support local farmers. That's about half the people say that and second is higher product quality. About a quarter of people say that. So that hits on everything y'all have just said.

Olivia Fuller

Oh, that's great. I'm glad that was part of the, the questions for that survey that you asked. We

Julia

Were fortunate enough to do personal interviews as a way to collect our data and we got a lot of feedback from people saying like, oh my gosh, like this is so cool. We love this. We're so excited to see like what you find out. Like we just got a lot of positive feedback that people were like, this is such a cool brand. Like we love this. Like, we wanna know about it. So that was a very cool experience, like being able to collect the data in the field and talking with those participants and seeing how they really felt about sweeter Alabama. So that was, that was very cool.

Olivia Fuller

I love that. I love that consumers cared that much and I love y'all's passion for it too. That really shows just today in the podcast, all of the work that went into that. It's really appreciated for, for this. And then for the farmers too, I know that they're happy to see what, what people are actually willing to pay and what it takes to get them involved in buying their produce. Anything else y'all want to highlight before we close out today?

Aisling Fields

Fun thing that we are actually talking about all of those farmer's markets. We published our farmer's market guide today on our website. So anybody who's listening it can go to sweetgrownalabama.org and can find a farmer's market in their area. We have all of them listed with their season dates and when they're gonna be open, what days and their hours.

Olivia Fuller

That is perfect. I love this information. Thank you so much for what y'all do.

Speaker 1

This has been a production of Alabama Extension at Auburn University.