



Reconnecting Consumers, Food and Producers: exploring 'alternative' networks

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More and more people in the United Kingdom are obtaining their food through 'alternative' food networks (AFNs). For many, participation is a way of establishing a sense of connection with the people, places and processes involved with growing and supplying their food. It reflects the anxieties associated with food consumption in contemporary society but at the same time, consumers report the pleasure they experience when buying, preparing and eating food from AFNs.

KEY FINDINGS

- The range and number of AFNs operating in the UK is enormous and includes well-established farm shops and organic box schemes, as well as unique and ingenious projects such as animal adoption, allotment groups, health and educational projects.
- AFNs are often imagined as a rural phenomenon, yet thriving AFNs can be found in urban areas, and serve relatively disadvantaged communities as well as affluent consumers.
- AFNs are very diverse in terms of how they function and who buys food from them. People consume food from AFNs for a great variety of reasons. Their motivations vary over time; often consumers identify increasingly with the ethical aims of the scheme in which they participate.
- For most consumers, AFNs are just one part of a greater repertoire of food sources and are used alongside supermarkets and other 'mainstream' outlets.
- Consumers get pleasure from AFNs – from both the food itself and the social relationships AFNs inspire. These relationships can be with food producers, other consumers and other members of their communities.
- AFNs disrupt conventional notions of convenience and lead to reassessments of what food shopping should be like: sensual and pleasurable in its own right.
- AFNs challenge supermarket-led notions of food choice. Although AFNs may seem to provide less choice to consumers, participants often associate them with a greater variety of foods, as well as the development of new knowledge about foods and new cooking skills.
- AFNs support relations of care between people, and between people and their environments: consumers 'connect' to people and places through AFNs. But 'care' is practised in various ways; from cooking for families and friends, to considering the environmental impacts of food consumption. Similarly, consumers establish 'connection' in different ways; from engaging growers

in conversation to literally helping in the field.

- The production of relations of care can in some cases also lead to new anxieties, like unexpected feelings of responsibility or guilt or ethical anxieties associated with a greater knowledge of how food is produced and consumed.
- Involvement in AFNs and greater interest in the ethics of food production and consumption has led some consumers to change their behaviour in other areas too, such as recycling, growing their own food and looking for more ethical sources of other goods.

Husband: **'That kallaloo we'd never heard of it 'till we had it but it's beautiful.'**

Wife: **'Yeah [...] I didn't know what them vegetables were, but I mean (laugh) I did steam them and P (husband) said they were alright but it's a shame to waste them isn't it?'**

Male, 60 and his wife, Salop Drive Market Garden

HIGHLIGHTS

Alternative food networks: diversity and change

The term 'alternative food networks' has been used to categorise ways of producing and consuming food which differ in some way from the 'conventional' food supply system, dominated in western Europe and north America by supermarkets and large food processing companies. Yet our project highlights the great diversity of activities existing under that general banner, and also emphasises that they change and develop over time. As the Table (over) shows, AFNs are defined in many different ways by the people who establish them.

Consumers also have a range of motivations for obtaining food from AFNs instead of, or alongside, the food they obtain from conventional sources. These motivations change and develop over time and often include 'push' factors, such as anxieties about how food is conventionally produced and retailed:

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'And when I see the chicken for sale in the supermarket I think "where were you before you were in this packet?" And that kind of stops me you know, I back off. I lift it, then I put it down. I think "I won't bother"'

Female, age 46, Earthshare, Scotland

Food, producers and consumers

Consumers in our case studies emphasise how important food from AFNs is to them. Many subscribe to a notion of 'proper' home-made family meals and prepare these from raw, fresh ingredients, spending a considerable amount of time in doing so. This does not, however, preclude convenience food and technology, which were used to varying degrees. The significance of food from AFNs is evident in their everyday routines. Buying, preparing and eating food, and in some cases being involved in growing food, is fitted into the wide range of activities making up peoples' individual and family lives. Consumers demonstrate great creativity in working food from AFNs into and around other activities.

But food also has wider significance. People engage with food in sensual ways. Food is looked at, smelled, squeezed and tasted as its various qualities are assessed and appreciated:

'The other thing is that I love cooking and choosing the food, choosing the ingredients is really part of that holistic experience of shopping for the food, preparing it, cooking it, and then eating it myself or having friends round to eat it. So it's the food experience, it's good'

Female, age 70, Bristol Farmers' Market

In social terms, the food practices associated with AFNs underpin diverse social relationships, for example with producers, with partners and other family members and with other food consumers. And in symbolic terms, food from AFNs can represent commitments to particular sets of ethical values, such as caring about social, environmental and economic sustainability. Food from AFNs seemed, from our research, to be special in the ways in which it permeated individual and family lives, contrasting with conventionally-sourced foods treated as mundane commodities.

Connections: buying, working and adopting

Different AFNs are set up to facilitate highly specific ways of managing a more direct connection between food producer and food consumer. Consumers can, therefore, purchase from a farm shop in a way which is similar in many respects to the act of purchasing from a supermarket, or buy from a stall at a farmers' market in the same way as from any other market, with the added twist of meeting the person who has grown or made the food being bought. On the other hand, they might order a weekly box of vegetables from a local grower, opening themselves up to the unexpected and losing the ability to choose what they receive each week in exchange for establishing a direct relationship with the grower. Or they might enter into longer-term commitments to support a particular farmer by joining a community supported agriculture project in which part of the payment for their supply of produce is physical work in the vegetable field. Consumers in the UK have even adopted sheep in Italy over the internet, receiving in return an adoption certificate and a twice-yearly parcel of sheep's-milk cheese.

Salop Drive market garden

Photo: Laura Venn



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Table:
Comparison
of main
academic and
lay definitions
of 'alternative'
food networks

Lay discourse and practice	Academic discourse and interpretation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stakeholder involvement e.g. supporters' groups, participatory planning, work days, schools projects, local procurement, demonstration farms, communal food growing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reconnecting consumers, producers and food in new economic spaces which re-embed food production and consumption
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Producer-consumer partnerships e.g. bulk purchasing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Non-conventional supply/distribution channels detached from industrial supply and demand and corporately controlled food chains
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Direct farmgate retail e.g. 'pick your own', mobile 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bag/box schemes (organic, biodynamic and conventional) 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Farmers markets / specialist markets / independent food shops 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Community access e.g. cooking clubs, newsletters, social events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Socially-embedded working on the principles of trust, community and place-based production
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Access to affordable, quality produce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Quality promoting quality; also preserving traditions, environment or heritage.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider environmental, biodiversity and conservation issues; restore /save land; seedbanks 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Health projects e.g. weight classes, diet courses, nutritional education 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Educational, lifestyle and empowerment programmes e.g. training, independent living skills. 	

'Connection', then, far from being a simple and easily achieved phenomenon, can mean very different things in different circumstances. One Bristol consumer expressed the significance of connection as follows:

'...what I hadn't expected or anticipated or looked for necessarily was a sense of it as a social occasion and the sense of it as something that kind of, um, altered my perception of the city as a whole, you know [...] it made it a more vibrant place and a friendly place and that thing about the connection with the...the world around it, the rural land and the fact that these producers come in from Somerset and Gloucestershire and so on and you know, you feel a bit more connected'

Male, age 43, Bristol Farmers' Market

Connection is in part a technical concern: how does food, and information about that food, get from producers to consumers? But it is also to do with relationships: what social relationships are established? How 'close' do they get? How do they function? How

important are they? The answers to these questions vary between different AFNs.

MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- Because AFNs come in so many shapes and forms, policies to support them need to respond to local needs and variations.
- Because consumers tap into AFNs for different reasons, policies to enable consumers to access such networks also need to be formulated in different spheres of government activity e.g. health, rural and urban regeneration, education, planning. There is not really a 'typical' 'alternative' food consumer, despite stereotypical representations of the middle class 'beard and sandals brigade'. One implication of this is that it is important not to 'dismiss' certain groups of consumer as being 'uninterested' in AFNs. Our research included those who live in a deprived urban area who valued the opportunity to obtain fresh vegetables from an AFN. Again, understanding the diversity amongst AFN is key; they serve different groups of consumers, are associated with different sets of ethical values and long-term objectives,

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and reflect the specific conditions present in different geographical locations.

- Although consumers have a range of reasons for wanting to source their food from AFNs, price is still an important consideration and can be a barrier to participation. Fitting participation into busy daily routines is also difficult, especially for working parents with young children who are often particularly aware of the nutritional advantages which may be present in both locally and organically-produced fresh food.
- Despite AFNs generally being small and specialist, and some being organised so as to reduce the choice that consumers have – in their organic box for example – participants in AFNs reported eating more different foods, and more fruit and vegetables when they participated in these schemes. 'Connection' between food producers and consumers is one way in which diets and knowledge about food could be improved.
- AFNs do not necessarily want to develop by growing bigger. In many cases this would damage the ethos of the scheme and undermine the sense of 'connection' which has been established between producer and consumers. A proliferation of diverse small schemes is more realistic than rationalisation and standardisation.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Reconnecting Consumers, Food and Producers: exploring 'alternative' networks (grant number RES-143-25-005) ran from June 2003 to December 2006. Our research involved in-depth work with food consumers and producers from six very different schemes: an organic vegetable box, a farmers' market, an urban market garden, a community supported agriculture project, a farm shop, and a venture allowing consumers to 'adopt'

a milking sheep on an Italian farm. The research brought together specialists in geography, sociology and anthropology based at the universities of Coventry, Warwick, Hull and Birkbeck. In-depth interviews, consumer workshops and household ethnographies were used; the project thus yielded rich data regarding producers' and consumers' values, practices and ethical frameworks.

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

- Holloway L., Kneafsey M., Venn L., Cox R., Dowler E. and Tuomainen H. 'Possible Food Economies: A Methodological Framework for Exploring Food Production-Consumption Relationships', *Sociologia Ruralis*, (forthcoming 2007).
- Kneafsey M., Holloway L., Cox R., Dowler E., Venn L. and Tuomainen H. *Reconnecting Consumers, Food and Producers: Exploring 'Alternative' Networks* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).
- Kneafsey M., Holloway L., Venn L., Cox R., Dowler E. and Tuomainen H. 'Consumers and Producers: Coping with Food Anxieties through "Reconnection"?' *Cultures of Consumption* working paper No.19 (2004), see: <http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/publications.html>

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CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME



The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context. The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website www.consume.bbk.ac.uk

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