

RESEARCH COMMENTARIES: FOOD SYSTEMS RESEARCH PRIORITIES OVER THE NEXT 5 YEARS

Participation and investment in local agriculture: What's in a community?

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Abstract

This commentary highlights how participation and investment in local food systems vary between differently situated actors in Alaska, with an emphasis on communities in the interior of the state. Our experiences with various food system research projects over the last five years have revealed several exclusionary and inclusionary practices and policies that call into question shared notions of community among local food producers and consumers. We note the different motivations and discourses that producers and consumers

construct for themselves and each other regarding their participation in local food movements. Tension and frictions exist in these multilayered foodscapes where cultural values of community, as imagined by both producers and consumers, confront the reality of market interactions. Hence, rather than producing a unified narrative of sustainability that is agreed upon by all members of some imagined community, we suggest that future food system research and development initiatives should be open to how foodscapes will and must remain contested landscapes whose contours are ever shifting. The alternative, we argue, is to perpetuate a façade of food system reform that, while sufficient for some, will remain vulnerable to external criticism by those who continue to promote only large-scale and industrial paradigms.

Keywords

community supported agriculture, food justice, food systems, local food

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Introduction

Over the last several decades, community-supported and community-shared agriculture (CSA) have emerged as locally based programs for connecting producers directly with local consumers. Proponents of these approaches, including the co-authors of this paper, allege that these efforts have the potential to directly confront some of the problems related to social and environmental justice that are embedded within the industrial system of food production, distribution, and consumption. Further, many argue that CSAs and other such local food initiatives foster local connections and action, building “community” and potentially extending notions of community to include the maintenance of local ecologies. Such initiatives are relatively recent and less well developed in Alaska relative to the contiguous United States, where the necessary infrastructure, including access to transportation, farm equipment, and even seeds for agriculture, is still being developed.

Alaska, too, is relatively underdeveloped in terms of food distribution mechanisms, such as farmers’ markets, farm-to-school programs, and community supported agriculture. However, as we discuss below, challenges related to the emergence of such programs in Alaska, particularly the interior region of the state, raise questions that are relevant to the development of local food systems and networks in general.

In our various research projects on local food in Alaska, we have observed both varying engagement and varying participation by differently situated individuals and institutions. Specifically, we have observed emergent tensions between idealized narratives of local food production and the realities of environmental and economic determinants that prevent building a robust local food system. To appropriately situate these tensions, however, we must first briefly discuss the positioning of farmers and consumers in the market economy and discuss the concept of community in the context of global processes.

Whence Local Food?

Food producers enter and remain in farming and ranching for a variety of economic and ethical reasons. In marketing their foods, they engage in a

variety of strategies that may foster relatively anonymous or intimate relations with the consumers of their products. Marketing strategies can include the use of regulated descriptors, such as “organic,” or can rely on lay conceptualizations of quality foods, through emphasis on “local” or “regional” sourcing and marketing. Hence, marketing for some farmers is inextricably tied to processes of production and place-making, by which farmers attempt to bind consumers to them through webs of mutual interdependence and reliance at the community level. Their “local” products may cost a premium in the market and can be viewed as attempts to commoditize new domains, but, as Fisher (2007) suggests in considering fair-trade products, they can also be viewed as a partial gift exchange or as a social movement. In other words, while producers’ marketing strategies may simply recognize local markets as a viable niche, their customers may assume that they choose this strategy out of concern for social reform. Since these exchanges are market-based, farmers must also contend with the immorality of the market (Falk & Szech, 2013) while attempting to convince consumers of the morality of supporting local agriculture.

Concomitantly, food consumers become and remain interested in local, regional, and organic foods for a variety of reasons. In market-based exchanges typical of grocery stores and restaurants, the consumer knows little to nothing of those who work to prepare food for consumption, including but not limited to those who grow the food, those who distribute the food, and those who prepare the food for consumption, whether this be prep cooks in a kitchen or graveyard-shift stockers of grocery shelves. As consumers we might gravitate toward particular chefs whose culinary arts capture the attention of food critics, or share stories about local affairs with the checkout person in the supermarket, but this is typically the extent of our personal knowledge of our food’s biography, its movement from field to machine to hand and ultimately to ourselves. As consumers in these contexts we certainly know little of those who toiled to wrest this sustenance from the earth and sea, although, through corporate co-optation of the local food movements and other sustainable food

system initiatives (see Belasco, 2006; Loring, 2013), we may be able to see the essence of their work and its importance in the personal narratives of idealized farmers, ranchers, and fisher-folk prevalent in the advertising imagery of companies.

Consumers increasingly are concerned with how alternative food movements may strengthen their local community, but the concept of community has, of course, become problematized by scholars who note the less-than-distinct boundaries between what composes community in an era of globalization that includes time-space compression (Harvey, 1990) and the emergence of online communities (Wilson & Peterson, 2002) such as YouTube (Wesch, 2008) and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (see Nardi, 2010). Despite its problematic nature from an academic context, the notion of community has become another way to brand commodities and create enduring bonds between companies, products, and consumers (Foster, 2007). The most effective brands, arguably, are co-constituted by multiple publics, such that they mean many things to differently situated individuals who nonetheless express strong preferences for the same products (Foster, 2007). Along with this branding are notions of expected product quality and adherence to the consumers' social values; brands that are called into question by consumers can leave companies reeling and forced to deal with environmental issues, albeit from a consumerist perspective of environmentalism (Vedwan, 2007). The emerging volume and accessibility of information regarding corporate practices and brand ownership, for example via the new cell phone application "Buycott," can leave consumers negotiating their own allegiances to brands and programs of social reform. It is critical to consider that commodities can also be sold as inherently exotic, untouched, and previously unknown to the West with potentially grave social justice and environmental implications (Kaplan, 2007).

Are we asking too much of farmers to navigate consumers' increasingly dense conceptualizations of place? When industrial systems of production and neoliberal economic paradigms of production agriculture align, are we asking too much of farmers to simultaneously earn a living wage and

provide for the all the elements that have been undermined through the imposition of industrial agricultural techniques with resultant dramatic transformations in both landscapes and communities? These expectations have been shown in the case of the French debate concerning genetically modified foods (see Heller, 2007). Can community be built, on the one hand, through the growing of local and organic foods, but simultaneously be eroded when these foods are brought in from elsewhere? While traditional foods are claimed by communities over long periods of time and remain key markers of ethnic identity in many contexts, they too are subject to shifting relations and interdependencies, which have not existed from time immemorial (see, e.g., Fazzino, 2008).

Just as processes of globalization include disembedding relations among people and between people and their local environs, they also create the spaces and opportunities for re-embedding of historical and traditional relations in a variety of revitalization movements, which have played on notions of a shared and collective past. Settler societies are no less rich with traditions than indigenous ones, traditions that have been established over a number of years and provide the grist by which to fashion notions of place. Food traditions in these societies in particular can resist the disembedding of production while at the same time maintaining the continuity of the traditional and authentic consumption, as in the case of Blue Crabs in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed (Paolisso, 2007) or as the authors regularly witness in Fairbanks, Alaska, when chain-owned grocery stores sponsor community or youth baseball teams or host cookouts featuring the products they sell in their stores.

Some Examples from Alaska

In Alaska we have explored several aspects of the local and regional food system over the last several years. These include: (1) an examination of the heat-or-eat crisis and food assistance in Fairbanks (Fazzino & Loring, 2009); (2) an examination of the historic contribution of outpost agriculture in Alaska (Loring & Gerlach, 2009); (3) an examination of fisheries in Alaska (Loring & Gerlach, 2010; Loring, Gerlach & Harrison, 2013); (4) a study of

community supported agriculture members and producers in interior Alaska building off the work of Durrenberger (2002) by Fazzino, Garcia, and Loring in 2009; and (5) a series of studies on perceptions of healthy, local, and organic foods at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) (a number of locally distributed reports from Fazzino in 2010 and 2011 and Mohammadi in 2013). Collectively these forays into Alaska's food system have shown us that economics matters, particularly with respect to how differently situated individuals have a variety of means to access food resources and define one another as members of the same community.

For example, those who receive food assistance in the Fairbanks area report that they are not always able to get the products that they desire, particularly Alaska Native respondents, who note a relative lack of access to traditional foods they consumed in their villages (Fazzino & Loring, 2009). Similar disparity in access to local fish has also been shown for communities in the Kenai Peninsula region (Loring et al., 2013). This is not to imply that Alaska Natives purport or expect to participate in some unchanging "traditional" food system, as new foods and subsistence strategies are regularly integrated (Loring & Gerlach, 2009). Nor is residence in a rural community a guarantee of access to traditional foods, given ongoing barriers to access created by environmental change and resource management paradigms that are organized around species conservation and resource development but not food security as idealized outcomes (Loring & Gerlach, 2010).


Likewise, through research on CSA programs in Interior Alaska, Fazzino, Garcia, and Loring found, following Durrenberger (2002), that those who self-reported as being white and earning household incomes of over US\$125,000 made up a disproportionate percentage of CSA members. Participation in a CSA did lead to changes in dietary behaviors, although these were somewhat muted given the short growing season wherein CSA members only have access to fresh local vegetables for 20 weeks out of the year. The Tanana Valley Farmers Market was not seen as a place where all Fairbanks residents would be likely to shop based on aesthetics and economics (Garcia

2012), affirming the same exclusionary phenomena reported by Guthman (2008) in California.

Finally, exclusion can also be a matter of individual finances, as indicated by surveys conducted with UAF students. Respondents to surveys at UAF were primarily students earning less than US\$25,000 per year, who nevertheless viewed local foods as important, although they were reluctant to pay more for incorporating local foods into their diets. Those respondents who lived in Fairbanks for the longest period of time most strongly agreed that local agriculture helps build community. Additionally, this demographic category felt more strongly than others that local agriculture is good for the local economy and community.

Discussion and Future Directions

The anecdotes from Alaska noted above illustrate the "growing pains" that local food initiatives are experiencing elsewhere (Tregear, 2011). As we continue to explore food systems in Alaska, we note that the concept of community is central to local food movements with the notion that where we eat, with whom we eat, how we eat, and what we eat all matter. Community itself is contested and marked by zones of exclusion and inclusion, including where the meal will take place, how the table is set, and who is invited to it. Do self-identified big-box store shoppers have any less of a claim to community than CSA members? Or, perhaps complicating things further, do subscribers to a weekly box of fruits and vegetables in Fairbanks, Alaska, have any less claim to community than CSA members if the company selling these boxes markets itself as local and provides a newsletter to subscribers? If the answer to either of these questions is "yes," what might this say about our own preoccupations about community, class, taste, and ethics, and what are the social justice ramifications of this? In framing research and reporting on results over the next five years it is our hope that researchers continue to reveal not only the economic and political power of industrial agriculture, but also report on the power differentials in sustainable food movements, with the hope of creating greater spaces for food democracy, justice, and agency rather than contributing to caricatures of food landscapes as bucolic and unsoiled country-

sides (see, e.g., the critique by Collier, 2008). There is already plenty enough “food porn” out there — to be tasted, savored, and consumed with only the details that reify the purported exoticness and purity of each bite. Food systems research should not merely mirror sites of desire created in the centerfolds of gourmet and travel magazines, but focus on the contested spaces and diverse voices that we all should strive to represent. 

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