

BUYING LOCAL FOOD: the role of shopping practices, place and consumption networks in defining food as “local”

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I feel guilty about eating food that has been flown half way round the world and I feel guilty for buying lots of food from Tesco, because it's quick, easy and close rather than sourcing it from local producers or whatever it might be, I feel better about it now I'm getting my fruit and vegetable box (Sarah, mother of 3).

One of the ironies of modern life is that although we have more ingredients to choose from than ever before, much of it is not worth buying. In a way, you could say we have been blinded by plenty. We have so many choices that we've forgotten how to select only that which is best (Parsons 2007, 16).

This article contributes to recent calls to closer examine what is meant by “local” in relation to food by focusing specifically on how consumers and retailers negotiate meaning in place. Increasing disquiet about the state of the environment, the high profile of food scares, and concerns for local economic well being have lead to appeals by activists to re-localise food, policy initiatives aimed at devolving rural governance to regions, and increased consumer concerns over the quality and provenance of the foods they eat. At present, while there are rules regarding provenance labelling in Europe,

there are no government guidelines as to what the term “local” means in relation to food in Europe or in North America. Thus, farmer advocacy groups in the U.K. are arguing for a definition of local food¹, which aims to differentiate food that is grown, processed and sold within a relatively small area and that contributes to the sustainability of that area from food that is not produced under these conditions. At the same time retailers in the U.K. and to a lesser degree in the U.S. are increasingly drawing on the discourses of the local as part of a marketing strategy aimed at distancing themselves from the negative connotations of globalised and industrialised food practices and as a way to link to national identity in order to ultimately capture a larger share of the market. The result is a confusing landscape of meaning around the word local that consumers feel they must negotiate as they go to buy their food.

In this article we aim to extend how academic debates have considered the term local in relation to food by examining how local is understood within consumer-retailer relations. While the main body of work concerning local food thus far has tended to focus on producers, there have been a number of calls to reconnect production with consumption in relation to local food (Guthman 2002; Bryant and Goodman 2004; Holloway and Hones 2007; Holloway et al. 2007). The literature that takes up these calls, we would argue, largely remains rooted in an agro-food tradition that starts from a perspective that looks down the commodity chain (but see Weatherell, Tregear and Allinson 2003). For example, within this work there is considerable advocacy for eating food that is grown or farmed locally, which considers local in terms of the distance that food must travel to get from farm to market and assumes that the market is somehow synonymous to the consumer’s fork. As a result, research within this area that acknowledges consumption has tended to equate local food with alternative food networks that are defined in relation to a reified notion of mainstream food distribution

(see Maxey 2007 for a discussion), and then interrogates the consumption of those who buy from these “alternative” producers (e.g., Bryant and Goodman 2004; Holloway et al. 2007). While this research has provided a number of important insights into understanding how the term local is utilized within alternative food networks, we think that that approach acts to elide the practices of consumers, who view their consumption as ordinary², with ideas of local food as they shop. Thus, rather than challenge the prevailing alternative-mainstream dualism, which we believe is already well rehearsed (see, for example, chapters in Maye, Holloway and Kneafsey 2007), we approach the question of local food by taking up heretofore little examined suggestions to look up the commodity chain (e.g., Roe 2006; Eden, Bear and Walker 2008), from the perspective of consumers, as a way to expose different social relations and practices than those revealed in the downstream view.

Recognising that consumption is not just a symbolic activity and that shopping spaces are constituted relationally in place, means that an upstream perspective of the commodity chain will also require a deeper engagement with the specificity of geography than has previously been unacknowledged in studies of local food (see also Feagan 2007; Eden et al. 2008). Thus we seek to engage with the arguments put forward by Gregson et al. (2002) that shopping space is relationally constructed through the contrasting practices of consumers; by also considering the ways that consumer choice is shaped by the local context where consumers experience competition (Jackson et al. 2006). We do this by highlighting how both the practices of consumers and retailers in a particular space shape the possibilities for consuming in that space. Specifically we examine the practices of largely white, middle class consumers as they negotiate and help shape a shopping space centred on notions of local food that is populated by food retailers, who also have social identities constructed

through the firm's own particular practices that engage with the idea of the local. Indeed our research finds that different retailers actively seek to produce different notions of the local for consumers. Likewise, consumers engage with the ways that retailers employ the idea of the local in relation to food in a way that is reflexive and relational but also linked to their own understandings of time-space, quality, and value. These different, but co-dependent sets of practices and understandings combine to produce a particular shopping space, which in turn shapes the possibilities and conditions under which local food may be purchased. Before presenting the empirical discussion, the article begins with a brief review of the literature, outlining how academics have understood the notion of local food and then relating this understanding to theories of shopping practices and place.

Considering the "local" in relation to food

Academic debate regarding the role of the "local" in food has conceptualised the term in a myriad of ways. Studies that focus on the notion of "food miles" and shortened supply chains (e.g., Renting, Marsden and Banks 2003; Smith et al. 2005), local food systems (e.g., Goodman and DuPuis 2002; Morris and Buller 2003; DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Feagan 2007), and food provenance labelling (e.g., Ilbery 2000) illustrate the diversity in the understanding of the notion of local within food production. Unifying this material diversity is the discursive association of "local" with trust, shared norms and values, heritage, quality, stewardship, known, simple, artisan, and community, which is placed as an alternative to the industrialised food systems that have been blamed for breaches in consumer safety, animal cruelty, Frankenstein foods, cultural homogenisation, and the undermining of farmers in both the global north and south (Tait 2001; Freidberg 2004; DuPuis and Goodman 2005). Indeed, the constructions of local food as alternative to industrialised food provision by activists and others is a

powerful tool for mobilising consumers around a host of food related social movements as well as offers the possibility for extracting greater rents on the basis of this alterity (see for example Guthman's (2002) work on organic food).

An acknowledgement of the socially constructed nature of the idea of "the local" has meant research is beginning to question who are the agents involved in defining food as local and who is part of that "local". Agrofood research has placed a considerable amount of focus on farmers and growers who sell directly to the public at farmers markets and food fairs, and to a lesser degree in small scale shops (Morris and Buller 2003). Likewise, there is a burgeoning literature on food activism and the move toward local food as a social movement (for a review see DuPuis and Goodman 2005). This literature identifies these activists, largely located in the United States, as promoting specific notions of a romanticised utopia through local foods to a largely by white, middle class group of consumers (e.g., Hinrichs and Kremer 2002; Winter 2003). Conversely, in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe, the impetus behind the active promotion of local food production has tended to focus on rural development (for further discussion of the distinctions between the European and American models of alternative food practice see Goodman 2003).

Holloway et al. (2007) and others have begun to argue that the discursive establishment of an alternative- conventional dichotomy limits understanding about the heterogeneous nature of "alternative foods". For example Ilbery and Maye (2005) illustrate that alternative producers are actually hybrid producers who adopt diverse sets of practices, sometimes adopting what might be considered alternative practices while at other times acting in a more mainstream or traditional way. While DuPuis and Goodman (2005:360) warn against "unreflexive localism" in normative terms as they argue it can undermine local social justice through its inherent exclusivity and

leaves the local “susceptible to corporate cooptation” (Sustain 2008), there still remains little engagement with the ways that the local appears in a more generalised food landscape. Indeed, we would argue, linking local with alternative has tended to obfuscate the engagements of what might be considered as mainstream practitioners, such as supermarket retailers or traditional butchers and green grocers, with local food.

There is also recognition that the place of consumers in relation to local food has continued to remain under researched (Maye, Kneafsey and Holloway 2007). There are, for example, several studies that examine the benefits accrued to consumers who are engaged with particular types of producer/ retailers such as farmers markets, community agriculture schemes, and so forth (Hinrichs 2000, Holloway and Kneafsey 2000, Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002, Bryant and Goodman 2004). But research that focuses on the capacities of ordinary consumers to negotiate the purchasing of foods in an economic and social climate where the local is increasingly more present as part of the retail message is somewhat sparser. We believe, like Weatherell et al. (2003) that this is the result of disciplinary distinctions that prioritise particular views within the commodity chain. The down chain perspective, primarily adopted by those concerned with local food systems, not only casts food as local before it gets anywhere near the consumer and their home by disregarding the journey that the consumer must make to get this food, but also pre-selects consumers as local food buyers based on definitions of local food as determined by researchers and (possibly) producers (e.g., Hinrichs 2000, Guthman 2002; Hinrichs 2003; Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002; Weatherell et al. 2003; Ilbery and Maye 2005; Tellstrom et al. 2005). Those concerned with local food thus far have constructed the consumer not as a potential agent contributing to the meaning of local food, but instead as a passive recipient with no locality of their own. In this reading, by the time local food comes to the consumer it is a category that is

essentially placeless rather than a practice that is negotiated in place by those who are located in that place.

Shopping, place and local food

Using the concept of place as a way to consider local food consumption practices is particularly useful because not only does everyone eat, but everyone must do so somewhere and on a regular basis and to do so food must be provisioned. Because the concept of the local place is not just a site on the map, but is made of up discourses that are sometimes conflicting (Creswell 2004), institutions and their interpretations (Blake 2006), memories and connections (Massey 2005) all of which are shaped by the movements of goods and people into and out of a particular locality (Cronon 1991), each particular location provides a site within which opportunities are constructed and constraints are imposed in ways that are particular to that place. Thus the importance of the local place as it is experienced by consumers is likely to become paramount to acts of buying food even as these acts become subsumed within the ordinary and overlooked practices of the everyday. Finally, by considering the role of place in shaping the conditions of food provisioning practices within a locality, the agency of place is reasserted (see Massey 2005 for a recent discussion of the agency of place). Place, in our account is not alienated from the food system as a market, but instead becomes part of the food system helping to define what foods come to be consumed and how people value and engage with those foods.

While perspectives that specifically address consumer behaviour rarely address local food consumption (Weatherell et al. 2003), and those who have, have tended to focus on consumers perceptions around foods that are from particular types of outlets (e.g., a farmers market). There are, we believe, further productive engagements to be made by examining local food from the perspective of consumers more generally.

Recent research by those concerned with consumer practices, and with shopping practices in particular (for example Miller 1998; Gregson et al. 2002; Jackson et al. 2006), have argued that shopping is more than an individual act, but is instead a practice whereby meanings and values are made. Daniel Miller, for example argues that ordinary acts of shopping, such as the purchase of food for the household, reflect and reinforce long held social values concerning care and thrift. By carefully developing skills linked to understandings of the quality of goods and then considering the available offering of a particular good (e.g., an apple) in relation to other offerings of the same good at different prices both in a single outlet (organic versus inorganic, or English versus imported) and across a range of outlets (e.g., the superstore versus the green grocer), he argues, British consumers are reinforcing the long held social value of thrift. For Miller, it is only through the repeated acts of purchasing that the value of thrift can be practiced, though the final item that is purchased may be different for different people depending upon how they judge quality. Thus, in one family, thrift may be practiced by buying the multi-pack of apples and thrift justified per the unit cost in comparison to those not available in this form. For others, thrift may be exercised by buying organic apples, at higher individual cost, but still purchased because they are deemed better value. Here thrift is achieved because the quality of the apple is thought to be higher than the bulk apples and because each apple may be individually selected and fewer apples need be purchased at any one time, thereby reducing the waste associated with having to throw away fruit that becomes bruised or otherwise rejected by the family as being edible. Miller's understanding of consumption also recognises that the objects of consumption have time; they are used up, thrown away, and sometimes replaced, which in turn, recognises that shoppers are also caught in webs of

time demand in that they must return to purchase goods again and again. With each repeat visit shoppers practice and refine their abilities to judge value and perform thrift.

Miller's work can help inform understandings of how "local food" might be included as part of the cultural value practice of shopping more generally (e.g., local food can be considered thrifty in that it is identified as being of better quality and will last longer because it does not have to travel). Miller's theory, however, lacks an engagement with the context of these shopping practices which others have argued are as important for understanding why consumers might want to purchase a particular good in the first instance (e.g., Gregson et al. 2002), how shopping practice itself is constrained by the spatial context of the shopper (Jackson et al., 2006), and how the conditions of that purchase are shaped in and by place through the materiality of that place (Cronon 1991), but also the discourses that inform that materiality (Freidberg 2004).

For Nicky Gregson, Louise Crew, and Kate Brooks (2002) shopping is fundamentally an engagement with and in place. The value of a particular good is relationally constructed, drawing on the shoppers own preferences, experiences and understandings of some ideal which is then used to compare different shopping venues. Moreover, certain sites are then constructed as appropriate for certain types of shopping. For example in their work on charity shopping they illustrate how a shopping event can become a leisure activity or treat, which is set within the context of an ideal construct of a charity shop and which is separate and distinct from ordinary shopping. Shoppers then compare their ideal shopping place to real places as they participate in both ordinary and treat shopping. Here, the practice of shopping itself becomes a treat and which is partially determined by how well the outlet measures up in comparative terms to both notions of ideal and ordinary in the mind of the shopper. In the context of

charity shopping, pleasure occurs in places where the work of ordinary shopping does not happen.

A second contribution from Gregson, Crew and Brooks is their demonstration of why it is important to consider shopping across outlets located within a place rather than focus only on one outlet. They liken shopping space to a tapestry that is made of a number of outlets, which are weighed up against each other in the minds of shoppers. Although this is not explicitly discussed, it is apparent that their shoppers have clearly defined mental shopping maps within which different shops are given different values depending on the types of shopping being undertaken. Shoppers then consult these maps when considering what they are going to buy. In terms of local food this understanding of shopping space suggests that foods themselves may be differentially constructed as for example ordinary food or treat food, in terms of how shoppers perceive the outlets within which they find these foods. Less explicit in Gregson et al.'s argument, however is how shopping outlets themselves inform shoppers' mental shopping maps and the role of everyday time-space in the ways that shoppers use these maps.

Consumers' food shopping choices are considered in terms of their convenience as framed by the everyday lives and circumstances of consumers are considered in the work of Peter Jackson and colleagues. Although Jackson et al. (2006) does not focus on the differences between treat and ordinary food shopping, this work begins to address the issue of consumers specific choice to go to one shop over another or buy one brand instead of another within a single shopping journey as it is set within the daily life trajectories of the shopper. In their article they assert that "consumer choice must be assessed at the local level, where the effects of competition are experienced by consumers 'on the ground'(47)." Drawing on poststructuralist accounts of everyday life

and habit, the argument is that choices are made within the context of the individuals own perceptions and experiences. Their analysis of shoppers in the Portsmouth area reveal that convenience is as important a component in shopping decisions as is the cost quality trade off used to define value that is described by Miller (1998). Considerable effort is spent in their account to unpack what consumers mean when they refer to convenience. In their study consumers frame convenience in a myriad of ways: being able to purchase everything at one time, being able to park easily, being near to home, being on the way to or from some destination where they must be for some other activity such as picking up children from school (see also Hanson and Hanson 1993). Consumers in this study also distinguish among different types of ordinary shopping. There is for example a big weekly shop, in which convenience might be one stop shopping with easy parking relatively near to home but which may be done further away than a “top up” within which convenience is defined as very close to home albeit at a smaller and perhaps more expensive outlet.

Understanding consumption decisions as being set within everyday life has implications for understanding shopper’s decisions to buy local food. Firstly, Jackson et al.’s research suggests that shoppers may define food as local in relation to their own geographic location as opposed to that of the farmer or supplier. Secondly, Jackson et al.’s research suggests the decision to buy local food will be made comparatively at both the level of the food item as well as at the scale of the store, and also that the decision will be influenced by the type of shop from which it is being purchased. Thirdly, that shoppers draw from a variety of outlets to meet their shopping needs, which are not expressed in terms of discrete sets of abstract products per se (e.g., butcher, green grocer, baker), but are instead selected on the basis of cost, convenience, and quality across different outlets is an understanding that is only revealed by examining

consumption practices from the perspective of shoppers. How consumers view local food within this set of relational constructs is likely to influence the choices consumers will make about buying local food.

In the above readings of consumption and place retailers remain largely silent partners. Freidburg (2004), however, tells us that while NGO's and the media have considerable ability to influence retailer's food practices, ultimately today the national Supermarkets have the majority of the control over shaping consumer's attitudes toward food provisioning in the U.K. through their public relations and advertising campaigns (see also Eden et al. 2008). The ways that retailers market and place the foods on their shelves, as well as the ways that they market themselves informs how consumers come to see foods as being of high or low value (Jackson et al. 2006), or as ordinary or special.

While existing agro-food research acknowledges that consumers are needed for local food to be economically viable, the consumption oriented studies outlined above suggest that recognising that consumers, as well as producers, construct meaning around the term local is also important for a food's economic viability. Local food is thus likely to be understood through a combination of shopper's learning about food meaning from the outlets they use, as well as the consumer's own mental shopping maps that are made within and by their everyday lives at the local scale. This understanding also likely to inform decisions about whether to buy local food or not and under what conditions that choice may be made.

Research Methods

To address the aims of firstly, highlighting the interplay between consumer and retailer in the creation of meaning, and secondly, understanding how the idea of the local is produced within that relationship and the role of place in these two processes we draw

on research conducted in a relatively affluent small town in West Yorkshire in the U.K. (population approximately 14,000). The town was chosen because it is relatively self contained sitting on the edge of two large urban areas and has a variety of retail options for consumers to choose from that are located within the town, but also within a relatively small radius. The town has an older, white, middle-class demographic profile. According to 2008 newspaper readership data 42% of the population is over 55 and a further 35% are between the ages of 35 and 54. A large proportion of households are in British social class AB (38% of the population (Office for National Statistics 2001))³. Census figures also show that in 2001 the town was 98% white, with the mixed category being the next largest group with only 94 residents (approximately 1% of the total population). We locate the research in this site, because these white, middle-class Britons are less likely to be worried about whether or not they have enough to eat (Caraher et al. 1998), are more likely to be able to cook and are therefore more likely to have the necessary shopping skills required for this cooking (Caraher et al. 1999), and are more likely to be aware of or willing to engage with the idea of local food (Hinrichs and Kremer 2002). As a result an examination of this group's everyday shopping practices should reveal quite a bit about local food shopping and suggest areas where less well off, less secure and less knowledgeable consumers will find difficulty.

The research methodology is primarily ethnographic and the materials we draw on for this article include life history accounts of 36 women who are members of a professional women's organisation (however most are now retired), data collected via long interviews with adult members of seven households, interviews with retailers, internet and other retailer reports, and participant observation. Interview households were chosen to represent different stages in the life course and range from a retired couple, a family of four with two older children one of whom recently left for university,

one family of five with two of the three children in secondary school, three families with children at various stages of primary school, and one young couple with no children. In four of the couple households the male householder declined to participate (the household with the school leaver, two households with primary school aged children, and the young couple household). Reasons for non-participation included the inability to find a suitable time to meet with the reviewer (school leaver) and female householders saying partners were not interested. One secondary aged child from one family was also interviewed. We were not able to recruit a single parent household and while we did interview a single woman in her thirties, she turned out to live in a nearby village although she worked in the town. Each householder who agreed to participate was interviewed at least two times and many were interviewed three times. Each interview lasted a minimum of one hour, although some interviews are two hours long. In total, 25 householder interviews were conducted with 11 individuals. Householders were also asked to complete food diaries, which most did. All the female householders, unless retired, worked at least part time.

When the householder interviews are considered alongside the life history accounts the resulting narrative offers a representation which does not give a lot of voice to those households with very young families, couples starting out, or single parent households. While there are younger households, due to its rural location on the edge of a metropolitan area, high local house prices, and limited rental opportunities the majority of households in the study town tend not to fall into these categories anyway. Likewise, while some of the elderly participants live on limited incomes and some had indicated that they lived in constrained economic circumstances when they were children, our account is largely a white and middle class representation. All the data were collected between the autumn of 2004 and Spring 2008. Coding of these data

focused on where households buy groceries, rather than takeaways or restaurant food that can be taken home and eaten.

Important to this methodology is an effort to move away from the current dichotomy of particular outlets as either alternative or mainstream. To achieve this we take on board Holloway et al.'s (2007) position that examining retailers as actors who are engaged in food projects, which they frame as particular retailer's efforts to sell food. Therefore to understand how consumers' mental shopping maps are informed locally, local food projects of three food outlets are examined to understand how the store positions itself and is positioned and understood in this particular market context by our consumers. These examples represent arenas of interaction between consumers, producers, and the materiality of food shopping. Outlets were chosen based upon their importance in our interviews and focus on both of the main supermarkets, Tesco and Booths, and a small greengrocer, who provides delivery fruit and vegetable boxes to half of our interview households. Importantly, the notion of local is used a variety of ways to describe the food that is being sold by these firms and helps differentiate quality in the goods provided and shopping behaviour.

Local food buying

The town's residents have a wide range of options when they shop for food. There are two large supermarkets, Tesco (the largest national supermarket chain) and Booths (a regional chain). There is also a discount retailer, Quick-Save⁴. Additionally all of the major national supermarket chains (Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's, Morrison's, and Waitrose) have superstores within 15 miles and despite not being located within the town all offer delivery to the area. Similarly, there are a number of frozen food retailers (e.g., Iceland) within 15 miles of the town, but again none of these are located within the town and unlike the superstores this type of store does not offer delivery. There are also two

convenience stores (Tesco Express and Co-op) with late and holiday opening hours. The town is likewise well served by several bakeries, four butchers, a fishmonger, two greengrocers, and a number of specialty delis and sweetshops. The majority of the town's food outlets, including the larger food stores, are located within the town centre, which is within one mile of all but the very outlying houses of the town. In a nearby village (3 miles away), there is also an organic farm shop which is supplied by an organic farm located approximately 35 miles from the village, and a number of council supported farmers markets in towns also within a 15 mile radius of the study site. While the area can be described as agricultural, in that there is considerable livestock farming, there is relatively little commercial produce farming. The nearest commercial produce farming occurs either in the Vale of York, Lancashire, and Lincolnshire; which are all beyond the 30 mile boundary that would designate the produce as local.

Cooking food with ingredients or assembling food from premade components (pasta and sauce for example), rather than buying ready meals, is a normal activity for most of those who participated in our research. While this practice was viewed as normal behaviour by our participants, it should be acknowledged that cooking is a practice that sits at the intersection of class, race and gender (see for example Caraher et al. 1999 for more discussion of cooking in England). Caraher et al. (1999) find that those with high educational attainment or who were employed in professional occupations were more likely to know how to cook or feel confident cooking with basic ingredients than those without a university degree or were in manual occupations. Given this, those within our study are more likely on the basis of social characteristics than perhaps those located in less affluent locations, to be concerned with sourcing fresh fruits and vegetables and basic ingredients. Likewise, in Caraher et al.'s research women were more likely to report confidence in their cooking skills than were men. In

our research the non-retired households, male participants and their wives reported that many of the male householders did participate in some of the family cooking. This would vary from being responsible for quite a bit of cooking to cooking circumstantially (such as for a special occasion, as a leisure activity, for company, or if the female householder was away). Retired participants reported that their male partners rarely or never cooked. Ultimately, however, in all our households, everyday family cooking was primarily the responsibility of the female householder, within households the balance of responsibility with regard to cooking is similarly reflected in the division of labour for food shopping (i.e., the more the male householder cooked, the more he also shopped), although male householders who never cook did shop occasionally.

To facilitate this cooking, the residents spent time in advance considering what they would buy, and many made lists so they could buy the items they needed. In many of the households with children, the production of the shopping list was negotiated across the family regardless of who was to do the shopping or cooking. All the adult participants were engaged with the idea that a diet high in fruit and vegetables would provide health benefits and included these items on the weekly list. Shopping trips tended to be planned, with one main shop per week and top-up shops throughout the week for households with working partners, while retired participants tended to shop more frequently. Where people chose to shop depended upon the item, what it was being purchased for, and whether or not it was judged to be an item where quality is highly variable across brands and outlets or fairly homogeneous. For example many of those who spoke with us would buy kitchen roll and cleaning items and so forth where they felt they would be the least expensive (e.g., Quick Save, a discounter like Costco, or at another low cost grocery retailer like Morrisons) or where it was most convenient (e.g., Tesco) and then would purchase meat at the butchers, fish at the fishmongers, or

fruits and vegetables from either a delivery box scheme or from one of the more expensive outlets located within the town. None of the respondents reported that they went to the organic shop in the nearby village, or regularly purchased food from the farmers markets located in other towns within the local region. Likewise, none of our respondents grew a significant proportion of their food in either their own garden or in an allotment, although one family had a small “lettuce, potato, beans and herbs” patch in their back garden and another grew a variety of soft fruit, which they froze and used throughout the year. Wild berries and apples are abundant in the autumn, and while many families did go pick this “free food”, this was done more as a hobby than for survival. Most households, regardless of size reported that they spent approximately £80-£100 a week on food. We did not ask for receipts, so cannot confirm this amount of spending.

For some items, shoppers perceived quality differences between store brand and national brand goods. Some shoppers were willing to go to a more expensive store, and buy own branded goods, than buy national branded goods at the less expensive retailer. Likewise, the residents associated the quality of non-branded goods, such as meat, vegetables and fruit, and fish with the store itself. For instance, if the store was perceived as being high quality, then these non-branded items were also assumed to be of high quality. The converse also held. For many, high quality goods were deemed particularly important such as for entertaining or a special occasion, and many of our participants indicated they would go to a specialist shop or more expensive grocery store at these times, when under normal circumstances they would choose an outlet they perceived as being less expensive overall. About a third of our all our participants (lifehistory and families) were willing to travel some distance (10 miles or more) to buy goods where they thought they could make a savings, but only if the savings would

offset the cost of travel and what they felt their time was worth and if the quality of the good was not compromised. Most however did the vast majority within the town.

Almost none of the people we spoke to were willing to travel out of town to buy high quality goods as most felt that what was on offer in the town was good enough.

What is evident from the above description of shopping practices is that shopping is a skilled activity that relies on a whole range of capacities. These capacities involve understanding how to cook and what specific foods are suitable for a particular dish, being able to schedule meals in relation to the biological processes of food, and so forth. Much of this skill also involves a geographical capacity to understand what will be available at the stores and at what times of the year and the range of differences in quality signalled by either the items brand, or the branding of the food store itself. The shoppers are also able to weigh up the costs of time and distance as they relate to quality and judge when there is a diminishing return. These shoppers are not just skilled consumers, but they are also practicing geographers. Their ability to act as consumers involves a detailed knowledge of the local retail landscape. The article now turns to three outlets within that landscape: Tesco, Booths, and Cascade foods

Tesco

Tesco is the largest supermarket chain in the U.K. According to several industry experts, by the end of 2007 Tesco claimed the largest proportion of the British grocery sector market with just over 31% (Thompson Reuters 2007). Tesco, on the whole, does not brand itself as local, although there are some lines, such as milk, that are beginning to be branded as such in some places, but not in the town's store. Tesco's web site also indicates that that further local sourcing is in the planning, but at the moment the clearest evidence of attention to provenance is the country of origin labels on their food. Tesco's main approach, according to the corporate web pages, is to create value for their

customers to earn their lifetime loyalty. For Tesco's large stores, this value is translated to mean low cost and the convenience of one stop-shopping near to home and top-up shopping in the convenience sector. The strategies employed by Tesco's to achieve low prices are well known, highly publicized, and in some quarters severely criticised.

Tesco's stocks their shelves with over 40,000 product lines (although not all are offered at all stores), offers a number of own brand ranges and different price points: Value label at the bottom, Tesco's own brand, and Tesco's Finest range at the top as well a number of specific ranges linked to lower fat and salt content, intolerances and allergies, ethical consumerism (fair trade and organic). At the same time Tesco has 580 large stores (superstores and Tesco Extra) and an additional 897 convenience (C-class) stores, making it local for most consumers. In fact, according to Corporate Watch U.K. (2004), a consumer advocacy group:

Tesco has almost total control of the food market in 108 of Britain's postal areas - 7.4% of the country. This includes Epping in Essex, Penarth in South Glamorgan and Buckingham. In a further 104 areas, it accounts for more than half of grocery spending. Competition law states that a corporation should not account for more than a quarter of the U.K. market nationally, but this study showed 325 areas where Tesco exceeds this limit. The populations in Buckingham, Bicester and Brackley can now choose from 'Tesco, Tesco or Tesco' as a result of the chain's recent acquisition of the One Stop chain of convenience stores.

Interestingly, food quality and safety are not explicitly mentioned in this corporate strategy.

Engaging with customer's desire for convenience is a large part of the Tesco strategy. To enable single store shopping, Tesco offers a range of internally branded goods, such as free from, healthy choice, and so forth. Of course by giving certain foods

special labels the message is sent to consumers that ordinary food need not be low in fat or salt, fair trade, organic, or produced locally. Thus through its tag line, "Every little helps" Tesco reinforces and helps shape the British consumer consciousness around how to make food purchasing decisions within a matrix of cost, convenience, at some adequate level of quality.

In the U.K. a history of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation coupled with class distinctions that were signalled through food provides a backdrop for present day food attitudes that position everyday food as inexpensive. For example Mrs. Beeton, one of the most influential of British food writers, as early as the 1850's instructed middle class housewives on the importance of frugality during the week that included buying food that was in season not because it tasted better or was more healthy, but because seasonal food is inexpensive. The stress on frugality in everyday shopping was such that a larger proportion of the weekly food budget could be spent buying exotic, prime, and high fat foods to serve to guests, which was seen a means for social climbing (Logan 2006, Calquhoun 2007). While both World Wars helped level class distinctions in relation to nutrition, the fact that food rationing after World War II lasted well into the 1950's with sugar being one of the last items to come off rationing, helped position national agents, rather than familial practices as the source of learning about food. The combined effect of limited food choices limited the experience and cooking repertoire of a whole generation of British cooks. While learning at home, and specifically from mother, is where most of the British public currently learn to cook (Caraher et al. 1998), a generation of mothers had to learn to cook (and provision) in ways that were different to those of their own mothers. This particular history further solidified the idea that ordinary foods could be tinned and processed rather than fresh and unprocessed, special foods are full of fat and carbohydrates, and that ordinary food should be cheap.

While it is clear that these historical circumstances have helped create national discourses around food and food provisioning these traditions are sustained through a concerted effort of those involved in food provisioning today (Logan 2006, see also Grasseni 2003 for further examples).

At a more local scale, research primarily on the poor has illustrated how the physical landscape in which consumption happens (e.g., transportation and the lack of cooking education in schools), set within these national discourses that help to determine the value of certain foods has meant that that the less well off purchase foods that are less likely to be fresh (e.g., more canned or frozen food than fresh fruits and vegetables) than are more wealthy households (Caraher et al. 1998). That retailers, like Tesco, are aware of these discourses and materialities and then capitalise on them through their marketing strategies should not be a surprise.

Most, but not all of our participants, shop at Tesco. To use the words of Gill, a mother of two older children in her late 40's: "I go to Tesco's because that's local." In this instance and for all our Tesco shoppers local means a combination of distance from home, the price/convenience/quality matrix that Tesco is selling through its marketing strategy, as well as what is on offer elsewhere and how those shops fall within Tesco's matrix. For example Gill talks about the distance from her home, 5 minutes by car.

Lucy, in her 50's and the mother of three children says:

(I go to Tesco) because it tends to be the standard stuff. We want the day to day basics so its nothing special, you know. I think Tesco will have everything really that I need.

Gill qualifies this convenience in her discussion of the range and quality of fruit and vegetables in that store compared to what is available in stores further away, and the cost difference between this local Tesco and other stores both in the town and

elsewhere. Because, in balance, Tesco is the closest with limited difference in cost and variety and because in general she can buy everything else she wants at this geographically local store, Tesco comes out as the most convenient.

I am aware of other Tesco's stores, one in Bradford, there is a much better range of fruit and vegetables and if that were closer I would go there...Booths is the comparison locally. (Booths) does not have a wider range to actually compete properly. ...I've been to Waitrose (6 miles away), but it's expensive, so while the range is better it is expensive, so I go to Tesco out of convenience.

While Gill would consider travelling further for a better selection, this would only occur within the context of some other task that would take her that way. For example Gill agreed that Sainsbury's, which is twenty minutes away by car, had a "beautiful range of vegetables", but it was not on a route to where she would go. Another shopper, used to buy her food at the Morrisons in Bradford (11 miles away), but that was only because her young son played football nearby on a Saturday morning and she could do the shopping while he did that. In the summer when the football has ended, she goes to Tesco, because it is the "least expensive option here and I am unwilling to drive all that way (Kathy, 40's, two children)".

The choice to identify this national retailer as the "local" option should not be construed as brand loyalty or even satisfaction. Richard, a married father of three in his young forties, illustrates this in his response to the question why he shopped at Tesco as opposed to other shops:

Mum's a bit Sainsbury's fan, I don't know why, she was fairly loyal. Before Sarah and I moved (to the town) we would go to Asda, that was the big place near us and we just went to the nearest. Tesco's is there so we just go...It is the nearest branded supermarket. If it was Sainsbury's then we would probably go there.

This lack of emotional commitment to the Tesco brand however is elided by the regular practice of shopping at Tesco, which lends the appearance of loyalty. In fact, it is convenience facilitated by the Tesco's location that commands the loyalty of these shoppers, not Tesco itself.

Further discussion with Richard also revealed that part of the reason convenience of one stop shopping was important was because he does not particularly enjoy shopping. While others admitted enjoying the social aspect of running into neighbours and friends while doing their shopping at Tesco, there was a strong sense of dissatisfaction over the actual act of shopping and selecting goods which they view as good enough, but nothing to get excited about. Lucy and Anna sum this up:

It is not a case of liking to shop, it's a case of convenience really. Reasonable quality as well, I could go cheaper, but the quality isn't as good and there isn't a choice. I wouldn't be able to get everything from one stop (Lucy),

I live so close by, I just want to go there, get it done, get it over with (Anna).

For these shoppers, shopping at Tesco's may be convenient, but it is also something to be endured.

While our consumers follow the assumptions promoted by Tesco's value matrix that food should be inexpensive and locally convenient, they also do not trust Tesco's for quality and as a result continuously make judgements about this quality and do not purchase certain goods on the basis of this judgement. Many, for example, are suspicious of the own branded goods. Margaret, the retired female householder illustrates the scale of examination:

When I am going for a big shop I go to Tesco mostly because it is convenient, the price is right and they have a variety of different products. I don't usually eat or buy Tesco own brands too much. Some of their cereals are very good. The

Weetabix is fine and the mueslis I find okay. Their cornflakes I wouldn't have and their baked beans I wouldn't have. If I need tinned tomatoes, chopped tomatoes, theirs are fine. It's just tomatoes you know.

Likewise, Lucy does not shop over the internet at Tesco because she is unable to see in her words, "what they've reduced on the value". In fact, for every one of our families there was at least one item that they would not buy from Tesco on the basis that they judged the quality to be of too low a standard. These included meat, wine, fish, and organic fruits and vegetables.

Shoppers also made distinctions between ordinary food and food they would buy for special occasions. Indeed the word special was used by a number of the participants to describe the foods that they would buy if they were having friends to dinner or cooking a special family meal. Importantly, however, Tesco is not where special food is purchased Gill elaborates this idea:

Doing the dinner party situation I like to sort of go upmarket with some things like cheese and... I'm trying to think, fish, I wouldn't go to the fish counter at Tesco for example, I wouldn't go to the meat counter, do they have a meat counter at Tesco? I wouldn't go there (Gill).

For our shoppers, ordinary food may be purchased at Tesco, but any time higher quality food was desired another outlet was chosen because the other outlet's products were understood as being of higher quality for the price when compared to what is on offer at Tesco. The article now turns to Booths, Tesco's biggest competitor in the town.

Booths

Booths is a regional chain of just 26 stores located across Lancashire, Cumbria, Yorkshire, and Cheshire with a turnover of approximately £215 million (2005/6). The chain is still owned and managed at the corporate level by the family that started it in

1847. The company mission is: "To sell the best goods available in attractive stores staffed with first class assistants (IGD Retail Analysis 2008)." According to a retail analysis firm working closely with Booths, Booths aims to achieve this through four aims that:

Build a unique offer around 'food with provenance'; build upon Booths' position as a trusted local brand and retail institution; to be the best retailer of high quality food and drink in the U.K.; and to promote a relationship with customers that transcends that of a contract of sale.

While Booths acknowledges that U.K. consumers expect their food to be inexpensive because they have learned by shopping at outlets such as Tesco that food can be purchased for very low cost (a recent, highly publicised example of this is chicken). In Booths' own words their strategy is to "shift the centre of gravity towards quality". Booths has own branded goods and premium brands, but there is no equivalent to a value label, as there is at Tesco and other stores aiming toward the bottom of the market. At the local scale, Booths is competing with premium ranges at Tesco and goods that are available in the many small shops in the area.

A key way that Booths promotes quality is by associating it with the word local. There is a clear connection between local and provenance in that their advertisements use terms like "food produced right on your doorstep" and "we take pride in sourcing as much food as we can from right here under our nose" and "Booths country". For Booths, local food may be food with provenance, although not necessarily from the area where it will be purchased. For example, Booths sell specialist geographically designated foods from elsewhere in the U.K. and Europe, with emphasis on cheese, beer and wine. But, particular emphasis is on selling food items that are produced, reared, or grown within the rather large 4 country region where their stores are located. Approximately

20% of all their items are produced within this area. Booths outlines the way they implement this strategy:

The Booths brand has high awareness in the North with a high perception of quality, service, family values and a regional bias. Because of this regionality, it has the unique ability of selling a purely regional message to the North. The company is flexible enough to deal with small suppliers, securing partnerships to the economic benefit of both parties. The small multi-skilled buying team who have been responsible for the same category over a long period of time ensures a broader picture view is taken when selecting products, thus avoiding category myopia.

Booths emphasises that locally produced food is not just any kind of production; it is of higher quality and therefore represents a divergence from the largest U.K. food retailers, which are in order of market share Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's, and Morrisons.

To facilitate local production they work with farmers to create forms of produce that can be grown in the North of England, which has a short growing season and wet weather. Booths have worked with farmers and researchers to develop, for example a form of Cos (romaine) lettuce, which is a Mediterranean variety of lettuce, that can be grown in winter in unheated greenhouses in the North of England. This involved an "intensive breeding programme" developed by the agro firm Enza Zaden, a Netherlands based firm, but in partnership with Lancashire farmer Philip Coxhead (Armstrong 2001). While Philip's farm is undoubtedly local to some of the Booths stores located in Lancashire and may be quite local to the distribution centre where Booths processes its food, his farm is not particularly any more local to shoppers in this Yorkshire town than is the lettuce with an English food origin label that may be found in Tesco.

Their local strategy has enabled Booths to capture two types of market, “those customers whose primary reason for visiting the store is for the (specialist) food and drink offering and those customers who visit the store for the service and traditional offerings (Booths store literature).” Many of our older respondents fall into the second category. They go to Booths because Tesco is “too busy”, the aisles are too narrow, and they always feel “rushed”, plus in Booths they can meet friends for a cup of tea before doing the shopping. A number of the older women also said that the choice to go to Booths is because Booths is not a national chain. Rebecca, in her 70's shares a house with another retired pensioner. They buy their food together and purchase it from Booths. They do this because firstly, she says “we don't like Tesco's marketing techniques, in its widest sense.” And secondly, they choose Booths because for them, small and local, while possibly unknown is synonymous with social responsibility and food safety. She says:

I like Booths because they support small companies, local companies and if you go round the shop, er, there are names that you've not heard of, but people running small businesses and I'm all in favour of this... Yes we use Booths own makes and on the meat counter you see, they will tell you where it's from. You know the animals are looked after properly, but Booths have really got in on the act on this and they will tell you where it's from. And you feel pretty safe about using their, their meat and bacon and so on.

The fact that local is regional, rather than local to her is of little import to Rebecca. In her daily life Rebecca and her housemate do a considerable amount of voluntary work, and they feel that this should extend into their purchasing as well. Because social responsibility is encoded in Booths version of local food, a form of convenience is enabled. Rebecca need not go to a number of outlets to buy food that supports local

businesses; instead she can support local farmers in one shop. Several of our older shoppers indicated that to balance the cost of buying food at Booths, they buy bulk goods, or goods without provenance, at the local quick save, which is less expensive. For example Pauline, retired and living on her own, like Rebecca above buys Booths own branded food. But she also says:

The dry household things, like toilet roll, I'll go to Kwik Save. It's easier parking and they're a bit cheaper (Pauline, Retired).

This illustrates the fine distinctions shoppers make when determining the value of a particular item.

A number of our shoppers who use Tesco for ordinary food fall into Booths second market of those looking for special food. Richard also makes the distinction between ordinary food and special food:

We occasionally, for more of a treat, we go to Booth's. And I quite like going to Booth's because they try to source stuff a bit more locally and so on. But, I must say it's noticeably more expensive place to shop, so if you do a, you know, if I grab my regular list and then go to Tesco's I expect it to be a certain amount. If I go to Booth's then, it's noticeably much more expensive. I find. So to do it on a regular basis would mean that the food bills would be much, much higher. When we're buying for five then it quickly mounts up... given that Tesco's is the nearest one and is perceptibly less expensive without a huge gap in quality, between that and Booths, but we go to Booths as a treat.

Richard, as with the charity shoppers in the study by Gregson et al. (2002), distinguish between treat shopping and ordinary shopping. Richard, like those doing charity shopping, the treat occurs somewhere other than where ordinary shopping is not done. However this shopping is still local and is identifiable in relation to where ordinary

shopping occurs in the local area as well as against some idealised understanding of what a treat will be.

Just as shoppers ideas around thrift and value are informed by the discursive practices of retailers, so are the idealised notions of what a treat should involve. For example and in an effort to capture the treat seekers, Booths describes food from “Booths country” as food that is “self-indulgent, to be enjoyed and proud of”. Food quality in their advertising is expressed through representations of nature, heritage, and tradition. Advertising photography includes pictures of white male farmers, in sepia tones, picking lettuce or tending cattle. Thus Booths also discursively inscribes both class and race onto local food through their advertising and marketing strategies in ways that also inscribe wealth and whiteness onto rurality in general.

Through their marketing buying local food becomes food shopping for white northerners, made in a white northern tradition. While it is true that farming in the region is largely managed by white farmers, which is linked to property markets and labour market traditions, there is also a long history of immigration to the region. For example, there is no Booths presence in the cities of Bradford (78% white) and Manchester (80% white), which both have large Asian communities. Instead Booths’ stores are largely located in places that are 97% white or greater⁵.

While class distinctions in relation to Boots’ store locations are less stark. Just under half (11) of the stores are located in wards with less than the national proportion of those in social grade AB (higher and intermediate professions). Eight places have location quotients above 1.25 indicating noticeable above national representation of this social class grouping. Some of the lower representation is explained by very rural locations, in farming communities for example. Locations that have a lower than national average proportion in social class groups AB are populated almost exclusively

by white ethnic groups (mean average is 99%). With a few exceptions Booths has not entered the more urban environments, and when it does these are wealthy, white, or both.

While to some this may seem a reason to avoid Booths. But it is not surprising that our shoppers made no direct comment on this aspect of the Booths experience. We argue this is because shopping decisions are made locally as already demonstrated in the discussion, and therefore shoppers are not aware of the demographic associations of Booth overall location strategy. While shoppers could easily identify where Booths has located its stores, and then map this against census information, it is likely that they will not practice their geographical skills to this degree. For our shoppers, what matters is that this is a local store, and that the images portrayed represent what they know to be their own community and social history (see also Slocum 2008). The town itself is 98% white and 38% are in the AB social class and so experiences of institutionalised racism and unrepresentative racial difference is not something they consider as part of their daily consciousness in the same way that helping local farmers is (see also Guthman 2008 , Slocum 2007 for further discussions of color blindness in relation to food).

Certainly some of our consumers express considerable guilt over choosing cost and convenience over supporting local farmers. For example Sarah says:

I think Booths has a policy of supporting local farmers and local growers and I, well that's another reason why I feel guilty, because I go to Tesco and at Tesco you can get the big bulk you know, packs of juice and cereal or whatever, that I can't get at Booths. But I do like Booths sort of philosophy more.

What is evident in this quote is that while consumers are willing to engage in a consumption politics, but normative talk around ethics of food provisioning is still

largely color blind (Guthman 2008, see Mason, May and Clarke 2007 for more on normative talk). For Sarah, only two choices are presented locally that she can negotiate and still retain the aspects of convenience and quality that she desires. Shopping at Booths involves supporting the community where she lives by supporting regional farmers. Shopping at Tesco means subscribing to the cosmology of thrift which is an inherent part of brining up a family in British life today (see Miller 1998 for further discussion). For Sarah, neither is an easy choice as Booths does not offer enough ways to for her to practice thrift, while Tesco is not connected to her community.

*Cascade fruits*⁶

The final example is Cascade fruits. Cascade Fruits is included because three of our families receive a weekly fruit and vegetable delivery. This scheme is similar to those offered by organic producers more often associated with alternative food networks, but the Cascade fruits scheme is marketed on the basis that it is convenient and local . Delivery is free within a 5 mile radius of the shop and an average family would likely buy one large vegetable box and one large fruit box. Each box contains 10 different types of fruit and vegetable of reasonable quantity and combined this would cost £24.50. Customers can phone in payment or set up a standing order. In his advertising the owner of Cascade Fruits emphasises the importance of their business to the fabric of the town.

At the heart of our work is a belief in the importance of community spirit and local pride. In a world of fast food and struggling town centres where every High Street has begun to look like any other, Cascade Fruits makes a refreshing change, striving to move against the trends and maintain the distinctive identity of the town centre (store pamphlet).

Rather than focusing on local as convenient (Tesco's strategy), or local as heritage and tradition (Booths' strategy), customers are strongly urged to buy the fruit and vegetables as a way to support not just this local business, but other local businesses as well as providing the business support to the firm that gives fruits to the local secondary school's cross country team. Thus, for Cascade fruits, local is the very specific local community of the town.

In their literature Cascade Fruits says that they try to source fairly traded and organic food when possible and to buy from local suppliers. In an interview with the owner, we learned that some of the vegetables come from within the near area, namely asparagus, which is very seasonal, but that sourcing very locally in this part of Yorkshire is difficult because of the region's geography, which is good for sheep and cattle but does not produce much in the way of fruit or vegetables commercially. The nearest produce farming is in the Vale of York, or Lincolnshire, 40 to 50 miles away or further. As a consequence, much of the produce sold by Cascade fruits is sourced from the Bradford council managed wholesale market, located about 15 miles away. Other greengrocers in the town also buy from this wholesale market.

While it is true that the wholesalers are based in the Bradford area, there is almost no evidence of local growers in the wholesale market, nor do these wholesalers sell their food sold as organic or fair trade. When wholesalers at the market were asked about where they get their food, they told us it is mostly imported. Moreover, this imported food is often not purchased from a farmer but from another exporter who is located outside of the region. For example, one wholesaler buys his fruit from South America from an importer located in the Netherlands or in Miami. Food grown in Africa is purchased through importers located in London. Interestingly, while Banana's are grown in Morocco, the wholesaler said that these would be exported to France.

Likewise, bananas grown in the Canary Islands are sent to Spain, whereas bananas eaten in the U.K. are sourced from former British colonies.

In addition to the global network represented in what is a relatively small space, there are just 10 firms represented in the market and the site is an interesting agglomeration of local networks. Wholesalers told us the market now offers a much wider variety of fruits and vegetables than it did 15 years ago, because of the large number of Asian traders that now frequent the market in order to buy culturally specific fruits and vegetables for the Asian and eastern European immigrant markets that they serve in inner city Bradford. Many of the wholesalers felt that the continued viability of the market was due to the dynamic presence of the Asian buyers who serve Bradford's immigrant communities. The continued (relatively) local availability of fruit and vegetables from green grocers in our case study town is dependent upon, somewhat ironically, the purchasing practices of the largely working class, immigrant groups who are not present in this local place and who are largely written out of the romanticised discourses of the local that focus on farmers and tradition.

The market was itself socialised along class, race, and gender. Many of the workers and about half of the wholesalers were Asian. There were almost no women present as either buyers or sellers, although there were a few women making tea in the cafe and doing bookkeeping and secretarial tasks. Social divisions introduce a rhythm to the market as well. The early morning trading is done by wholesalers and some white local greengrocers, of which Cascade Fruits was one. These traders look for first class, unblemished fruits and vegetables and negotiate a low price, and they tend not to buy a lot of the exotic fruits and vegetables. Wholesalers commented that the reason they could talk to us at 6:30 in the morning was because there are relatively few of these "white" traders left as they had been put out of business by the large supermarket

chains. In comparison, after 7:30 in the morning, the market gets very busy with Asian greengrocers coming from Bradford, because the Asian traders open later than do the white traders, but also stay open later at night. The Asian traders are also looking for low price. However, they are willing to purchase 2nd grade fruits and vegetables as less value is placed on the visual in these communities. Towards mid-day, the restaurant buyers come to the market to buy first class exotics. While the food purchased from this Market is not particularly local in the productivist sense, it carries with it more inclusive representations of class and race, than the regionally farmed food sold by the supermarket chains.

Cascade Fruits does not reveal its connections to the wholesale market in its advertising. Instead it draws on similar imaginaries as those employed by Booths (e.g., the support of local farmers and small businesses). The shop owner seeks to distinguish himself from Tesco by introducing ideas of trust, sustainability, and tradition, and thus aligns himself with Booths, but within the locally established discourses around food choice within the town. Consumers are aware, to some degree of the non-local nature of the food in the box, as they understand that pineapples do not grow in Yorkshire. However they rationalise the local by linking it to the shop itself. For example Sarah's quote at the start of this article. Sarah feels that her box delivery offsets a little bit the fact that she goes to Tesco for the rest of her shopping:

But I think a lot more of it (the box) is local and I'd rather support a local little greengrocer than a massive, national supermarket chain.

The box delivery fills two needs for Sarah. Firstly, it fits within the ideas of thrift because it just shows up each week with no input from her, the fruit and vegetables arrive at her doorstep, and the delivery is free and the quality is good enough. This means, then when the shopping for the remaining required items is done by this

shopper, or her partner who also does household shopping, it is done at just one store, and thus the delivery preserves the convenience of one-stop shopping valued in this household. Secondly, the box delivery provides Sarah with the opportunity to practice what she sees as a meaningful politics of resistance to what she sees as the exploitative power of Tesco (a sentiment expressed by many of our respondents) while still being able to practice thrift. This family feels it is getting good value from the box scheme because only fruits and vegetables are purchased and the weekly cost is relatively low and because Sarah does not feel Tesco's fruit and vegetables are of very good quality. There is no discussion about comparing the price of the fruit and vegetables to what they would spend on just fruits and vegetables at Tesco. This is in direct contrast to the ways that these consumers, and others, compare the total bill from Tesco to the total bill from Booths.

What Cascade Fruits particularly illustrates however, is the difficulty that small fresh food retailers have getting food that is farmed within a relatively proximate geographical region as both the physical and social geography offer limitations and opportunities in terms of what small these retailers can purchase. Booths, in contributing to the public consciousness about "local" food have helped to enable a market for the greengrocer by helping to reinforce a public discourse around the idea that local is better. However, the sourcing strategies, of the supermarket chains including both Tesco and Booths, which often involve exclusive agreements with farmers, also make it more difficult to find locally grown food at the wholesale market. This assessment of the sourcing difficulties for small fresh food retailers is confirmed by local farmers.

Concluding thoughts

Increasing ecological awareness has led to concerns surrounding food miles and the health benefits of local food. However, the food journey of produce consumed in the U.K. – rarely being a straightforward trail from farm to fork – often involves a diverse range of individuals and bodies at different stages and places, resulting in a complex set of meanings attached to food items considered to be local. In this article we have explored the myriad of ways in which local can be understood. Based on empirical research involving case study methodology – drawing on interviews with producers and (mainly) middle class consumers – we explored the ways that retailers seek to sell local food, the diverse aspects of this term for consumers and the ways that consumers negotiate these differences.

The research highlighted how consumers negotiate the term “local” through relational consumption practices. We have argued that local not only connotes a local supplier, local producer or local commodity chain, but for those to whom we spoke involves understandings of convenience, health and status. What this article has shown is that local is a relative concept produced by both consumers and producers. When viewed from the perspective of the consumer, constructions of local becomes less straightforward than when viewed from the farmers perspective. The idea that food is local can be linked to elements along the whole length of the commodity chain such as where the food is farmed or processed, who the seller is, to where the shopper is located, to even who the shopper might be. For our consumers, food miles may merely become another element on a label that must then be balanced against cost quality and convenience (see also Eden et al. 2007). For instance, for those in our study, a distinction of 30 miles is not particularly meaningful and no different from 50 or 100 miles; instead, local was only a recognisable concept when referring to a much smaller geographical area (in our case this was just one mile), when linked to an existing

journey, or when attached to a particular set of abstracted social meanings. When divorced from distance travelled, however the term local does have political currency for our consumers, as, for example, when they actively choose to support a greengrocer as opposed to a national supermarket chain.

What is also apparent is that the value of the local changes in relation to how it is used. Local is an open concept that is negotiated in place by a number of actors with different agendas. These actors include large food producers and retailers aiming to increase market share, small retailers aiming to stay in business in an increasingly difficult climate, farmers and rural planners similarly aiming to sustain British agriculture, as well as consumers themselves who are often trying to live a good life that includes providing for their families, living healthily, and contributing to the fabric of their community. However, the multiple retail voices that create discourses around local food in this research site combine to define locally produced food as alternative food as opposed to ordinary. Furthermore, local contexts can work discursively and relationally to construct this alternative as expensive and exclusive, rather than healthy food or family food, as was expressed through the ways that consumers compared Booths' local food against the value of Tesco. In another context where very low cost retailers are present, food from Tesco may be judged by consumers to be the place where special food is purchased.

An examination of local food from the perspective of the consumer reveals that the assertion that people should be willing to spend more on their food than they do currently is an inadequate solution. While the notion that food must always be inexpensive has been widely challenged and compelling arguments that advocate spending more on what we eat and less on other forms of consumption have been suggested (e.g., Du Puis 2001); the notion that good, fresh food must also be expensive

is also worth further interrogation. This sort of interrogation would move the emphasis up the commodity chain from consumers to focus on the practices of retailers (see also Lang 1999). Tesco, for example just posted a 10% increase in net profits (Lynch 2008), despite current economic global economic hardship. While there is a demonstrated economic need to support farmers and an environmental need for countries to maintain some ability to feed its own population, the needs of all consumers also must be considered in any proposed solutions as consumers will reject efforts that impinge upon what they view as their own sustainability.

The explicit reconnection of food with its origin on farms, through the stories told in branding strategies that name a particular, usually white, farmer, combined with the increased cost that local commands, fixes the idea in consumers' minds that the rural landscape is a place of prosperity. This conceptual link, however, does nothing for U.K. farmers' claims of economic hardship, which is a key motivator of food system localization efforts (Pratt 2007), as consumers' mental image of a farmer becomes one associated with wealth and whiteness. For those whose own identities do not resonate with this construction, there is very little motivation for purchasing local food, because it is not socially local to them (see also Guthman 2008 for a similar argument). Convincing a larger number and a greater variety of consumers to adopt a willingness to buy food produced more sustainably than there are currently will involve a greater engagement with the identities of those consumers and the food practices that are linked to those identities. There is still, however, relatively little research that aims to understand the foodways and food consumption practices of ethnic minority groups within the U.S. and in Europe. More research is needed to understand where connections might lie between ethnic minority consumers and the farmers who produce sustainable food before a more inclusive politics of food provision can be mobilised.

These cases also show that it may be easier for large firms with strong supplier networks to access food farmed locally to consumers than it is for small independent retailers. However, because of the internal logistics of these large firms, this locally farmed food is likely to travel away from the local area to be packaged and processed before returning to the local store. Small independent retailers, however, have excellent access to international distribution centres through the wholesale markets, where ironically local farmers are not particularly represented due to their own exclusive agreements with the large supermarket chains. Recognition that this imported food plays an important role in maintaining a particular form of local community, that is often racialized and fragile, is needed and would contribute to a more inclusive food politics (see also Slocum 2007; Guthman 2008).

Perhaps contrary to expectation, this article is not advocating a formalised definition of what should count as “local food”. Instead, we take the opposite stance, warning against positioning local food as a social fact. There are social consequences implicated in the increasing popularity of local food which may perpetuate existing inequalities surrounding health and food choice; perhaps most obviously, local food in the U.K. – because of the cost and required cultural capital – is likely to become exclusively the domain of the few who are wealthy, educated and live in the correct regions. At the material level, it is clear from this research that even in affluent areas and for middle class people it is not always easy to get food that conforms to the food activist’s definition of local food that is farmed, processed and purchased all within a distance of 30 miles. Local defined as 30 miles is arbitrary and for some inadequate as to achieve a healthy varied diet may be impossible given the climatic and physical characteristics of an area.

The obvious question arises: if the relatively affluent living near the countryside cannot easily access local food, then how much more difficult will it be for those in poor inner city neighbourhoods to do so? We concur with Eden et al. (2008) that further labelling and other simple knowledge fixes like these that encouraging people to buy 'local food' are an insufficient solution. We feel that not only does this add further pressure on consumers, but it shifts the blame for a more general and lowered expectation regarding food quality onto consumers, with no accountability being placed onto retailer's roles in these processes. In addition to greater retailer accountability, better consumer focused strategies, we believe, involve more deeply rooted educational and resource initiatives aimed at allowing consumers to reclaim the capacity to know what constitutes good food, be it local or otherwise and that involves understanding more than just the visual characteristics of food. Likewise, programmes that enable all groups to grow their own fruit and vegetables as part of a daily routine is also needed so that consumers have the tools to remain ambivalent about and less dependent upon retailer's offerings. This would involve rethinking a whole host of social institutions such as planning practices that limit the size of gardens and allow the closure of allotments to an education system that does not allow time for learning about gardening, provisioning, and cooking, but is instead willing to leave the teaching of food value to retailers.

Finally this article has also suggested that place matters to the consumption practices of individuals and groups in ways that are more important than just as a location. We have adopted a more open understanding of place that affords the possibility for understanding how value is imposed upon goods by consumers as they consider the goods in relation to other products located in that same place (see also Miller 2008). Unlike previous research on food that "follows the thing", considering

place as an active agent forces a consideration of how people understand “things” in relation to each other as they are located in place and then how that perspective helps to determine the value of individual items. Using this case study of local food we have indicated that place is more than the stage upon which things happen, and whilst we have focussed specifically on how local is understood in relation to food, these discussions can also contribute to wider discussions outside of local food debates.

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Notes:

¹Susatain, an alliance of over 100 food and farming advocacy groups in the U.K., for example, proposes a definition of local food as food that is “produced, processed and traded, from sustainable production systems where the physical and economic activity is controlled within the locality (usually 30 miles) where it was produced, which delivers health, economic, environmental and social benefits to the people in those areas (Sustain, 2008:16)”.

² Hinrichs and Kremer (2002) make the argument that because those consumers who belong to local food movements tend to white and middle-class, there is an exclusionary practice to local food systems that defines insiders and outsiders. Likewise, Winter (2003) illustrates the range of political agenda’s that are encapsulated within these movements. While both of these points are important, in this article, we wish to move away from a notion of consumers as active and intentioned members of a particular movement towards a notion of a consumer that views their consumption practices in terms of a socially shared understanding of ordinary. This focus on what consumers view as ordinary seeks to move away from a singular notion of an ordinary consumer. Indeed the consumers in our study do practice consumption heterogeneously when viewed from the researcher’s perspective, however their accounts reveal that they understand their own performance of consumption as being ordinary and akin to what others do, as opposed to consumption that might be performed by a gourmet, for example (See Lee (2006) for more discussion of the ordinary in economic life).

³ According to JICREG New readership data (2008) there were 11,080 households and approximately two thirds of the population are in social classes A, B, and C1. This

British class categorisation is based on 6 classifications. Categories A and B include upper managerial and professional occupations.

⁴ Since doing the interviews this has closed and is now a Marks and Spencer food store.

⁵ According to the 2001 Census, in England the white population accounts for 90% of the total population. Using ward level data, the percentage of the population that is non-mixed race white was calculated for each Booths location. Just two of the 26 locations were in areas that were less than 97% white, and these two locations, both in Preston where Booths started out, are still above this national percentage at 91% and 93%.

⁶ The name of this retailer has been changed in accordance with U.K. ethical guidelines.

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