

Journal of New Business Ideas & Trends

2015, 13(2), pp. 57 -72.

"<http://www.jnbit.org>"

Food Festivals, Food Marketing and the Re-invention of a Rural Community

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the effectiveness of food as a marketable entity and a marketing platform. In addition, this narrative provides an illustration of how a rural Australian community re-defined itself in response to unanticipated changes in the immediate economic and political environment.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on a conceptual review and observations of a rural food festival in Australia. Framed by a review of academic and practitioner materials in the public domain, it highlights the value of food as both a marketing platform and a catalyst for community capacity building, born out of perceived necessity to protect farming land from competing interests, in this instance, from the mining industry. Observations about the festival were made over a 9-month period as the author acted as a volunteer consultant to the Festival's organising committee.

Findings – The value of food is further re-stated in both its material and symbolic functions as an effective commodity that supports a variety of marketing platforms that appeal to consumer markets. The food festival is an example of a comprehensive marketing entity with elements of preservation marketing, education, tourism, product and service innovation, community capacity building and relationship marketing. Food security emerged as a strong consumer desire across a global landscape. Underlying the success of the food festival itself is the fundamental value of food as a plastic commodity that can be harnessed to a multitude of social, economic, political, religious and cultural goals.

Keywords: food marketing; food festival; community; food security; tourism; rural identity

JEL Classifications: M31

PsycINFO Classifications: 3940

FoR Codes: 1504; 1505

ERA Journal ID #: 40840

Introduction

Necessity being the mother of invention is not new to marketers but there are still lessons to be learnt from new and challenging situations. This paper describes how one community chose to assert the value of food as being more socially important than the potential financial rewards that could be gained from other types of activity (in this case the mining of coal and gas) undertaken on prime agricultural land. Rather than focus on the economic, ecological, political or social debates surrounding the ‘mining versus dining’ debate, the intention of this paper is to highlight the investment in the symbolic power of food as the tool used by a community brought together to maintain its own sense of identity. Observations surrounding an emergent rural food festival illustrate how reliable the research literature in this field of scholarship has been and provide a convincing account of how marketing principles based on food can be applied to community building, and how local pride and commercial acumen can be brought together.

The rural community and the food festival it created are relatively small. However the ‘David and Goliath’ battle between the farmers and external challenges provides a vivid backdrop to explore the food production and consumption divide, and the material and symbolic functions of food in linking nature, human survival, culture and livelihood (McMichael 2000) as a focus of resistance to potential re-makes of an established and traditional way of life.

Agricultural farming by its nature creates a diffuse community. Seasonal growth and harvest follow various timetables so that farmers within regional communities who are growing a variety of crops may not necessarily have much need to develop social cohesion. Their lives revolve around meeting market demand from global communities. The great irony of success in the global marketplace for some Australian food producers is the resultant erosion of their local identity. On the one hand, the global market requires standardised goods but, at the same time, this has an homogenising effect that can threaten the close connection between food and place, aka *cuisine terroir* (Mak, Lumbers & Eves 2012). From the consumer’s perspective this has implications for culinary tourism; they want the uniqueness of local products, but, from a wider perspective, the constant demand for products that are, in reality, seasonal, has implications for the value of food quality in general and the value of rural industry, farm preservation and community identity. Despite the obvious or arguable value of land for prime food production the fact remains that contemporary urban consumers have less experience of and a diminishing interest in knowledge of rural production and its implications for food quality, community and sustainable economic growth. Consumers want products that are marketed as local, fresh and authentic while remaining unaware of how such goods are actually produced.

However, the globalisation of the food system generally has given rise to an interesting movement of counter-defences aimed at redirecting consumption towards community agriculture, fresh food and shorter distribution channels as a response to the consequences of competing interests from other industries. In order to understand how one community has asserted the value of food as a valuable marketing platform as well as a device for building social cohesion this paper looks at the value of food generally, and then some of the issues associated with food security and the role of rural communities as the producers of such. This will set the scene for an overview of the development and ongoing growth of one rural food festival and how its organisers have harnessed the symbolic and cultural value of food to a diverse range of marketing efforts.

A key issue in examining food marketing is the disciplinary divide in research to date. Studies in rural sociology and rural geography tend to examine food systems from the perspective of production only, whilst studies in food consumption and consumer behaviour

rarely take into account the ways in which rurality, landscapes, communities, systems of production and local identity can be integral to consumer perceptions and choice of foods (Weatherall, Tregear & Allinson 2003). Reviewing the short history of one food festival is provided here as a useful means of bringing these two perspectives more closely together to not only highlight the power of food in marketing but to consider food marketing from both a production and consumption perspective. It is this gap in the research literature that this paper aims to address.

The Value of Food

The word value in this sub-title does not refer to an economic or market worth but rather the importance, social meaning, power and cultural significance of food as a comestible. From a marketing perspective this is a complex notion as marketing borrows from the research in economics, sociology, anthropology and psychology that tend to consider food in various different contexts. By and large, economic theories regard food as a commodity subject to systems analysis while rural sociology tends to focus on the production centred approach to food politics (Goodman & DuPuis 2002). However the simple demand and supply equation of commodity trade is substantially more complex when we consider the role and value of food in everyday life. In this sense sociology and psychology are generally more concerned with consumption and consumers.

Without regurgitating the history of food habits it is accepted that food has a complex social status with a multiplicity of meanings. Even so, in its most rudimentary form food satisfies a basic human need for sustenance and therefore survival that relates to human physiological needs. There is then an obvious and near universal concern for ensuring its safety. We have learned to eat whatever is palatable, nutritional and aesthetic. However, food safety is an issue not just in developing countries but increasingly in the developed world in the form of crises related to various food contaminations or the general debate over genetically modified ' Frankenfoods'. There are also short and long term health risks associated with food with short term risks such as food poisoning giving way to longer term risks such as heart disease in what health researchers have called the epidemiological revolution (Rozin 2005). The fact also remains that food is a tool for social display; it is a means for satisfying social needs, personal esteem and self-representation. Irrespective of the society, whether it is highly developed in industrial production or an agriculturally based economy of immediate supply and circulation, the status of food is always mediated through concepts such as status, taste, wealth, culture, religion, luxury and fashion.

Food is a plastic commodity that operates in different ways all of the time. This makes food a complex phenomenon for marketers especially when considering the apparent disconnect between theories pertaining to production versus consumption and personal need versus social status. Finkelstein's (2014) sociological review of food and the making of modern identity describes the complexity and contradiction of human needs and motivations in relation to food:

The history of sugar from a luxury and medical antidote to a relatively cheap source of energy and food substitute in the eighteenth century, and a staple in everyone's diet by the next century, reflects the capacity of food customs to shift social values on a grand scale. Mintz observed that as consumption of sugar grew, so too did the industrial capacity to manufacture new food substances such as sugared fruits, then jams and marmalades. Integral to the development of new food products were new ways of thinking about daily life itself, embellishment of specific foods with symbolic meanings and character. it (is) puzzling that substances with no nutritional value such as tea, coffee, nutmeg, ginger, pepper were popular and quickly absorbed into the daily diet and have remained so into

the present time. Such trends demonstrate how the symbolic value of commodities does not necessarily equate with their natural properties (pp.42-43).

Food has unique characteristics that contribute to definitions of culture, religion, region, social-class and even self-identity. In this sense food serves as a platform for production, consumption, socialisation, integration, cultural identity, environmental sustainability, identification and individual pleasure. It is also worth noting that it is one of the few commodities that is as dangerous in its scarcity (poverty in the developing world) as it is in its over-abundance and indulgence (obesity in developed countries), both afflictions weighing heavily on global health agendas.

A rational economic perspective might view the globalisation of the food system as a basic supply and demand equation which also values farming practices and agricultural geography in these same terms. However such a view on the importance of mass food production, global fast food chains and long distribution channels, is focussed on the maximisation of economic return in the distribution of food. The industrialisation of food with its style of production that tends to cater to the widest possible market in terms of consumption is driven by maximising profitability over the consumer's knowledge of food origins, regionality and *cuisine terroir*. In this way, developed consumer markets have encouraged the demand for the availability of certain styles of food over and above any concerns for its nutritional value or environmental impact (Ritzer, 1996). Global markets prioritise consumer demands above the exigencies of farming and production. This highlights again the tension between consumer demand for fresh products with the flavours of *cuisine terroir*, and the actualities of local production systems and agricultural practices.

Food is a mechanism allowing people to make social distinctions and establish social linkages through the sharing of food and the expression of emotions towards others. Food can assume symbolic functions and take on moral significance (Rozin 2005) as with vegetarianism for Buddhists, and the exclusion of beef for Hindus. The contemporary obsession with food preparation, celebrity chefs, reality cooking shows and gastro-porn are testimony to the fact that food is also a medium for aesthetic expression and class distinction. The emerging trends, at the moment, bring emphasis to the embryonic 'turn' away from the global food system to consider issues of food production such as where ingredients are sourced, processed and grown.

The creation of mass cuisine and the industrialization of food have delivered different kinds of foods to the global marketplace but it has also fundamentally changed the individual's relationship to food by standardizing and transforming comestibles into a highly regulated and closed commodity, which can produce greater passivity, disinterest, and even boredom in the consumer (Finkelstein 2003). Following the microwave-oven-frozen-food era and the industrialization of food, consumers are now demonstrating a trend toward social novelties; they evidence greater interest in being inventive and exploratory and using the complexity and diversity of food to express identity and reflect their knowledge and indulge their senses in a more obvious and deliberate manner (Finkelstein 2014).

An interesting by-product of this heightened interest in the status of food is an emergent nostalgia for agricultural heritage. A consequence of the disconnect between food production and consumption in the Australian context has been to remove consumers from an agricultural heritage in which farming communities and industries were highly regarded, well profiled and part of the national identity. Modern consumers have had little of the nostalgic regard for farms or farming that previous generations enjoyed when there was a more considerable reliance on local produce. Times have changed; the conditions of a global division of agriculture versus local has meant that styles of agriculture has become less and less an anchor of societies and cultures and a more fashionable component of corporate global sourcing strategies (McMichael 2000).

However, the inherent plasticity of food itself has meant that a 'turn' away from the globalization of the food system is a predictable trend that acknowledges the salience of 'consumption' and consumers in the history of the food economy. The growth of alternate food movements which include organic production, alternative agro-food networks, quality assurance schemes, multi-dimensional rural development policies and territorial strategies to valorise local foods are now abundant in practice and in the research literature in these areas (Adams 2004; Goodman 2002 & 2004; Newman, Turri, Howlett & Stokes 2014; Sharma & Vyas 2011). Mak, Lumbers and Eve (2011) argue that the tension between globalisation and localisation is conceptually a dialect and interdependent dialogue. That is, while globalisation is contributing to a more homogenised food supply on the one hand, the tension between globalisation and localisation is producing greater diversity, on the other.

In the emerging value of gastronomy itself, the consumer interest in the origins of foodstuffs seems to precede formal regulations; the market interest produces its own patterns of consumption. However, an ironic consequence of these emerging trends is that the demand for regional products can generate a de-localisation of the foodstuff itself. The consumer demand for specialised products remains in evidence irrespective of the growing season or any actual agri-practices. This, in turn, creates tensions between regional identity, increased social mobility and the hybridization of consumer tastes. The celebrated food writer, Elizabeth David, commented on precisely this issue in the 1950s when she observed the growing amount of tourism through regional France and its impact on the all-year-round demand for regional dishes that were highly seasonal such as Bresse chicken and bouillabaisse, cassoulet. The new gourmandizing tourist was not deterred by the relationship between product and place but demanded the ever-ready availability of dishes irrespective of their seasonality. David's lament that consumer demand exceeded the capacities of the agri-environment was an early and prescient recognition that fashionability in foods has become a factor in the current deterioration of *cuisine terroir* and the homogenisation of popular cuisine.

The value of food for marketers can be found in endless opportunities associated with both production and consumption and in the state of flux between the globalisation and localisation of food systems. Food should be recognized as a collection of contextual and evolving social practices where it no longer merely serves as sustenance but also a way to relate to other people in social, cultural and political terms (Oosterveer 2006). Other marketing opportunities can be found in trying to mend the economic/cultural fault line that is the source of the compartmentalization of production and consumption (Goodman 2002). A theory that contemporary food marketers appear to accept has been proposed by Max-Neef (1992); it expands the idea that consumers like to feel in control of their desires even when they are not. The take-home message for food marketers in this theory is the attempt to recognize consumers as protagonists in their own future. Human desires obey various imperatives – taste, fashion, status, culture and so on, and these desires shift as individuals absorb various social attachments. This means that desires and tastes are not static, that there is no fixed order of precedence in their satisfaction and actualization. Simultaneities, complementarities and trade-offs are characteristics of the consumer (Max-Neef 1992). This is of course more relevant in developed countries where basic nutrition is assumed and where choice, in the pursuit of personal satisfaction, is a taken-for-granted daily pleasure. However, it is not the case that these desires and tastes arise in arbitrary and unexpected ways; on the contrary, consumer demand for specific food items can be clearly aligned with trends in marketing. It is at this point that the current value accorded fresh foods that are identified with regional values can be considered a response to the near-exhausted global marketing of homogenised foods. The fashion for uniformity and reliability that underpinned the marketing of fast foods through universal chain restaurants, for example, threatens to become passé. Many consumers want something else.

The next section will discuss food and rural communities as a forerunner to identifying marketing opportunities in the light of threats to both. With that in mind Max-Neef (1992) gives a suitable end-note in summary of a new way of considering food marketing as a function of both production and consumption:

Such development is focused and based on the satisfaction of fundamental human needs, on the generation of growing levels of self-reliance, and on the construction of organic articulations of people with nature and technology, of global processes with local activity, of the personal with the social, of planning with autonomy, and of civil society with the state, where 'articulation' is taken to mean the construction of coherent and consistent relations of balanced interdependence among given elements (p.197).

Food & Rural Communities

The fashion for regional foods in Australia has strengthened in recent years, for instance, King Island cheese, Pakenham pears, Margaret River wines. Rural communities are more frequently engaged now in marketing their home-grown local goods while also being highly conscious of the need to protect themselves from the homogenisation that comes with global food marketing. These efforts, however, will only be successful if they are valued by consumers and understood by producers in terms of what needs they actually serve. Again in rethinking both production-centered and cultural approaches to food politics we must do so in ways that acknowledge the contested processes of interaction between how we 'grow food' and how we 'know food' (Goodman & DuPuis 2002).

Developing a strong culinary culture in Australia is an entrepreneurial ambition. Though many places across the globe provide interesting dining experiences such as Hong Kong, Kerala in India, Ragusa in Sicily, the predominant model is France which maintains its reputation for quality food and wine. This is, of course, embedded in the very identity of France with its history of Michelin starred restaurants, culinary histories from Escoffier onwards and its guaranteed authenticity of products through its *Appellations d'Origine Controlée* (AOC). In comparison, the nascent culinary culture of Australia can only bring its reputation as fresh, uncontaminated, innovative and youthful. These are strong elements and may well be successful with a tourist clientele but they do not have the ballast of history, or the concept of *terroir* as its proven value. Consequently, the Australian agricultural farmer needs to invent and re-invent consumer appeal until the unique identity of their product is established. In addition, the market concern for fresh, uncontaminated food is not yet widespread enough and Australians, in particular, have taken-for-granted and enjoyed a long history of safe and plentiful food production from thriving rural communities (Lawrence, Richards & Lyons 2013). While the notion of safe and abundant food remains with Australian consumers it is difficult to gauge the value if any they place on these attributes in food consumption as they have rarely been faced with the alternative of unregulated or contaminated foods. However, the concept of environmental sustainability is becoming more readily acknowledged with urban and rural consumers alike, and coupled with the agitation against global food production, this has led to movements such as community supported and sustainable agriculture, community coalitions focussed on food security, organic food production, fair-trade movements and farm-gate-to-plate initiatives.

To achieve sustainable competitive advantage, businesses must be able to adapt to a changing environment more effectively than their competitors; they have to be prepared to adopt new practices (Reeves & Deimler 2011; European Commission 2002, p.5). In 1987, the Brundtland Commission coined the term "sustainable development" to explain development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, p.24). This requires businesses to integrate social and environmental

concerns into their operations and communicate these with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis. This has given rise to the movement of eco-efficiency whereby the best use of natural resources are employed in order to integrate ecology and economy. The role of partnerships between government, businesses and society in the new economic era has become a focal point in achieving sustainability especially where the natural environment is valued as a social and economic dividend (Kleine & Hauff, 2009). To achieve sustainable development, meet the triple bottom line, attain sustainable competitive advantage and satisfy corporate social responsibility, businesses need to behave differently (Quinn 1996). They need to understand that cultural change and transformation are essential in aligning sustainability with business purposes in order to ensure sustainable business success (Linnenluecke & Griffiths 2010; Stoughton & Ludema 2012). It is in this context that the emergence of a local grouping of diverse food farmers (as in this instance of a local food festival) becomes an illuminating example of the intersecting interests that characterise food, namely, market responsiveness, political awareness, economic viability and commercial acumen.

Food in the advanced societies has always been associated with good living. Social theorists such as Michel de Certeau (1984) and Pierre Bourdieu (1984) refer to the patterns of everyday life as the *habitus* we take for granted. The selection of certain foods, in this context, acts as a marker of social distinction and class position. Embedded in this perspective is the recognition of food as a mode of social coalescence for specific groups. Food is commonly advertised as a necessity but also as an ingredient in our future well-being. Food is always good for us and no food substance carries the opposite message – that is, until there is a crisis caused most commonly by contamination. Mass produced items trade on the values that industrialism has offered – scientific manufacture, economic production, guaranteed quality, improved hygienic handling. In contrast, the value of many regional products is based on more direct and immediate trust: the producer stands by and guarantees the product, the producer invites the consumer to see the fields, animals and kitchen to assure themselves of the reliability of the offer. The consumer is promised quality. The goodness of the regional product lies in the short, lean chain of production. In this specific claim, regional products can demonstrate in an immediately obvious manner their right to claim inherent robust healthiness.

Regional products are heavily invested with notions of the *natural sublime*; the pastures are lush, the soil untainted, the river water is clean, the climate conducive to seasonal production. The physical attributes of the region are incorporated into the qualities of the comestibles. This invests a sense of local essentialism and particularity into the products; *pâte* from the Pyrenees, mussels from Brittany, charcuterie from Lyon, Yorkshire pudding, Sicilian olives, Somerset Brie from the Ile-de-France region, Angus beef, Napa Valley wine etc.

Consumers are becoming trained to be more concerned about the provenance of their cheese, pesto sauce, cold pressed oil and balsamic vinegar. They are increasingly interested in artisanal production techniques than Government regulations that focus on mass-produced factory standards. The consumer seeks a guarantee against industrial accidents that can produce adulteration in food products. The producer or the local entrepreneur meets this demand with the mobilisation of region as the signature of taste and quality. Thus there tacitly develops a new consumer contract – the demand for originality that implies quality based not on Government regulation and industrial efficiency but a sense of trust with the provendor.

Many Australian consumers however are still subject to a form of ‘cultural cringe’ insofar as they are more likely to identify and consume international ‘local’ food products than they are to acknowledge the quality of Australian regional products such as wheat, oysters, pineapples, chickpeas or sugar. A reason for this lies in the history of urban

migration. Rural communities of the Australian interior once held a special place in the national identity. In 1900 over 60% of the Australian population lived in inland, rural Australia, compared to today where almost nine in ten people reside within 50kms of the coast, with 84% of people living in 1% of Australia's land mass in metropolitan centres (Carrington & Hogg 2011). This presents major obstacles to sustaining rural communities in much of the continent not only because of the lack of rural workers, consumers and infrastructure but also because a great deal of affection and identification with rural communities and agricultural production has dissipated. The urban consumer does not necessarily regard farming as conducive to permanence or cultivation or to the husbanding of scarce resources through moral, political and economic enterprise (Carrington & Hogg 2011). This shift in attitudes has far reaching implications for the value of domestic and local food production. It is also a factor to be considered when understanding the significance of a community (as in this instance of a local food festival) that successfully coalesces around the singular focus of food marketing.

The concept of value in shortened distribution channels and the quality of local foods is only one of the marketable commodities for rural producers made more important by urban migration. Another more political imperative is the value of rural production and agricultural sustainability in general. It is hard for urban consumers to be moved by the plight of a rural community under threat of foreign investment and loss of industry or the proliferation of mining on agricultural land when they do not have a history or tradition of any association or understanding of a particular rural community. The mining versus farming industries in Australian rural communities has, in recent years, highlighted some challenging issues associated with food production and consumption, such as the demands of urban consumers for specific products with the practical issues of environmental sustainability. The best use for agricultural land has emerged as a new influence on marketers who are designing campaigns for the selling of products. The reality of debates about community sustainability and land usage is an emerging consideration in food advertising. Rural consumers (who are often producers as well) are well versed in the argument for food safety, food security and superior agricultural production and sustainability as these are long-term the benefits that can contribute to public confidence and the national economy generally. However without a similar understanding and valuing of these concepts by urban-dwelling consumers then the fundamental marketing concept between producer and consumer is not being recognised or satisfied.

Food marketing based on its locale and particularly its regional proximity necessitates not only marketing the food products (and services) but the regional and/or the rural community itself. For example, rural areas associated with agriculture and food have been highlighted as key areas for both domestic and international tourism in regional Australia. However, rural regions are explicitly less place-specific than actual towns or cities thereby making rural place branding potentially more difficult than other destination marketing campaigns. Uluru, for example, is a specific place whereas Outback Australia could be anywhere. Rural areas are often characterized by small, dispersed populations and activities, diverse landscapes and varying perceptions of what is 'rural' by both locals and visitors (Boyne & Hall 2004). Hence, they can be hard for the tourist to find.

Yet the effective branding and promotion of rural regions and their food products does serve a complex set of needs for both producers and consumers. The increased value of 'local' foods and the accompanying benefits help producers defend or grow their markets and even sustain whole communities and industries by protecting agriculture land from alternative use or economic demise. In addition, the promotion of 'local' foods and aggregate production and regionality allows for increased rural tourism and agri-tourism opportunities which can inject money into rural economies, promote understanding of rural areas and thereby feed into the cycle of sustainability. In addition, the added opportunities of interacting with consumers allow farmers to explore more value-adding options in food

production and marketing. Rand, Heath & Albert (2003) recognized regional food as having a pivotal role in destination marketing and vice versa. Their work found that 'local food holds much potential to enhance sustainability in tourism; contribute to authenticity of the destination; strengthen the local economy; and provide for environmentally friendly infrastructure' (p.97).

Food marketing campaigns based on the values of rural proximity and the appeal of locality or regionality should be mindful of both the food itself and the location. This means showcasing not only the value of the food products and services but also fostering strong geographical association both environmentally and socially and making distinct connections between quality and local availability (Boyne & Hall 2004).

Rand, Heath and Alberts (2003) urge us not to underestimate the importance of the food-region connection in any marketing activity. They concluded that the use of local food can directly or indirectly contribute to the various elements of sustainability in a particular area including stimulating and supporting agricultural activity and food production, preventing the exploitation of authentic goods, enhancing destination attractiveness, the empowerment of the community by means of job creation, the encouragement of entrepreneurship, the generation of pride about food and the community itself, and finally, reinforcing brand identity of the destination with the focus on food experiences in the particular area.

The next section outlines an example of a rural community that used food marketing by way of a rural food festival to address a variety of political, economic and social issues as have been discussed in this section.

Rural identity and a Food Festival

The food festival and the region under discussion are not identified in order to protect the anonymity of its stakeholders; it will be referred to as the Rural Food Festival (RFF) and the Rural Community respectively.

The Rural Community encompasses an area of some 24, 000 hectares of prime agricultural land in Australia. The area was a significant region in the initial settlement of Australian farmland and for the establishment of successful agricultural practices in the region. Geologically it is prime land situated at the headwaters of a reliable water catchment. It is closely settled and many farmers are second and third generation. The area is characterised by rich fertile black soils and a climate that enables it to grow food crops all year round. Rural Community farmers produce a wide variety of crops including wheat, barley, chickpeas, mung beans, sunflowers, lettuce, cabbages, beetroot, celery and onions. The district is also a substantial producer of beef, lamb, pork, poultry, dairy and eggs.

In 2008 an unlisted public mining company based in Australia made a proposal to develop an open cut coal mine and chemical plant in this area that would initially extract 800,000 tonnes of coal per annum with a second stage extracting 3.8 million tonnes per annum with the ultimate goal of 12.8 million tonnes annually. Residents of the Rural Community (predominantly farming families) opposed the development with the core argument that the coal mine would inflict unacceptable impacts on agriculture, the natural environment and the community. Furthermore, the mine proposed was out of character with the prevailing environmental, social, economic and cultural parameters of the district.

Leaving aside the arguments from both parties in this conflict, the focus here is on the conflict as a catalyst for a food marketing initiative from which several relevant food marketing themes can be examined.

While political and community debate raged about the coal mine proposal in this Rural Community, a group of farming residents found themselves frustrated by the need to defend what they saw as a gesture toward securing the nation's food security. For those primary producers' food security meant not only saving agricultural land but also protecting the environmental quality of food production in Australia. Their concern was that approval of this particular regional mine would prove a valuable test case for further mining in key agricultural areas across the country. Their message in town hall meetings, local, state and national media releases and interviews was largely centred around explaining the significance of the region in terms of high quality food production.

In a relatively non-confrontational response to this potentially large-scale conflict, the group of local producers developed an idea to showcase the food of the region by holding a food festival and thereby heightening awareness of their community and its produce. In the first year, over 4000 people attended the inaugural Rural Food Festival and the Rural Community was overwhelmed by the support shown for its local farmers and the food they produced. Following this success, changes were made in the following year to provide greater visibility of the event. The Festival moved to a larger and more shaded Festival site overlooking the beautiful Rural Community Valley. The new site proved successful and with ever increasing marketing activity the Festival's popularity continued to grow with over 10,000 people attending in its third year.

The Festival is a one-day event involving 75+ stallholders from the Rural Community area. The Festival is both educational and entertaining, celebrating farm produce and methods; it provides cooking demonstrations from celebrity chefs and a celebrity gardener who uses only local produce. The Festival is devoted to showcase and brand the Rural Community and its surrounding region as a superior agriculture and food growing area. In partnership with producers, suppliers and regional authorities the organisers of the Festival leverage the natural beauty and potential of the region in order to increase visitor numbers and revenue, build community capacity, encourage value-adding in production and finding new markets for regional produce.

This is an instance where the Festival was born out of a genuine desire by local farmers and producers to protect the region for quality agricultural endeavours and to showcase the region as an important contributor to the Australian food bowl. To ensure the quality of the produce and the reputation of the region, each participant/stall holder is rigorously screened to ensure that they are indeed producers/growers from within the designated radius of the region. In addition the food vendors onsite at the Festival must emphasise how to use local produce and the value of quality agriculture.

Another feature of the Festival's brand personality is the authentic rural experience of the day. To this end, the event is held on an actual working farm, in a paddock complete with livestock, crops and expansive rural views. The responses from Festival visitors indicated that they frequently commented on the genuine warmth with which the Rural Community volunteers greeted them and the extensive interaction with local farmers and producers who mingled with the crowd to explain, demonstrate and generally educate and entertain everyone, especially children. The Festival included a Q&A tent with farmers and producers that was popular with visitors and added to the Festival's educational goals.

The next section addresses some of the key marketing themes and activities that have emerged from this Festival that in turn highlight the complexity of food marketing and the power and value of food across the political, economic, social and cultural landscape of rural regions.

Emergent Food Marketing Themes

The Rural Food Festival was born out of necessity as an exercise in promoting local interests by appealing to a wider community through the social value of education. The promotion of techniques of agricultural production in order to draw attention to the plight of a community perceived to be under threat from a mining proposal was based on the emerging cultural trend to value the local over the industrialised global. The outcome of the conflict between big corporate (the mining company) and the farmers of the Rural Community currently rests in favour of the Farmers but that perceived victory is attributable to many stakeholders, initiatives and external environmental factors, and no attempt is being made to attribute the success to the Rural Food Festival alone. The more interesting point is that a food marketing activity in the form of a food festival was identified as the best way to respond to a community at risk of possibly losing its livelihood and identity. The food festival was a way of raising the profile of the area and of educating the public about local food production and sustainability.

It was the response to an apparent crisis that highlighted the production and consumption divide for rural producers who subsequently identified the need to explain themselves and their personal investment in farming. The circumstances of the potential threat to the region from a mining interest highlighted the physical and psychological distance that existed between food production and consumers at large. It illustrated the previously unrecognised problematic disconnection between the general public and primary producers. This episode was a galvanising influence on the formation of a community as well as an illustration of the social and environmental consequences of food production (Kimbrell 2002 in Feagan 2007). More than that, though, the Rural Food Festival has grown and evolved as a significant event in not only the local calendar but also the State tourism calendar. It can now rightfully claim a place as a significant food tourism attraction and has achieved some advances toward many of the potential contributions of rural sustainability through food as stated by Rand, Heath and Alberts (2003). These include: providing **education** to reduce exploitation and reinforce brand identity; instigate food **tourism** initiatives by destination branding and promotion of experiential consumption; **product innovation** by encouraging rural entrepreneurship and value-adding; **relationship marketing and networking** with intermediate and final target markets and stakeholders; and **community capacity building** through the generation of local pride, opportunities for skill building and engagement with new stakeholders and partners.

(a) Building community through education

Wittingly or not, the organisers of the RFF employed a raft of conventional marketing techniques to advance their cause without necessarily having any specialised knowledge of the marketing research literature. In this way, the success of the RFF adds to the validity of the scholarship in this field.

A key objective of the Rural Food Festival was community education about food production and the opportunities offered by agriculture as a producer of food as well as a potential area for employment and further education. The intuitive feeling of the Rural Community farmers was that the initial difficulty in garnering support for their rural crisis was the lack of understanding in the general public about who they were, where they were and what they produced. Indeed, research suggests that proximity to food production can impact on consumer's awareness and interest in food quality and the importance of agricultural land preservation. Thus, rural based consumers are closer to sources of food production and have more contact with the communities engaged in this production; as a

result, their awareness and concern for wider socio-economic issues surrounding agro-food systems is greater than their urban counterparts (Weatherall, Treager and Allinson 2003).

The Rural Food Festival had three objectives in relation to education: to support local food producers in the (Rural Community and its region) by the development of a wider community understanding and appreciation of where and how food is produced especially its seasonality;

to protect the Rural Community region as an important agricultural identity through the promotion of sustainable and innovative practices and education of the next generation of producers and consumers; and to engage local children – through the school curriculum - to understand the health benefits of consuming fresh, local foods and to develop their capacity to both prepare and grow local seasonal produce.

Proponents of education for sustainable development (ESD) see community based objectives such as these as integral to the socialisation of future generations and to the preservation of agricultural quality and value. There are wide concerns that the day to day experience of many people is increasingly removed from the natural environment. Weitkamp et. al (2013) state that developing a relationship with nature and the environment (both 'wild' and 'domesticated') should be combined with some understanding of the consequences of everyday choices on the environment and local and global society. ESD is promoted by encouraging people to discuss sustainability issues which they might realistically encounter, such as whether to consider animal welfare issues (e.g., free range meat and eggs) in purchasing decisions, the impact of chemical use on the future of soil quality and water tables, or the types of value inherent in supporting local producers (Weitkamp et. al. 2013), exactly the types of issues that are built into the format and content of the Rural Food Festival.

The success of the RFF as an on-going event with growing popularity can be taken as evidence of meeting these goals and bridging the contested processes of interactions between what Goodman and DuPuis (2002) refer to as how we 'grow food' and how we 'know food'.

(b) Increasing market visibility through tourism

The Rural Community had little to no previous experience in destination marketing or in developing a tourism environment. In particular, there had been no prior agri-tourism initiatives in the region. In the past decade, across the wider society, food related tourism has grown rapidly as travel, Reality TV and gourmet food movements have sparked increased demand for food related experiences. Increasingly in rural regions with transitional economies, gastronomy-related heritage is being employed to strengthen areas' tourism offerings (Boyne, Hall & Williams 2003).

The development and growth of the Rural Food Festival has led to a direct and formal relationship with the local and state tourism authorities and to the packaging of the event with local restaurants, accommodation centres and transport companies. The Festival itself has contributed economically to the region by attracting domestic and international visitors who have spent money on accommodation, food and beverages, transport and merchandise. The Festival has also been highly successful in promoting agribusiness opportunities.

With visitors to the event now numbering over 10 000 the economic impact of the Festival has been recognised as making a significant impact in the region. In addition, the exposure of the region to the surrounding metropolitan regions has made it a desirable destination for day-trippers and has led to increased inquiry about potential farm-stay and other tourist activities.

(c) Food marketing and product innovation

The farmers of the Rural Community are historically bulk commodity producers dealing in livestock, grains and vegetables. A by-product of the mining industry threat to the region and the subsequent development of the Rural Food Festival has been to encourage entrepreneurship among local producers, particularly in terms of value-adding to their products.

In this way the Festival has raised the profile of the Rural Community region as a premier food growing area and encouraged producers to seek new marketing opportunities by adding value to their produce and/or selling directly to consumers.

As a result of the success of the RFF, some local producers have added additional processing such as the milling of sorghum into flour. They have also increased the sale of chickpeas to consumers as well as developing new product lines in farm-gate sales of artisan meats. These have all proved valuable supplements to the traditional farm income. This supports van Caenegem, Drahos and Cleary's (2015) view that the assertion geographic indicators in food production and marketing is generally justified on the basis that they offer rural regions development benefits in terms of greater investment in local value-adding, better incomes for farmers and greater employment opportunities for future generations.

Innovation and entrepreneurship is seen as a key element of sustainability for rural regions. A study commissioned by the Australian Government's Department of Fisheries and Forestry and the University of Tasmania's Institute for Regional Development (2011) outlined the importance of value-adding in the rural sector:

Diversifying from sole reliance on bulk commodities in the rural sector to value-added and/or niche products provides a potential source of advantage in the market place, but it requires understanding the target markets and what they value, and responding with a product that delivers this value. The know-how required to do this may well be quite different to that adopted to date in the broad acre/ bulk commodity production systems. Thus, one of the compelling questions in the future of rural industries is how to create alternatives and/ or value-add to low-value bulk commodity production by encouraging the development and diversification of new enterprises along the 'value chain' (p.3).

The Festival has not only provided the impetus for value-adding but also attracted investment and integration of skills and ideas within the community itself. The exposure to direct consumers has also provided valuable insight into the behaviour and attitudes of existing and potential target markets. In this way, achieving the goals of the RFF has provided an illustration of how real life in rural Australia follows the accumulated research findings in this particular marketing specialism. Real life, it appears, imitates research.

(d) Relationship Marketing & Networking

The Rural Food Festival also allowed producers and consumers an opportunity to meet and share their respective experiences. This new experience was a valuable marketing exercise in itself. With the added benefit of technology there are also opportunities for ongoing relationships through the Festival's website and social media sites. This has produced content and ideas for further marketing and has also led to the innovative proposal of an online marketplace where consumers and producers can interact directly.

In addition the Festival has showcased celebrity chefs since its inception who have gone on to champion the region using their own popular websites, blogs and guest

appearances. They have also introduced the produce of the region to their clientele and other chefs who in turn provide network contacts and ideas and suggestions for further market development and product development.

In seeking expertise to maintain the success of the Festival and manage its exponential growth, the local organisers have made valuable connections to rural businesses, financial institutions, regional universities and agricultural businesses. This type of relationship marketing and networking is seen as an essential part of the growth of rural producers in expansion with value-added and artisan products. Events such as the Festival itself provide a regional showcase but innovative partnering, networking and ongoing marketing relationships further help producers to move along the trail of development (Dickie 2007).

(e) Community Capacity Building

Finally, a serious issue in the sustainability of rural communities and agricultural producers is the lack of infrastructure in rural communities and the social and economic pressures of farming life. Feagan (2007) has stated that 'Being conscious of the constructed nature of the 'local', 'community' and 'place' means seeing the importance of local, social, cultural and ecological particularity in our everyday world' (p.23); a perspective that can, in time, shift the value systems that individuals hold.

The Rural Food Festival has provided a platform and an agenda around which the Rural Community interacts and builds a local identity that is of benefit to a range of stakeholders. There have, for instance, been informal initiatives that have identified skill sets among residents in the community and encouraged utilising the skills of women on the farm who have had previous marketing, accounting, cooking and legal knowledge – all of which benefit the community at large.

The education and innovation components of the Festival have also highlighted the potential opportunities for remaining in the region and seeking a satisfying future for the children of local producers by staying on the land. In turn, this has given farming families a catalyst to discuss improved processes and practices, and to initiate new projects that succeed in capturing the interest of the next generation of farmers and agricultural producers.

In real terms those involved in the Festival have seen economic and social benefits and the region has also seen modest increases in investment by local Government agencies. The Festival has in reality provided financial and community support to local service clubs, charities and businesses by offering them opportunities to raise their profile through involvement in the Festival itself.

Perhaps the greatest potential for community capacity building has yet to be realised as the growth of the Festival and leveraging of the event continues to expand. For instance, there has been the formation of a local standing committee that aims to address other local issues such as the resurrection of derelict buildings with the prospective of improving local infrastructure.

Conclusion

This account of a local small scale enterprise illustrates how reliable the research literature in this field of scholarship has been as the Festival in question unwittingly employed the classical principles of marketing in its endeavour to find a solution to its immediate economic and business problems. By promoting education as an element in

brand identity, by using food to promote experiential consumption, by encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation, this originally inchoate community became a source of capacity building and commercial success.

The globalisation of the food system has led to contradictory movements where, on the one hand, our food experience is being homogenised and, on the other, local food system movements are explicitly rejecting the mass production and distribution of food from unidentifiable sources. In Australia, the disconnect between the production and consumption of food has been further widened by the urban migration which continues to marginalise rural communities and erode the national interest in and awareness of our agricultural heritage and practices. This paper has described how one rural community developed a rural food festival in response to the potential threat of losing its identity. The food festival proved successful in both marketing and social terms. As a result, it has become a platform for a range of efforts that address the production and consumption divide. It has also been a catalyst in developing potential solutions to growing concerns about rural agricultural sustainability. This study is thus a convincing account of how marketing principles can be applied to community building, and how local pride and commercial acumen can be successfully brought together.

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