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# **It tastes better because ... consumer understandings of UK farmers' market food**

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**Abstract:**

In the social sciences there has been much exciting and informative work on farmers' markets and this paper contributes to this literature by considering how the place of farmers' markets affects the way consumers understand the taste of food. I draw on the difficulty faced by many consumers in articulating the taste of food, especially when food is perceived to taste good. I explore how consumers demonstrate their evaluations of taste, whether through descriptions of taste that are metaphor-laden or through beliefs and values emboldened by food knowledges and opinions. I argue these are how farmers' market consumers understand and perform taste in relation to market food. The findings that inform the paper are taken from interviews with farmers' market consumers in the UK.

**Keywords:** Farmers' Market Food, taste, place, performing.

## INTRODUCTION

Farmers' markets are not new; direct sales, agricultural livestock marts and food markets have extended back for thousands of years (Mazoyer & Roudart 2006). Nevertheless, farmers' markets as they are understood in the UK today are a relatively new phenomenon (Holloway & Kneafsey 2000). The first UK farmers' market took place in the city of Bath in 1997 and from here the concept grew (see Chubb 1998). The markets seized the imagination of the UK public in a manner that marts and fairs never quite managed and the result is that there are over 550 markets, 9500 market days and 230,000 stallholders throughout the UK (FARMA 2011). Despite their name, being a farmer is not a prerequisite to selling food at the markets. Instead, as the National Farmers Retail and Market Association (FARMA) state, the food sold at farmers' markets should be produced locally and those selling must be involved in the production or growing of what they sell (see Chubb 1998; FARMA 2011). As a result of guidelines such as these, producers selling at the markets have been viewed as food artisans, or as one television programme calls them 'food heroes' (BBC 2011). More often than not, 'hero' titles are awarded because of the producer's passion and commitment to producing high quality food. The underlying tone to much of this esteem is an emphasis on small scale production, where food production techniques and recipes are often traditional and local, relying on time-honoured knowledges and skills. Equally, the benefits of local, fresh, organic and good quality food has been heavily promoted and media friendly chefs, food writers, environmental groups and, even, governmental publications such as the Cabinet Office's 'A Sustainable Future' report have played a role in how the markets are understood by consumers (see Brignall 2004;

Curry 2002; The Observer Food Magazine 2002). Food sold at farmers' markets it would seem is held in high regard.

In this paper I want to push these notions of high regard a little and I do this by looking at the expressions of consumers at the markets, because even when consumers have difficulty describing why they like the taste of food, they demonstrate their appreciations of taste in other ways. Whether through descriptions of taste that are metaphor-laden and ambiguous (see Fine 1995) or through beliefs and values that embolden food knowledges and opinions, these are the type of actions and experiences through which farmers' market consumers perform taste. Taste is far from a simple process of identifying the qualities that a food happens to possess, rather, as Korsmeyer states, many understandings are included in the experience of tasting. These experiences, for example, may include conversations at the family dining table (Wiggins 2002, 2004), the information or knowledge consumers have about food (Kihlberg et al. 2005; Lyman 1989) or the ambience in which food is encountered (Stroebele & De Castro 2004). Food, after all, is a sensory as well as a social experience (Lupton 1998; 2005) and taste can be the physical taste of something (sour, sweet, spicy, etc) or it can have more social connotations, for instance appreciations that are 'socially constructed' and influenced by issues of class, status or hierarchy (see Bourdieu 1979). Taste is malleable and a receptor of many stimuli (Gallegos & McHoul 2006). Consequently, the paper has two aims: first to explore the influences of the place of the farmers' market on taste, and second, to consider how farmers' market consumers perform taste.

### **Farmers' markets and the influence of place**

Over the last 10 years or so there has been academic interest in farmers' markets and this work has provided a valuable reading of the contexts that surround the markets. A particular focus has been the nascent forces that have encouraged the re-emergence of food markets (Hinrichs et al. 2004; Holloway & Kneafsey 2000). Prior to this, opportunities to engage with alternative ways of sourcing and buying food were somewhat limited in the UK (Jolly 2002; La Trobe 2001). For most UK consumers, the supermarket is where they shop for food – the 3 largest UK supermarkets account for over 70% of all UK groceries (Thanassoulis 2009). While farmers' markets offer a relatively ephemeral and small window into the economic processes of local economies and of actually buying and selling food, they do offer a distinctive approach in understanding the contexts of such actions. Previous work on farmers' markets has considered notions of trust, face-to-face transactions, quality, race and social embeddedness (see Curry 2002; Guthman 2008; Sage 2007; Slocum 2007). In addition, work has also examined the political and economic debates raised by local food systems, particularly opposition to centralized agricultural policies, as well as the growth of alternative food networks (Delind 2006; Fonte 2008; Smithers et al. 2008; Stiles et al. 2011). These works have helped to strengthen what makes farmers' markets both different and unique, as compared to conventional means of shopping; for instance, meeting and talking to the person who actually produces the food on sale is a novel idea in an age of post-industrialization (Kirwan 2004). While exciting and informative, much of this work does not consider the emotive and social impacts on the taste of the food, a focus I wish to address by drawing upon the concepts of place and performing taste.

The concept of place has been widely used, particularly in human geography, when reviewing the meanings and relationships between humans and their environment (Cresswell 1996; Massey 1994; Sack 1992; Skelton & Valentine 1998; Tuan 1977). This work has tended to consider place as a fluid entity rather than something that is, for example, bounded by organisational processes such as national borders. As Massey (1991: 28) states, 'what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus'. Place links people to things in the world (Tuan 1977) and allows us to explore how we inhabit and experience the world we live in. Agnew (1987) argues, place can be understood in 3 ways: firstly, as a *location* in which an activity or object is situated; secondly, as a *locale*, where it is the setting to everyday life; and thirdly, as a *sense of place* where there is an attachment and a felt belonging to a specific place. In relation to food attachment to place is significant and I argue this allows us to examine the behaviours and meanings present when participating in 'place-related' activities (Agnew 1987; Massey 1991). Place attaches meanings to food, for instance, in transnational contexts - Italy and pasta, India and curry (see Dickie 2007; Mitchell 2006). Indeed, as Germann Molz (2007) states, food can be a novel way of experiencing 'Otherness'. Food affords the opportunity to experience far-away cultures and tastes. Moreover, food can represent nationalities - the French as 'Frogs' or the English as 'Rosbif' (Cook & Crang 1996). Food can also provide emotional support for those displaced or far from home, as Brown et. al (2010) suggest, for international students living in the UK, eating and cooking food from 'home' provides comfort and a link to the familiar. Similarly, Duruz (2010) argues, consuming food can nurture a bonding experience, especially for diasporic communities.

There is a flexibility to what food can represent and the meanings that are attributed to it and place often influence the meanings and perceptions associated with food.

The place of the farmers' market holds relatively unique associations with food. One common perception is of a food cosmopolitanism or sophistication where the markets are understood in terms of socio-economic values or food snobbery (Miele 2006; Rhodus et al. 1994; Williamson et al. 2009; Wood 1996). Food snobs are consumers knowledgeable in new, exotic or fashionable foods and as Ashley (2004) states, this is a trend constructed through innumerable newspaper restaurant reviews, television food programmes or by dining out frequently. These influences give voice to new food vocabularies and knowledges adopted by 'aspiring professional couple[s] to whom food is a fashion' (Ashley 2004: 149). *En Vogue* food allows its consumer to display their sophistication and distinctiveness, mainly because they are not buying mainstream conventional food. Indeed, there are notable performances associated with farmers' market food and these performances offer an insight into how consumers understand and express taste. In considering these understandings and expressions I want now to turn to the concept of performing taste.

Making sense of food is a relational process between consumer and food, and it brings together a host of knowledges and experiences, that inform food preferences and the choices made when buying food. These food knowledges often say as much about consumers as they say about the food (May 1996; Vannini et al. 2010), and, as such, there is a performance here in how the meanings associated with food are constructed. Performing taste is not simply how we taste food or appreciate food; it is what foods mean to us, and to



others, and the associations and interactions that help us to understand and make sense of food (Mann et al. 2011; Roe 2006a; Spiller 2010). 'Sophisticated' food, for example, holds many of these kinds of meanings. Buying food that only a discerning cook may know how to prepare, for some consumers, can be a means of performing taste; for example, beef shin, although at one time a popular cheap cut, is a type of meat that for most UK households is not cooked on a regular basis - no doubt because it is a time consuming. Cooking beef shin and other less popular cuts requires a degree of commitment not every cook may be willing to execute. As a result, slow-cooking is now a somewhat redundant skill (Horowitz 2006). In buying and cooking certain types of meat, a consumer can display their food knowledge and enthusiasm to those they cook for and to those they talk to about food. Buying farmers' market food can affirm food sophistication and food knowledge and, as Stiles et al. (2011: 226) note, from such affirmations 'come spirited possessions that can shiver the physical sensations of taste, shaping what, and whom, tingles the tongue'.

Arguments have been made to suggest that farmers' markets are the preserve of the middle-classes and, as such, participation in the markets is restricted to those who may fit into such a categorisation (Brown 2002; Hinrichs 2000). This, I would suggest, is not always the case, and as May (1996) states, being a food snob or 'foodie' is a comparatively cheap way to display social and capital status, as the cost of expensive food is not equivalent to the cost of other goods commonly used to display wealth and sophistication. I found farmers' market consumers share a desire for good food (discussed subsequently). There are, of course, symbolic meanings and status that can be read in this desire. Buying commodities, particularly high value ones, is a way of distinguishing oneself (Veblen 1994) and Bauman

(2005) also argues there is much emphasis placed on individuality and uniqueness in what we consume.

Articulating what a commodity means to a consumer can be difficult. However, one influence on how this is achieved is talk. Talk helps to establish sensory and aesthetic standards (Gallegos & McHoul 2006), yet talk can also be nebulous in the meanings it ascribes to food (Magee 2009). Fine (1995) argues that talking about food is a challenge that will always be difficult because we can never know how others taste. As he (1995: 252) states,

Talk about food is decidedly constrained by the lack of vocabulary. As Jacobs wrote recently, pungently: "How inadequate the language is in the service of palatal sensation, how hollow with overuse the few available modifiers!" Yet, this lack does not mean that individuals cannot express opinions and attitudes about food.

There are opportunities within inarticulateness or lack of vocabulary, particularly in exploring the affective and emotive contexts that may inform and influence how food is performed. Indeed, as Stevenson (2007: 13) argues inarticulateness gives an opportunity to examine that which is 'by default difficult to study or observe'. Talking about taste helps to gain an insight into the factors which influence the experiences and actions of farmers' market consumers (Wiggins 2004). Language is important, not least because, 'people reveal how they value material objects in the linguistic tools they use to interpret them' (Vannini et al. 2010: 391). There is, as Besnier (1990) would suggest, a 'persuasive language' in expressing taste preferences that is equivocal. Besnier cites the language of wine tasters and their use of 'descriptors', which in effect produces a language that is not always easily

understood or relevant to how the wine tastes. Nevertheless, the language is often influential in how consumers appreciate wine and in deciding which wine to purchase.

In evaluating farmers' market food there is a performance that is grounded in the place of the markets and the expressions and understandings of market consumers. They value the food in specific ways and may even talk about the food in articulate ways, but they do not articulate the taste of food in a concise manner. Instead, the language used relies on metaphors and is ambiguous. Such language does not make farmers' market consumers unique, as many consumers find describing taste difficult. What is unique with farmers' market consumers in the UK is, while they are inarticulate in describing taste, they are articulate in how they perform taste. Their understandings of what farmers' market food means to them is expressed through their interpretations and evaluations of taste. As I examine, the consumers put as much value, if not more, on the place of the farmers' market as they do on the taste of the food. In the following sections I develop my argument by firstly introducing my methodological approach and then examining my results. The results focus on the influences of the markets and draw attention to how consumers describe the food at the markets. I then offer some thoughts in the Discussion section as to the meanings embedded in farmers' market food and finally, I conclude by highlighting the role of the markets in consumer's understandings of food.

## **METHOD**

I began researching farmers' markets by 'hanging out' and observing what takes place at the markets (see Woodward 2008). The research took place in the northeast of England where

there are approximately 16 monthly markets. I spent 14 months attending the markets, talking to, and observing producers and consumers. After an initial period of attending all of the markets I decided to concentrate on 3 particular farmers' markets; this was for two reasons. First, I wanted to gain a greater understanding of the markets by building-up relationships with producers and consumers. Second, I wanted to gain a good cross-section of the different settings and the different ways in which markets are run. In realising this rationale I focused on: Newcastle farmers' market, which is located in an urban setting and run by the City Council; Durham farmers' market, which is a small city and run by a limited company; and Hexham farmers' market, which is in a rural setting and run by a group of enthusiasts. There was a logistical reason to focus on a smaller number of markets, it became increasingly difficult to travel to 16 markets - some markets occurred on identical days, others were tricky to attend, for example the Lindisfarne farmers' market is on an island where the only access road is impassable during high tide. Once chosen, I attended the 3 markets on a monthly basis and observed how people bought and sold food and the general day-to-day running of the markets. I also conducted surveys at each of the markets and, as part of the survey, consumers were asked if they would be willing to be contacted about further research. Over 100 consumers indicated they would be and from this list, 38 consumers were then picked at random: 18 men and 20 women, ranging in age from mid 20s to 81. Participation involved an interview that lasted on average an hour. The interviews took place at locations that were convenient to consumers and usually took place in their homes or local cafes.

The interviews were semi-structured and explored the differences people experienced between shopping at the markets and shopping elsewhere. This focus considered the markets as alternative spaces of consumption and asked why consumers preferred the food bought at the markets as compared to other retail outlets. In building up an understanding of consumers' appreciations of food I employed a reflexive appreciation of the emerging themes that arose from each interview, often pursuing certain themes in subsequent interviews – in this way encouraging the exploration of wide ranging personal knowledges and experiences (Bartholomew et al. 2000; Goulding 2005; Strauss & Corbin 1997). All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were then coded using Atlas.ti software to identify themes and patterns in the data (Dey 1993; Miles & Huberman 1994). The coding sought to identify core responses as to why participants shopped at the markets. Comparing the interview data in this way allowed me to interpret and organise consumers' explanations of their preferences for the markets. Taste was mentioned by each and every consumer as being a difference between farmers' market food and supermarket food, and as a result, taste was a central code. In exploring this code I filtered my analysis into two sub-codes: *descriptions of taste* and *philosophies of taste* (see below). My intention in doing this was not to have two distinguishing categories, as I feel it is almost impossible to totally separate these codes - for example, describing the taste of bread may be influenced by an undeclared preference for organic food. Instead, these codes are used to explore what it means to perform taste, and while their focuses have certain perspectives and emphasises, they are connected through their focuses on issues of taste, all of which I reason gives greater depth to how we examine taste (Milstein et al. 2011; Nicolini 2009).

The *descriptions* code concentrated on how the taste of the food was expressed. Descriptions of taste rarely included the actual physical taste of the food in the mouth, instead other descriptions were used and this code analysed the 'other' qualities found in the food. Accordingly, the *philosophies* code focused on the beliefs and values the consumers spoke about in explaining what it was about the markets that made them 'better' places to shop and what made farmers' market food 'good'. All of the participants' names have been changed. Throughout the paper I also include notes from my field diary, the notes were written in the moments just after interviews and they are intended to give some perspective on the participants and their outlooks on the food they buy.

## RESULTS

### DESCRIPTIONS OF TASTE

As you will see in the following interview extracts, taste is attributed to the palate of an expert, the doubts of a cynic, the cost of food, whether food is for a Sunday meal or the enthusiasm felt for a particular place to shop. These descriptions tell us little about the food. This is not to dismiss the physical taste entirely, as this is also important, if farmers' market food did not meet certain standards it is fair to assume that consumers may not buy it. Nevertheless, taste is expressed through rather intangible qualities. I begin with Sue's comments on the taste of farmers' market food:

*Sue works in administration at a university and has a grown-up family; although one of her sons still lives at home. She likes to cook, but says she is not that good at it. She lived in the U.S. for a number of years and became aware of*

*farmers' markets when there. She likes good tasty wholesome food that she feels will benefit her family. However, when asked why she preferred food at the markets, she replied, 'because it tastes better' and when asked to elaborate on this, she mentioned,*

I'm not that much of a gourmet that I would notice the difference between a carrot that was imported for a supermarket versus a carrot that I buy at a local farmers' market.

Sue considers taste in terms of being a gourmet or an expert. Sue does not possess the trained knowledge that may allow a better appreciation of the food (or so she thinks!). In Sue's case, she may not notice or is reluctant to admit she notices a difference in taste - the evaluation is framed by her admission of a lack of expertise. In a similar manner, note how the following consumer relies on descriptions such as scepticism and psychology in describing taste,

*Joan is retired and lives with her husband. She stumbled across farmers' markets at first, knowing nothing about them. Indeed she was quite dubious of them, as they were very expensive. However, she grew to like them and now shops there every month.*

My husband has always been a bit of cynic. But, I'll put the food down in front of him and he'll comment it tastes different, it's lovely. So I can't stipulate exactly how it tastes different.

Joan's husband is described as a cynic, which suggests he may harbour doubts about farmers' market food. The doubts, I presume, concern the cost of buying food at the markets and possibly the socio-economic connotations of shopping at the markets. Nevertheless, it appears that due to a different taste, these doubts recede, even though as Joan states, she can't say what the taste difference is. Instead, the food is 'lovely' and is therefore worth purchasing. Again, in the following quote rather ambiguous language is used to explain this consumer's thoughts on taste, her comments emphasise the 'psychological' influences she attributes to farmers' market food.

*Kate runs her own business and lives with her husband and two dogs. Kate describes herself as impulsive about food and if it looks good she will buy it. She is careful about what she buys, and likes to walk around the market first and see what is available. She never attends the markets with a shopping list or with any great intention of what to get, instead she looks for what she likes.*

Well the supermarket is cheaper, yes, but I think it is psychological ... I think your palate has to be quite trained to notice the difference, John [Kate's husband] reckons he can tell, but I am never certain because after all, the majority of lamb is free range and organic really, yeah, so maybe you get a slight difference. Beef is similar, but pork I haven't had very much pork yet, I have got some pork chops to try at the moment, but I am expecting to see a difference with the pork. With chicken, yeah, you can taste the difference. It depends on what I want it for, is it for the



Sunday dinner, I will look for the size and the look of the, I can't explain it, it's difficult to explain it.

There is a distinction for Kate in how she rationalizes her taste preferences, as she mentions it depends on what the meat is for. Within this statement, there is awareness of the function the meat has to serve, for example, for a Sunday dinner. Equally, the farmers' market meat is, as she recognises, more expensive which may demonstrate a food snobbery or at the very least a decisive difference between farmers' market food and supermarket food. The market food, it appears, is better tasting, even though she does not seem to be able to recognise the taste quality, instead the emphasis is on the function the meat may serve. In the following extract Peter's enthusiasm for food appears to affect his evaluations.

*Peter lives with his girlfriend and her daughter. He considers himself to be a 'really good cook' and pays a lot of attention to where his food is sourced. The farmers' market for him is a place where he buys a lot of his food. Each time he attends the market he tries to buy enough food to last for the month or until the market is on again.*

It just seems fresher, emh, it just seems to have a better taste, now I don't know if that is psychological or whether it does have a better taste. Emh, I have no idea, possibly, possibly, if I get something in my mind I go a hundred per cent for it, so it could be a psychological thing there.

The descriptions given by these consumers provide indications as to how they value and understand farmers' market food. Peter's 'psychological' meanings suggest the food is valued because of a conscientious decision rather than what it tastes like. Kate's 'I am expecting to see a difference' suggests the food is not like supermarket food and, as the context of her comments indicate, the farmers' market food will taste better. Equally, Joan's evaluations centre on her husband and whether he likes the food, not if she does. So the question remains, why do these consumers prefer the taste of the market food? Better taste, it seems, is what consumers expect to find at the markets. Despite this there still appears to be a lot of uncertainty as to whether it does actually taste better, only rather vague indications were expressed by the consumers. Words and phrases such as 'seems', 'may be psychological', 'trained palette' (which Sue and Kate indicate they do not have) are used. Nonetheless, as Besnier (1990) suggests, descriptions can reinforce emotions and knowledges - he cites Foucault and suggests labels have powerful consequences. In this manner, if the markets are described by experts and food snobs as having a better taste, is the food for these consumers more likely to possess that taste? Sally, in the following extract, talks about the taste of farmers' market food and why it tastes 'better'.

*Sally first heard of farmers' markets through television programmes and magazines, although it wasn't until she moved from London that she first started attending the markets. Sally has two young children and she is conscious of buying good food for them.*

I assume the people that produce food at the farmers' markets will be producing good quality stuff. And certainly, so far, its taste is good, but there is the assumption that it will be [good].

[Q: Why?]

Yeah, it's interesting isn't it, I guess because we have been told this, you know, this is the line that has been fed in the media and all that sort of stuff about farmers' markets are great places because the producers are producing good stuff and you can meet them face-to-face, so I suppose that has always been what we have been told about the farmers' markets.

Sally is aware of the influences that have affected her appreciations of taste, yet she is relatively hesitant in explaining her choice and why the food tastes better – 'it's interesting' and 'I guess'. The markets are an important place to shop for Sally and she attends the market most months, mainly because she wants to buy good food for her family. However, these appreciations it would seem are directly related to her assumption 'that it will be good', a knowledge she has learned through tasting farmers' market food. Yet, many of the points she makes in the second half of the quote rely on other people's opinions – particularly those expressed through the media.

### *PHILOSOPHIES OF TASTE*

In this section I draw attention to consumers' understandings of farmers' market food and how their beliefs and values influence their food appreciations. 'Good' food for these consumers is based on more than just the physical taste of that food. Much like Crang's

(1996: 48) 'lores', the meaning of the food is embedded in the meanings and understandings that surround the commodity. Crang's example centres on commodities bought on holiday and then displayed around the home. Constructed are imaginative projections where the commodity embodies the holiday destination and experiences of place. For farmers' market consumers, the 'lore' of the market enhances the taste of the market food. As the following consumers comment,

*Mora's husband does most of the cooking and they have a grown up family who regularly visit - especially at meal times. Both Mora and her husband consider themselves as having a good knowledge of food; they travel and holiday quite extensively and food is a big part of travelling and how they socialise. Buying good quality and good tasting food is very important for them.*

We had a dinner party a couple of months ago and a couple of my guests said, 'Oh this lamb tastes like it used to when I was little', and I think we all noticed how tasteless meat has become.

The context to Mora's comment is a link to the past when food was not 'tasteless', and the markets for her, and her dinner guests, provide food that tastes like 'it used to'. What Mora seems to suggest is that meat nowadays is different. Of course, human memory is fallible and it is difficult to quantify differences in tastes over a number of generations (Holtzman 2006). Nevertheless, it would appear the lore of the markets accommodates a yearning for

associations with yesteryear when food was perceived as tastier. The following extract also considers the enhancements of market food qualities.

*Becky generally buys for herself, unless 'friends are coming over'. She works as a doctor in one of the local hospitals and quite often doesn't have much time to cook. As Becky insists, she is not a very good cook, but does enjoy trying to cook. She feels strongly that we all should buy local.*

The meat is certainly better... in my mind I know it has been well looked after, it's been a happy cow or deer or whatever

Becky's comment suggests she finds comfort in eating meat from an animal that was well cared for. Becky's evaluations of taste are influenced by beliefs in 'happy' meat or one that has been reared in an ethical manner. For her the taste of the food is influenced by values of care and, as such, the markets provide the value and taste that appeal to her philosophies of taste. This type of evaluation also influences Matt's comments:

*Matt generally buys all his meat and vegetables at the markets. Animal welfare is an important issue for him and he likes to chat to producers and make sure there are no hormones and 'stuff' in his meat.*

It's craftsmanship I'd say that's the most important thing, it's the same about the meat, how it is bred, how they cut it. It's just quality and also the taste experience is

much better compared to some of the stuff you buy in the supermarkets. You can see its already gone past the, if you go and touch, some of the vegetables they're soft.

As Matt suggests, farmers' market food is better than that found in supermarkets and possesses 'craftsmanship'. This may be due to the food not being mass-produced, as is the case for most supermarket food. Equally freshness and localness may be important, where food is expected to be sourced from within a radius of a number of miles, usually 50. This small distance does not guarantee freshness or quality and in itself can be problematic (see Morris & Buller 2003), but for Matt this and craftsmanship has a correlation with 'quality' and the taste experience. Similarly, in the next extract Glenda talks of a food philosophy that for her the markets symbolize.

*Glenda tries to do as much of her shopping as possible at the markets. She has three teenagers and she wants them to appreciate good food. Buying local is very important to Glenda. She and her family particularly like the cheeses and meats from the market; she describes herself as a traditional cook, where 'meat and two veg' is usually what she cooks for the family.*

Well I suppose, it's rather the philosophy of it, you get more of a sense that you know where your food has come from, and I like that sense of, emh, of recognising where the food was grown or where the animals were reared and I have kids of my own and I want to teach them that sort of thing. That bread didn't come from a

factory but it did come from wheat grown in a real field and harvested by a real farmer, so you feel that much closer to it and it tastes better, it certainly does.

For the previous consumers, taste is based on memory, happy animals, touch or food traceability. A happy cow may in reality be more important for Becky than the taste of the meat, or it may be the difference between farmers' market and supermarket meat. For Glenda and Mora the relationships that surround the food are of importance; be they discussing meat with dinner guests or telling your children about the origins of food. How consumers think about such stimuli contributes to their descriptions of taste, and as Thrift (2004: 66) states, 'it is often the force with which passion is delivered which is more important than the message'. In this way, the lore of the markets and philosophies of taste eclipse, or certainly add to, the taste sensation. For instance, Glenda wants to teach her children something she feels may not be achievable with 'bread from a factory'. Instead, by buying locally and at the markets, she and her children are 'closer' to the food and this makes the food 'taste better'. Other stimuli and factors are equally influential on the taste of farmers' market food, as Mike suggests in relation to the colour of meat,

*Mike has recently retired and moved to a new flat in the city centre. Mike has an allotment and is a keen grower of vegetables. He was always interested in food and the farmers' markets, and the new flat has made it easier to shop there.*

The supermarkets are there to sell mass-produced food ... I think perhaps we are a little bit more particular with what we eat, so with beef, we like it hung for three

weeks and don't mind if it is very dark in colour because to me that is a sign of taste, but of course at supermarkets it has got to be red.

Mike is 'particular' and to him the colour of the meat indicates certain qualities and tastes. The markets are important for Mike because they sell dark meat, but also 'being particular' presents certain knowledges that are 'signs of taste', something that not all supermarket consumers appreciate. The underlying assumption here is based on the homogeneity that is central to supermarket produce. Food at the supermarket is standardised and is largely uniform in shape, colour, size and how it is packaged - leading to consumers losing the skills required to select quality food (Jaffe & Gertler 2006). Mike appears to have the skills to select good meat and this choice makes him distinctive (Bauman 2005). The markets allow Mike to demonstrate his food skills and knowledge and this manifests in the taste of the food and the philosophy that surround this taste: a belief that farmers' market food is better as compared to food sourced elsewhere. In the following extract the emphasis for Tim is that supermarkets cannot offer the same quality as small producers.

*Tim is an executive at a large multinational and enjoys 'good' food. He and his family lived outside of the UK for a number of years and when they moved back living in a rural setting was important, one of the advantages of this is being close to local producers and being able to support them. This, he feels, is good for his family's health and good for the local economy.*



There is a perception; the perception is it's bound to taste better or it's bound to be better... I know what supermarkets are like, supermarkets squeeze their supplier... so I suspect that inevitably leads to suppliers shaving costs. How do they shave on costs? They reduce quality... So I don't mind paying a bit more for me to feel better about stuff as well as it tasting better...

Again, there is a strong indication here of avoiding mass-produced food. Tim is explicit in expressing his preference to spend more on his food, as for him this ensures greater quality. The belief in this instance is that farmers' market producers will not 'shave costs' and this makes Tim feel better and the food also tastes better. Brian expresses a similar philosophy,

*Brian has two teenage children and he feels it is important to teach them about good food. He attends the farmers' markets each month and brings the family with him, in an attempt to try and get the children involved as much as possible. He does most of the cooking at home and, as he suggests, he would never give the family any 'rubbish' food.*

I have a particular interest in food and a perception that the stuff I get from a farmers' market will be fresher, better quality and locally produced.

Brian believes food from the markets will ultimately taste better because of localism and freshness and he qualifies his comment by stating he has an interest in food, an interest that may influence his valuations and judgements. Appreciations of food may be symptomatic of the many influences that advertently or inadvertently affect consumer behaviour, choice,

experience and expression of that experience. As Hennion (2007: 111) suggests, taste 'depends on everything' and is reliant on many places, descriptions, philosophies, associations and perceptions, as has been evidenced in the extracts presented here.

## **DISCUSSION**

The language used to describe evaluations of food can be complex not because of what is said, but in many ways because of what is not said, for instance, the philosophies and associations that affect farmers' market consumers. Descriptions such as 'you get a sense' or the 'perception is' are not definitive in describing food; rather such descriptions form a persuasive language (Besnier 1990) that helps consumer to perform taste. Experiences of food in these examples are not expressed in terms of a sensate knowledge of the food or in terms of social evaluations, it is somewhere in-between. Meaning does 'not reside in an object or sign, but is an affect of the circulation between objects and signs' {Ahmed, 2004 #491@45}. Evaluating food and articulating those evaluations is a process that rests between the food and its consumer, as Korsmeyer (1999: 136) suggests,

Meanings of many sorts become a part of eating experiences, sometimes emerging from the larger social context of eating, sometimes embedded in the very tastes of what we eat. Those meanings may admit readily shared discovery when the narrative contexts in which they emerge are common or public, or they may depend upon idiosyncratic and individual personal histories.

There are variations in how people consider food or enjoy it, or even dislike it (see Fairburn & Harrison 2003), and often taste is not constructed around an innate object but rather around the associations that the object represents (Makatouni 2002). Farmers' market food

can ascribe 'membership to a range of possible memberships' (Sneijder & te Molder 2006: 108) - for instance, a knowledgeable, ethical, health conscious or cultured consumer (Barnett et al. 2005; Kloppenburg et al. 2000; Miele 2006). In these instances, evaluations are emboldened through, for instance, the food's association with the place of the market and the meanings that it generates. Without the context of the markets the food becomes something different. For example, a farmers' market sausage, which looks and feels like a conventional or non-market sausage, gains status because it is not a mainstream sausage.

The 'lore' of the market in these terms is a powerful influence and helps to construct ways of appreciating the market's food. As Sally suggests 'we have been told' and within this statement an important association is substantiated. The perceptions and associations mentioned by consumers help to inform and construct performances of taste. As Lyman (1989) states, critical to understanding food preferences are how settings and contexts create attitudes and influences. For instance, 'saying we dislike a food because of its taste or some other physical characteristic sounds plausible and is much more acceptable than 'because it reminds me of a fight with my brother'' (Lyman 1989: 136). Food has many associations that affect its taste.

I have argued that despite the difficulty some consumers may have in articulating taste, they still perform taste. This performance relies on articulations that can, as I have suggested, rely on notions of animal husbandry, food traceability or touching food. Within these performances evaluations and judgements are displayed and strengthened, much like conversations at dinner tables (Wiggins 2004) or the language at wine festivals (Vannini et al

2010). Taste does not depend on specific taste qualities alone, nor does it depend on the sensate abilities of the consumer, it is somewhere in-between where taste is understood and expressed (Teil & Hennion 2004). Farmers' market consumers, much like consumers at supermarkets or at other retail outlets, have difficulty in expressing taste, because taste is difficult to express. As suggested taste depends on 'everything', yet even when taste is difficult to articulate, expressions of taste can still be forthcoming. For the farmers' markets consumers I spoke to these performances can be understood in their descriptions of taste and philosophies of taste. Most striking in how they talk about the food at the markets is that despite the variety of descriptions used, the force and passion of their language demonstrates a belief and evaluation that the food they buy at the markets tastes good. Consumers may not be able to express good taste explicitly in terms of language, but their actions suggest otherwise. They perform taste with conviction.

#### *CONCLUDING REMARKS*

In conclusion, interviewing 38 consumers about their evaluations of farmers' market food presents a narrow focus and this paper does not imply that such beliefs or practices are used at all farmers' markets, or beyond. Instead, this paper may help to expand some of the literatures on farmers' markets and the influences of place on how food is understood by some consumers. Much as the physical components of a food are important, there are other factors which are equally influential. This paper has contributed to the growing work on food by considering the less than tangible aspects of food and how they are talked about by consumers. Their inputs serve to highlight the complexity of food; particularly the contexts and places in which food is encountered. It is important to acknowledge the meanings that

place can have on food and the aim of the paper has been to expand such thoughts, by exploring how consumers perform taste. Hopefully this focus has expanded the literature on farmers' markets by highlighting the importance of place in cultivating the taste of food.

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