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Research report

A taste of ethical consumption at a slow food festival ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 October 2014

Received in revised form 2 April 2015

Accepted 22 April 2015

Available online

Keywords:

Slow food

Alternative food networks

Food habits

Culinary tourism

Virtue ethics

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the motives and experiences of attendees at a Slow Food festival to gain an understanding of how people engage with ethical consumer projects. Slow Food is a global social movement aimed at promoting food that is regionally, ethically, and sustainably produced, and convivially consumed. The movement uses culinary tourist events, such as food festivals and farmers' markets, to promote its philosophy and attract new members. There have been no empirical studies of ethical consumption using a Slow Food event as a case study. This study uses an ethnographic approach and a framework of virtue ethics to explore the views of people attending a major Slow Food festival in the city of Melbourne, Australia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted *in situ* with 33 participants (19 consumers and 14 stallholders) to discover their rationales for attending the festival, and their perspectives on ethical consumption. Transcripts were coded and thematically analysed, resulting in three themes reflecting varying degrees of public virtues (altruistic motivations) and private virtues (personal wellbeing): the quest for virtuous lifestyles through ethical consumption, the importance of co-production, and the challenges of putting ethical consumer project like Slow Food into daily practice. The findings reveal the manner in which virtue ethics affects foodways and highlights the contingent and challenging nature of practising ethical eating.

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Introduction

An ethical perspective of food production and consumption is a small but growing influence on food choice in western society. This paper critically explores the rationales people provide for becoming interested in ethical projects like Slow Food. The growing literature on ethical consumption – also known as political, alternative, virtuous, or conscious consumption (Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Micheletti, 2010; Pietrykowski, 2009; Schor, 1999) – has yet to be examined through the lens of the Slow Food movement (cf. Gaytan, 2007; Leitch, 2003; Meneley, 2004; Miele & Murdoch, 2002; Parkins & Craig, 2006). We aim to address this gap in the literature by examining the motives and experiences of people attending a Slow Food festival to explore the attraction of ethical consumption.

The Slow Food (2013) social movement, with around 100,000 members in over 150 countries, aims to make consumers aware of

the political, social, and environmental impacts of mass-produced industrialised food. Unlike some alternative food networks that encourage frugality and voluntary simplicity (Gambrel & Cafaro, 2010), Slow Food is not anti-consumption or anti-capitalism, and explicitly promotes gastronomic pleasure and conviviality (Parkins & Craig, 2006). Slow Food is predicated on ethical modes of production and consumption, or what it terms 'eco-gastronomy' and 'virtuous globalization'. Under the emblem of the snail, Slow Food advocates 'good, clean, and fair food' through the promotion of culinary diversity, indigenous ingredients, artisan cooking techniques, sustainable agriculture, and equitable trading relationships between developing and developed nations (Malatesta, Weiner, & Yang, 2005; Petrini, 2001).

The focus on food pleasure and its use of culinary tourism events to promote the philosophy of Slow Food has come under sustained critique for reflecting elitist values that have more to do with the cultivation of 'good taste', luxury goods, and social distinction (Chrzan, 2004; Gaytan, 2007; Laudan, 2004; Pietrykowski, 2004, 2009) than a genuine democratisation of quality food consumption. Yet Andrews (2008) maintains that Slow Food's unique appeal depends on its blending of political activism with the pleasure and sociality of producing, preparing, and sharing (quality) food. We have previously shown that Slow Food is portrayed in a romanticised and essentially apolitical manner by the Australian print media (Germov, Williams, & Freij, 2011). That content analysis found the print media

☆ Acknowledgements: The authors acknowledge the work of Danielle Palmer in assisting with compiling data for the results.

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1 predominantly focused on positive aspects of conviviality and locale,
2 rather than critical aspects of the mass production of food. A study
3 by Frost and Laing (2013), using discourse analysis to examine
4 website content promoting five Slow Food festivals throughout the
5 world, similarly showed that this romanticisation was not merely
6 an Australian phenomenon.

7 In this paper, we examine a major Slow Food festival from an
8 ethnographic perspective, with an emphasis on the motivations and
9 experiences of those participating. We apply the framework of 'virtue
10 ethics' (cf. Barnett, Cafaro, & Newholm, 2005; Barnett, Cloke, Clarke,
11 & Malpass, 2005; Micheletti, 2010; Quastel, 2008) to show that the
12 appeal of such projects lies in their ability to mutually satisfy con-
13 sumers' self-interest and altruistic concerns (cf. Campbell, 1998).
14 Virtues refer to qualities to which individuals aspire – such as com-
15 passion, integrity, trustworthiness, empathy, and fairness (MacIntyre,
16 1985). Micheletti (2010, p. 154) makes a useful distinction between
17 *private* and *public* virtues, whereby people's participation in ethical
18 consumerism 'is initiated by everyday self-interest (private virtues)
19 or concern about the everyday consumption of goods on the well-
20 being of the community (public virtues)'. By attempting to persuade
21 consumers to consume 'carefully' or 'differently' (Gabriel & Lang,
22 2006; Johnston, 2008), ethical consumer projects promote 'enlight-
23 ened self-interest in caring for others' (Barnett et al., 2005, 17).

24 We argue that the Slow Food movement explicitly appeals to
25 private and public virtues through culinary tourism events (see Long,
26 2004) such as food festivals, which are used as a method of dis-
27 seminating Slow Food philosophy and recruiting new members. Frost
28 and Laing (2013, p. 68) have argued that such 'linkages between
29 events and social change are often overlooked'. Our study used a
30 Slow Food festival as the lens through which to investigate the mo-
31 tivations and experiences of people drawn to an ethical consumer
32 project and what challenges they may face in enacting an ethical
33 consumer lifestyle.

34 Materials and methods

35 An ethnographic approach was used to explore the experi-
36 ences, beliefs, and practices of people attending the Slow Food festival
37 *A Taste of Slow*, held in the city of Melbourne, Australia. We chose
38 this event because it was the largest Slow Food festival in Australia
39 at the time. The Human Research Ethics Committee of the
40 University of Newcastle (Australia) approved the study (H-631-
41 1107). Data were collected over each day of the three day event.
42 Data sources consisted of participant observation of the event itself
43 (by attending talks and films and walking around the exhibition area
44 and documenting impressions), collection of print material, and
45 semi-structured interviews conducted *in situ* with a convenience
46 sample of two groups of participants: the lay public attending the
47 free public event (termed 'consumers') and those who held stalls
48 that were selling produce, ready to eat food, or handing out infor-
49 mation about slow food (termed 'stallholders').

50 A semi-structured interview protocol was chosen to allow the
51 wording and order of questions to be altered to suit the situation
52 and the particular individual, thereby acknowledging the contin-
53 gent nature of interviews where unforeseen issues can arise. Two
54 interview protocols (one each for consumers and stallholders) were
55 developed after a review of the literature, and were pilot-tested for
56 timing, clarity, and relevance of questions prior to the event. The
57 questions explored the reasons people attended or participated in
58 the Slow Food event and sought to uncover their beliefs and prac-
59 tices towards food production and consumption. The interviews
60 commenced with the questions: 'What does Slow Food mean to you?'
61 and 'Why are you attending/participating in this Slow Food event?'

62 Recruitment took place at the primary site of the event. Poten-
63 tial participants were approached by a researcher and invited to take
64 part in the study. If willing to be involved, participants were pro-

65 vided with an information statement and consent form, and were
66 offered the opportunity to have any questions answered before pro-
67 ceeding to interview. Permission was sought from participants to
68 record the interviews with a digital MP3 device and all consented.
69 To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were allocated by the research-
70 ers. Demographic data on participants' age, sex, occupation, income
71 bracket, and education were collected in writing as part of the in-
72 terview process. The MP3 interview recordings were downloaded
73 to a researcher's computer and then transcribed verbatim into a
74 word-processing package; subsequently, grammatical errors were
75 corrected and identifying information was removed. To confirm the
76 validity of the transcriptions before analysis was undertaken, all in-
77 terview participants were sent their transcripts and offered the
78 opportunity to verify and clarify their comments (with three par-
79 ticipants sending minor corrections).
80

81 Interview transcripts were entered into NVivo7 along with the
82 participant observation and print data, to assist the authors with
83 thematic coding. To enhance the validity of thematic analysis, the
84 two lead authors separately coded the data, and through compar-
85 ison and discussion formed a consensus on the important themes.
86 The key themes resulting from the analysis of transcripts are sup-
87 ported by quotations from the participant interviews, which are
88 identified by pseudonym and age of respondent (if provided), as well
89 as whether they were a 'consumer', or 'stallholder'.
90

91 Results

92 The presentation of the study findings begin with an overview
93 of the Slow Food festival and the study participants, including a dis-
94 cussion of their motives for attending the event, followed by a
95 discussion of the three key themes arising from all the data sources:
96 the quest for virtuous lifestyles, the importance of co-production
97 and the challenges to putting ethical consumer principles into daily
98 practice.
99

100 Description of the event

101 This description of the event comes from overt researcher partic-
102 ipant observation, the impressions of stallholders and consumers
103 (described through direct interview quotes) and the collection of
104 print materials. *A Taste of Slow* was held at Federation Square, a high
105 profile, freely accessible and large public space in the heart of Mel-
106 bourne, with the event commencing on a Friday and concluding on
107 a Sunday afternoon. The site is a popular venue for people to socialise
108 over food and drink, and it is also used for special outdoor public
109 events. The festival attracted significant crowds, including interna-
110 tional tourists, producing a lively atmosphere as described by
111 participants: 'You're right in the centre of the city, it's full of life'
112 (Sid, 63, stallholder); and 'I don't believe you can go wrong having
113 an event at Federation Square. It's really the umbilicus of the city'
114 (Yolanda, 54, stallholder).
115

116 The event consisted of invited speakers, films, music, cooking
117 demonstrations, and food-producer stalls (see Fig. 1). A special dinner
118 was held on the evening in the middle of the festival. Produce for
119 the dinner was contributed from around Australia and for at least
120 one participant, this was the highlight of the event: 'the dinner was
121 awesome last night. . . about 180 to 200 people were there. . . Ev-
122 erybody really liked all of the dishes and the different things' (Matt,
123 46, stallholder). Other events, such as the special talks by 'legends'
124 in the Slow Food field, were perceived as highly desirable by the
125 stallholders: 'For organic farmers he's (Percy Schmeiser) just the
126 guru'. ABC radio (the national radio station in Australia) broadcast
127 from the event, which one participant described as 'pulling in the
128 crowd' (Chris, 53, stallholder) and several of the stallholders men-
129 tioned taking part in a radio interview.
130
131

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