Farmers’ markets: Commoditizing rural Mythologies

by

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Farmers’ markets in New Zealand in the new century.
Farmer’s Markets are a relatively new, popular feature in the local New Zealand retail market. Held on Saturday or Sunday mornings, the first began in Whangerei (two hours north of Auckland) in 1998. Sellers set up their tents, tables, and umbrellas, or used the backs utes as display spaces. By 2008 there are now around 50 markets, nation-wide.

The appeal lies in the difference from other forms of food shopping. As Baron, Harris and Harris explain, the ‘essence of the experience is the people and the produce’ (Baron et al 2001; 110). Santich writes of the ‘comfort of plenty’ at farmers’ markets, and that ‘the market is a meeting place, a natural community centre where good will pervades.’ Making a direct purchase from the grower – of believing they are – gives the purchase a ‘seal of authenticity’ (Santich, 1996; 31-32). John explains the process of localizing food economies can be readily tracked to the ‘manifold destructive consequences of the commoditization of food by the global free market’ (http://www.thechangeagency.org/). The same sentiment inspired two locals to start the Whangerei Farmers’ Market as a growers’ market, believing they could get ‘better prices by direct selling, than by selling to supermarkets and wholesalers’ (Cameron, 2007; 372).

A range of influences have propelled farmers’ markets into popularity, including the growing consciousness of consumers regarding food ingredients and additives; the desire for organic foods; and the need to reconnect consumers with their food and its origins (Szmigin et al, 2003; 542-543). The globalization of food production has been increasingly promoted in the media, with awareness of ‘food miles’, whereby the majority of supermarket produce is imported, and an apple can travel over 3000 miles prior to purchase (LaTrobe, 2001; 182).

Other prominent concerns for UK consumers include public health scares, such as Foot and Mouth Disease and Asian Bird Flu, ‘which are often associated with intensive farming and the consumers’ ignorance of the supply chain, leading to increasing suspicion of the food available to us’ (Guthrie et al 2006; 562). Environmental and health factors are behind the growing desire for GM free food, organic food and free range eggs, which have combined with a desire to ‘buy locally’, compelling the number of farmers’ markets to expand exponentially.
New Zealand markets are located from Kerikeri in Northland, to Invercargill in Southland, and in the larger cities. Their rapid rise reflects trends elsewhere. In Ireland, for example, in one decade the move was from no farmers markets, to 129 in 2007. In UK the first successful market was held at Bath in 1997. Today there are at least 550 markets held regularly in cities, towns and villages throughout UK.

Structure of Farmers’ Markets in New Zealand

'A Farmers’ Market is a predominantly fresh food market that operates regularly within a community, at a focal public location that provides a suitable environment for farmers and food producers to sell farm-origin and associated value-added processed food products directly to customers.' (Australia Farmers’ Market Association, http://www.farmersmarkets.org.au/about.jsp).

New Zealand farmers’ market regulations duplicate those of the farmers’ market movement in the U.S.A. The aim is at least 80% local produce, with both farmers and producers of value-added commodities needing to reside within a set radius of the market location, generally around 50km. ‘Vendors may only sell what they grow, farm, pickle, preserve, bake, smoke or catch themselves from within a defined local area,’ (New Zealand Farmers’ Market Association http://www.farmersmarket.org.nz/). To create a larger, more attractive market, some produce from outside of the boundaries is accepted.

New Zealand’s markets originally evolved through the entrepreneurship of market participants themselves, seeking to control their sales, and hence their profits. The structure of the first markets was essentially a community co-op, with committees formed to guarantee desired developments. Markets were held on council owned land.

As the first farmers’ markets proved popular, individuals with marketing and development expertise developed their own farmers’ market visions, establishing markets on custom-made sites on private land. These purpose-built markets employ marketing managers and other staff, and are run, in effect, as business enterprises, with the developers able to actually on-sell their market. Many of the community co-op styled markets, in comparison, are run by volunteers, with profits going to charities.

The Farmers’ Market Association in New Zealand was formed in 2005 by three market managers from across the country, who sought to maintain the integrity of farmers’ markets, or as their website states amongst its goals, to protect the brand ‘Farmers’ Market’, clearly distinguishing the concept of a Farmers’ Market from other markets, both retail and wholesale.
The concept of a governing body follows similar initiatives in Australia, Ireland and the UK, in which the volunteers or paid managers of individual markets are able to meet during conferences, share ideas, and create frameworks for emerging sites, while maintaining an overall similarity amongst the stalls.

Visiting Markets
The experiences of these two researchers at various North Island rural and city Farmers Markets found the fresh produce significantly more expensive than at everyday outlets. Little of the produce was claimed to be organic. The greater price was perhaps because vendors assumed buyers would happily pay for the cache of making their purchases at a Farmers’ Market.

We also found that many markets were attended by the same vendors offering the same products. Since that first market in Whangerei, the concept has been taken advantage of by small business people using the market as an incubator experience. Indeed Alan Cameron notes examples of vendors outgrowing their local market, as the success of their products has them gradually supplying at first specialist food shops, then later even supermarkets, finally not wishing to commit weekend time to sell at the local market (Bailey, 2008; Cameron, 2007). There are also existing food retailers (e.g. bakeries; organic food businesses) using farmers markets as additional outlets. Some sellers, we were told, buy goods at produce wholesalers Turners and Growers city markets, to on-sell at the local markets.

The New Rural Gentry
Many urban dwellers have escaped – even if only for weekends – to a county retreat. There are now around 140,000 lifestyle blocks in New Zealand (Paterson, 2005). While some residents commute to city jobs, many are developing new ‘boutique’ crops and products. Little and Austin suggest that a key feature of the quest by the middle classes to locate and live the rural idyll, increasingly relies of the notion of exclusion and selectivity (Little and Austin 1996;103). Phillips refers to gentrification as a space in which people realise their consumption or lifestyle choices; his particular emphasis is on the construction of social identities and differentiations via refurbishment of rural properties (Phillips 2001; 282). High levels of urban to rural migration and socio-economic changes in some districts have certainly re-shaped contemporary rural cultures, with renewed articulations of belonging, commonality, difference and place (Neal and Walters, 2006; 178).

As Tyler wonders, in her case referring to the similar phenomenon in the UK, ‘how do white middle class residents imaginatively reproduce their idea of their place as a traditional ‘village’ in the face of suburbanization?’ She observes
efforts to reproduce imaginative and nostalgic ‘village’ identity, which she sees as ‘part of their middle class social status, lifestyles and sense of self’. Founding agendas for recent farmers’ markets investigated in our New Zealand study appear to correspond to this ethos. The whiteness of the new farmers markets in New Zealand is achingly apparent. They are a total contrast to the large Pacifica markets that have thrived for years in Auckland suburbs such as Otara and Avondale.

A particular demographic dominates: vendors and shoppers are noticeably mature age. Szmigin, et al refer to empirical studies that have found (in UK) the dominance of farmers’ market shoppers in the 51-65 age groups: a demographic with time to shop, treating shopping as recreation, and enjoying traditional methods of purchasing. Nostalgia and the quest for community are likely further motivations (Szmigin et al, 2003; 545).

The original local community is not so much revitalized as hijacked; a new local landed gentry takes charge. Park and Coppack observe that high levels of affluence, mobility and lifestyle opportunities ‘facilitate the pursuit of the intangible and experiential commodity of rural sentiment’ (Park and Coppack, 1994;164). It is within this context of demographic shift and re-vitalization of some rural areas, that the new farmers’ markets find an obvious niche.

In Auckland City there are now weekend produce markets at various sites. If you cannot go to the country, the country comes to you, tucked between the high-rises, with no irony intended at all. Some of the purveyors do the rounds. One vendor told us that his family ‘did’ ten markets each weekend, between Auckland and home - six hours away: in fact, running a small business with wide geographic spread. His story showed that the fluidity of the concept ‘localism’.

**Post Rural**

Urry famously wrote of the ‘post tourist’: someone reflexively aware of their own identity as a tourist, who has a ‘playful’ relationship with the tourist experience (Urry, 1990). In this paper we draw from Murdoch and Pratt’s notion of the ‘post rural’. As Brunori reiterates, post-rural theorists focus on the dynamics of social representations of rurality. Brunori observes new demands of the countryside, including for local and artisan products (Brunori, 2003). This inevitably means new social actors such as organic farmers are taking initiatives in the rural sector. To market their products, they apply overt representation of rural values to their products. In this paper our attention is on the deliberate re-construction of the countryside, in this case the conscious re-enactment of an imaginary rurality at farmers’ markets.

This process demonstrates the distortion of tradition into mythology. At Matakana Market for instance, the marketing manager assured us that stall-holders would certainly not define themselves as ‘farmers’. A selective version of rural way of life is presented, a counterfeit form of ideological packaging to wrap
around the goods on sale. To MacCannell ‘true sights’ e.g. in this case, real rural objects and experiences, are ‘the source of spurious elements which are detached from and are mere copies or reminders of the genuine. The dividing line between the genuine and the spurious is the realm of the commercial’ (McCannell, 1976; 155). The styling of farmers’ markets accurately demonstrates this.

For most New Zealanders – 86% are urban dwellers – notions of the countryside are largely mediated through television commercials. The countryside becomes an aesthetic backdrop, implying wholesomeness in the product or service being promoted. Images and promotion of national identity in this country still draw strongly and persistently from rural imagery, belying the actual experiences of most New Zealanders. Layered upon this viewing are the imported British television series set in pretty country villages, inviting models of charming rural living.

Wicker basket performances for cosmopolitan consumers
Various resources provide ideas, advice, encouragement, marketing and networking information. As Park and Coppack explain, rurality ‘has been commodified, marketed and sold to exurbanites by entrepreneurs in the form of rustic ambience. The iconization of rural culture and values is exploited for contemporary consumption’ (1994; 163).

‘Cultural values and images are appropriated from the historic past to promote a distinct rural idyll’ (Park and Coppack 1994; 164). The Farmers’ Market Charter advises stall holders at Britomart City Farmers’ Market to use ‘baskets and crates so presentation is appealing to customers’; they are ‘encouraged to present an attractive site in keeping with the theme of a farmers’ market’ (http://www.cityfarmersmarket.co.nz/docs/CFM_MarketCharter.pdf). This is a ‘performing’ of rurality: ‘retail theatre… environments that provide opportunity for audience participation and interaction…’ (Baron, Harris and Harris 2001; 102). The abundance and variety of colourful produce suggests infinite culinary possibilities: fragrant fresh bread; smoked eel; verdant herbs; glowing capsicums, tomatoes, aubergines. The market is a spectacle. As Duruz observes, markets may be ‘transformed by our collective gaze into evocative sites of visual/sensual culture, repositories of the romance of community and belonging, theatre for acts of consumer(ism of food) (Durez, 2004; 428).

These vendors serve the cosmopolitan culinary imaginary (Durez, 2004; 438); shoppers who have enjoyed markets in Tuscany, or Provence, perhaps. For the burgeoning neo-middle class, shopping at farmers’ markets may be a way of expressing self-ascribed cosmopolitanism. Every customer is a connoisseur; their subjective response is crucial. These customers are responding to ‘the western cosmopolitan’s search for ‘novel’ tastes – for consuming difference literally, alimentarily’ (Duruz, 2004; 428). The food on sale does not convey the
raw processes of actually farming animals and crops. Products at the markets show nothing of the labour or processes required to create the products (salami! pancetta!). This remains absent and mysterious.

The rural idyll as nostalgia construct
The farmers’ markets investigated for this paper demonstrate the commoditization of notions of traditional rural spaces (physical and metaphorical) via a process of vernacular mobilization. Various geographers have addressed debates about a distinctive rural ideology (e.g. Little and Austin, 1996; Crouch 1992; Murdock and Pratt, 1993). As Little and Austin explain, academic attempts to identify an underlying rural ideology dovetails with the political imperative of evaluating and negotiating the future of the countryside. Bell’s research in New Zealand in the early 1990s located four extractable themes that underpinned rural way of life in this country; she summarized these as distinction, mythology, belonging and nostalgia. These themes did not combine to create an ‘ideal type; rather they helped explain the tenacity of the rural ideals from the past to the present’ (Bell, 1993; 218). Bell found that the notions of rural were not spatially contiguous, but a media construct as well as a cultural construct, with nostalgia as the ruling paradigm. This included nostalgia for a sense of belonging to a local community. In this new century, farmers’ markets have become an active response to these requirements.

Conclusion
We can read farmers’ markets as a potent symbol in the expression of the new middle class in New Zealand. The new rural dwellers are subscribing to both old and new myths about country living: to fictions about a gentle, wholesome life in the country; and the new mores of rural based entrepreneurship. Extensive mobility through occupation, locality, and residence is redressed by the implied-fixedness of the local market, styled with material accoutrements to look as if it has always been there (barrels, cartwheels, wood stoves). The commoditization of ‘country style’ at the burgeoning markets is another phase in New Zealand’s on-going rural myth perpetuation process. The very sustainability of the images and myths about rural way of life has been central to the creation of farmers’ markets.

Bibliography


