

A Qualitative Study of Slow Food in Australia

by

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Abstract

Slow Food is a global social movement that arose in response to the cultural homogenisation, taste standardisation, and public health problems associated with fast food. Despite its popularity, there has been little empirical research on Slow Food and no Australian study to date. This paper begins to address this gap in the literature by reporting on a qualitative study into the subjective experiences of people participating in the Slow Food movement. The study involved 33 semi-structured interviews with food producers and lay public attending a Slow Food festival. The findings illuminate the changing nature of consumer culture, particularly the notion of ethical consumption.

Key words: Ethical consumption; food habits; life politics; public health; social movements

Introduction

The Slow Food movement was internationally constituted in 1989, and now claims to have more than 85 000 members worldwide in over 130 countries. Slow Food's goal is to counter the rise of fast food and its associated standardisation of taste and homogenisation of culture via its philosophy of 'eco-gastronomy' and 'virtuous globalisation', whereby regional cuisines and ingredients, artisan cooking techniques, sustainable agriculture and fair trade are promoted to a global market of consumers (Petrini 2001; Malatesta *et al.* 2005). Slow Food has the potential to significantly

influence the way food is produced, marketed and consumed in Australia, and thus represents an important topic of investigation. Of particular sociological interest is the potential impact on food habits, consumer-producer relations, public health and consumer culture.

Bourdieu (1979/1984) argued that food choices along with other consumption practices can be used by people to socially differentiate themselves from others or convey membership of a particular social class or social movement. For Giddens (1991), consumption choices are increasingly based on reflexively considered decisions (what he terms life politics), which may also form the basis of collective action for social change (emancipatory politics). This study explores the extent to which participation in Slow Food reflects social differentiation, reflexive forms of consumption and social action.

The existing academic literature on Slow Food consists mostly of descriptive commentaries and documentary analyses that focus on the philosophical aspects of Slow Food (see Parkins & Craig 2006; Donati 2005; Chrzan 2004; Labelle 2004; Laudan 2004; Meneley 2004; Leitch 2003; Miele & Murdoch 2002; Ritzer 2001). The few empirical studies that have been conducted have focussed on case studies of a particular food, such as olive oil (Meneley 2004), and pork fat (Leitch 2003), or a particular restaurant (Miele & Murdoch 2002), with little attention directed towards understanding Slow Food participants' motives and experiences.

The study reported here adds to the empirical literature on Slow Food through an exploration of people's experiences of a Slow Food festival in Australia. Slow Food

festivals are now regular tourist events around the world, and tend to celebrate both local and international cuisines, representing a form of food cosmopolitanism (Tomlinson 1999), as well as being used to promote the philosophy of Slow Food.

Methodology

A qualitative cross-sectional methodology was used to explore the experiences, beliefs, and practices of people participating in *A Taste of Slow*—an annual food festival held in Melbourne, Australia (see: www.atasteofslow.com.au). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two groups of participants: lay public attending the event, and food producers involved in the event itself. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow the wording and order of questions to be altered to suit the situation and the particular individual, thereby acknowledging the contingent nature of interviews where unforeseen issues can arise. The interview protocols were developed after reviewing the literature, and were pilot-tested for timing and relevance of questions. All the materials for the study were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Newcastle.

Recruitment took place during the event, with participants approached by a researcher and invited to take part in the study. If willing to be involved, participants were then provided with an information statement and consent form, and offered the opportunity to have any questions answered. The interviews took place *in situ* during the *A Taste of Slow* food festival (23-24 February 2008) at the primary site of the event—Federation Square—a high profile public space in the heart of Melbourne. The festival consisted of invited speakers, films, music, cooking demonstrations, and food producer stalls. Permission was sought to record the interviews with a digital

MP3 device and all participants agreed. Demographic data on participants' age, sex, occupation, income bracket, and education was also collected as part of the interview process.

Interviews took place with 33 individuals; 14 with food producers (8 male and 6 female) and 19 with members of the general public (7 male and 12 female). The interviews took approximately 15-30 minutes to complete. They explored the reasons people attended the Slow Food event and sought to uncover participants' beliefs and practices towards food consumption and production.

Interview transcripts were analysed via thematic coding by both authors. To enhance the validity of thematic analysis, each researcher separately coded the data and through comparison and discussion a consensus on the important themes was formed. As a further validity check, interview participants were sent their transcripts and offered the opportunity to verify and clarify their comments (with 3 out of 33 participants sending minor corrections).

Findings

The findings are organised under the following themes that arose from the data: conceptions of Slow Food, consumer-producer networks, ethical consumption, and class-based food habits. Quotes from participant interviews are identified by pseudonym and age of respondent, with food producers designated with the term 'Producer' to distinguish them from lay public respondents.

Conceptions of Slow Food

Participants were asked about their understanding of, and interest in, the concept of Slow Food. The food producers interviewed were all stall holders at the event and were well acquainted with Slow Food, with almost all being members of the international Slow Food organisation as well as a local group (known as a *convivia*). Some of the lay public interviewed had specifically attended the event due to an existing interest in Slow Food, while others were just passing by and were attracted to the food stalls. Nonetheless, the lay public had a generic awareness of what Slow Food entailed, perhaps due to the fact that many had already visited numerous food stalls and been exposed to ‘taste education’ and associated Slow Food literature.

It was common for participants to associate Slow Food with local and fresh produce, ‘natural’ and hand-made production processes, in addition to underlying notions of such food being healthier than mass produced, industrialised fast food. The following quotes give an indication of the typical responses provided.

Well I guess it’s the opposite to fast food. But it’s buying produce from locally so that it hasn’t travelled far, that it’s fresh, people can take it home and cook it themselves, spend time with their family to sit down and eat it as a family and enjoy. **Sid, 63 – Producer**

Well to me ideally it means an antithesis to the fast food high production society that we’re in. It’s about reconnecting with our food sources. And producing food locally, getting back in touch with what it is that actually sustains our lives. **Holly, 35**

I think foods that are first of all fresh, and more freshly prepared, rather than processed, and also ones that are grown and sourced from smaller scale farms rather than mass produced ones, and then lastly that are chemical free and certainly not genetically modified. **Mitch, 51**

Tied to the notion of ‘the local’ was the idea of food provenance, or the ability to source food origins and production methods. This entailed the desirability and privileging of procuring local produce, the regional branding of foods (to identify their source), and the ‘certification’ of food (as organic, GM-free or hand-made).

People want to know what they’re eating and where it’s from and make sure they’re not going to get sick. **Beth, 40**

We try and eat organic or buy direct wherever we can. A lot of the produce we actually use and consume at home is actually bought at farmer’s markets... we buy all our fruit and veg at farmer’s markets and things such as bread and dairy and meat we buy at the farmer’s markets so there’s not a lot of other stuff that we need. **Will, 38 – Producer**

Consumer-Producer networks

A key idea promoted by the Slow Food movement through its various publications and website involves the notion of consumers acting as ‘co-producers’ of their own food, by forming close associations or networks with producers. Interestingly, many of food producers interviewed identified this aspect as integral to the notion of Slow Food and as one of the key things that attracted them to the movement. In particular, food producers highlighted the economic and perceived community building benefits of being involved in Slow Food.

People are looking for the producers, they want to know the story, they want to feel the connection. And as producers, we like to feel the connection with the people buying our product and taking it home. **Emily, 27 – Producer**

... there’s direct contact between the grower and the purchaser and its good both parties to benefit from each other and also there’s a cost effectiveness there as well. The farmer will get a little more for his product and the consumer will pay a little less and it’s a better quality product. **James, 34 – Producer**

Well in the past we had no connection with the consumers at all. We sold it to a big packing shed and had nothing to do with the marketing at all. Now we can talk directly to the consumers and it’s wonderful. There is a real education

process for the consumers where we can talk about our product and what we do with it and the benefits of it and how long they can store it for. **Sid, 63 – Producer**

This had the effect of stimulating and enhancing a sense of local or regional communities.

I think Slow Food can help to reinvigorate small communities by assisting small producers to develop artisan industries for want of a better description. **Rob, 47 – Producer**

Consumer-producer networks were apparently more important for the food producers because of the dual benefits of increased economic return and the social interaction with consumers, where they experienced a sense of being valued members of their communities.

The Ethical Consumer: Ideal versus Practice

Ethical consumption was another prominent theme, with both consumers and producers highlighting the importance of sustainable modes of production, a focus on ‘natural’ (minimally processed, chemical free, non-GM), organic, hand-made (non-industrial) forms of production. A couple of participants also noted the issue of ‘fair trade’.

What the consumers are thinking a lot more about where they get their food from and how it’s produced and questioning things. From a coffee point of view, fair trade coffee’s probably the product that has got most media coverage and people are most likely to think about when they’re thinking about coffee... people are quite accepting and supportive of that recognition of giving the farmers and the producers a fair price. **Will, 38 – Producer**

I am much more inclined to think about what I’m purchasing and where it’s from for a start. Everything that I buy I kind of question where is it from. Is it ethical, how was it grown, how was it transported, how was it processed; all those kinds of questions are just always there with me automatically. So I make more – much more conscious choices now. I tend to go for things that are minimally packaged, if at all packed, I prefer bulk. **Holly, 35**

While participants were very supportive of the ideals espoused by Slow Food, some members of the lay public admitted they were far from incorporating Slow Food principles into their daily practices.

Well it hasn't quite got there yet cause I'm still part of the rush of modern life but I guess it's something I think I would aspire. And I would want to eventually live that way. I just have to figure out how to do it. **Debbie, 48**

Social class and 'foodies'

Some of the literature on Slow Food (see Chrzan 2004) has criticised the movement for being elitist due to its focus on exotic foods and artisan techniques that are often costly. Some participant responses supported such a critical viewpoint, when they noted that Slow Food tended to appeal to 'foodies'—people who could afford to be preoccupied with food quality, novelty, and taste. Others explicitly highlighted social class and high cost of Slow Food.

Slow Food is probably more upper income; middle-class to upper income-type people would be more attracted to it because I think they're attracted to the benefits of a more healthy lifestyle. **Matt, 46 – Producer**

Because of the premium prices, it makes it difficult for people who've got fairly tight budgets to commit to buying stuff all the time. I mean they're the realities for families. In the end you've got a mortgage to pay, kids to feed, school fees. **Doug, 51**

The fact of the matter is that sometimes it's a problem because the food is more expensive. And you just don't have the money in your budget to buy the organic fruits that you like. **Debbie, 48**

I'd say it's kind of a 'rich' concept. I guess there's not enough talk about how the average person can have a small vegie patch... I mean it's expensive. At the moment Slow Food is expensive. **Amy, 27**

There was little comment among participants about the role of collective action or government in shaping food production and consumption patterns; instead the focus tended to be on the role of personal choice in shifting overall consumption practices.

Preliminary Conclusions: Towards a Sociology of Slow Food

Slow Food promotes a form of ethical consumption by attempting to influence consumer behaviour towards the consumption of food that is produced without the exploitation of people or the environment. Membership of the Slow Food movement, and attendance at its events, may be used as a form of social differentiation to construct and reinforce an ethical identity. To varying degrees, the study participants espoused the willingness to be reflexive ethical consumers, though such 'life politics' (to use Giddens' term) was often difficult to sustain in practice.

The wide variety of food choices available to consumers in developed countries led Fischler to suggest that people are faced with an 'omnivore's paradox'; they 'lack reliable criteria to make decisions and therefore they experience a growing sense of anxiety' (1980: 948). Slow Food potentially addresses public concerns over food risks and provides an answer to the omnivore's paradox of what is 'good to eat'. The privileging of 'the local' and an emphasis on 'natural' production methods and fresh ingredients, particularly in terms of building a sense of community (for both social and economic reasons) is a theme that will be pursued in subsequent research by the authors.

This project was the first of its kind on Slow Food in Australia, and one of the few studies to empirically investigate people's experiences of, and beliefs about, Slow Food. While necessarily exploratory in nature, this research has provided insights into the perspectives of food producers and consumers. The study provides a preliminary understanding of the moral discourses underpinning Slow Food.

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