

Visual Representation of Local Food in Conventional and Unconventional Retail Spaces

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Background

The Local Food Movement (LFM) is composed of a complex network of actors including producers (e.g., farmers, ranchers, processors), purveyors (e.g., farmers' market vendors, retailers, restaurateurs), organizers (e.g., farmers' market operators, food bank administrators) and narrators (e.g., local food journalists). Limited governance within local food systems (LFSs) and a lack of consensus on the definition of 'local food' provide such actors with notable latitude in how they frame the meaning of 'local' in the products they produce, market, and sell. The expansion of food products that are marketed as being local within conventional retail spaces may be further convoluting the meaning and representation of local food across the disparate market spaces that operate within a single LFS (e.g. community gardens, farmers' markets, festivals, grocery stores, roadside stands, you-picks). Indeed, consumers are left to sort through a variety of elements (e.g., activist, aesthetic, community, cultural, ecological, economic, health and wellness) that converge and compete to shape their understanding of local food and guide their consumption decisions.

Methodology

We used a single case study design to qualitatively explore how the meaning of local food is shaped and conveyed across conventional (i.e., grocery stores) and unconventional (i.e., farmers' markets) retail spaces within the Southern Arizona Local Food System (SALFS). We define 'conventional retail spaces' as those that source the majority of products from dominant agricultural producers and distributors¹. 'Unconventional retail spaces' are defined as those that source the majority of products from local producers and small scale distributors².

Our study primarily relies on a structured photo analysis design with the photos being taken of local food products and their presentation across a sample of conventional and unconventional retail spaces. We selected photographs as our primary data source in order to capture a unique perspective on the market presentation and consumption of local food that is not otherwise captured through existing local food scholarship. Overall, I analyzed 683 photos as part of this study with the number of photos specific to each ranging from 6 to 177. At each site, photos were taken of local food products, the aisles or booths containing such products, how the food was displayed/merchandised, advertisements or signs pertaining to local food, and the surroundings of each retail site (e.g., grounds, surrounding businesses and neighborhoods). The breadth of the photos helped reveal the logics (i.e., activist, aesthetic, community, cultural, ecological, health and wellness, market) that guide the strategies used to present and market (i.e., commodify) specific local foods within and across the 10 retail spaces. In general, the inclusion of photos that transcend individual items allowed us to capture a contextually diverse view of each site and enrich our overall analysis.

Two levels of deductive analysis were conducted. First, we conducted a round of ideographic analysis⁵ that involved coding each photo to reveal the logic elements that influence how local food is presented and marketed at each site. Second, we conducted a round of nomothetic analysis⁴ that included the entire set of photos as a collective representation of all 10 of the market spaces. The spaces were also analyzed collectively through several rounds of axial coding to identify general patterns and determine if there is one or more taste regimes shaping what is or is not considered legitimate local food production and consumption within and across the in SALFS.

Theoretical Framework

The following three sociological theories guided our approach to the current study: institutional logics^{7,8,12}, commodification^{10,11}, and taste regimes^{3,4,6}.

Institutional Logics

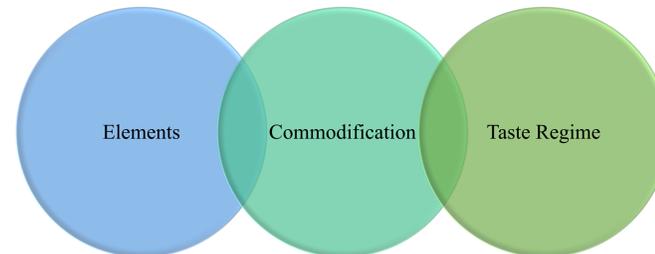
Institutional logics help guide our analysis of the commodification patterns of local food logic(s). More specifically, the various elements of the blended LFS logic that Mars and Schau⁹ identify (i.e., activist, aesthetic, community, cultural, ecological, market, and health/wellness) guided our exploration of the various ways in which local food is commodified within and across various retail spaces operating in the SALFS.

Commodification

We explore variations in how local food is commodified within the SALFS according to the elements of the blended LFS logic. By doing so, we are able to better recognize and understand how both market and non-market contexts work either in isolation or in combination to influence the nature and duration of the social life of a local food commodity¹⁰.

Taste Regime(s)

We build on the insights gained on the commodification patterns to illustrate the taste regime(s) that signifies and facilitates the normative practices of local food production and consumption within the SALFS^{3,4}.

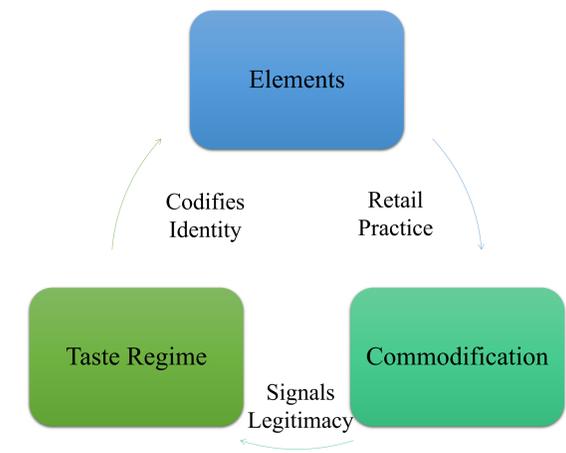


The theoretical framework we have developed here enables us to explore how elements from the blended local food logic (i.e., activist, aesthetic, community, cultural, ecological, market, and health/wellness) meld together to influence the commodification and social construction of local food production and consumption across multiple retail settings within a single LFS. The flow of the theoretical framework begins with the logic elements guiding the identification and framing of the commodification pattern(s) within and across the various retail sites. In turn, the commodification patterns are drawn on to reveal and illustrate either a single taste regime or the co-existence of multiple taste regimes that are differentiated between retail sites.

References

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Findings



Primary: Market



Secondary: Aesthetic



Tertiary: Activist, Community, Cultural, Ecological, Health & Wellness



Activist: "Shared table for gardeners & small farms"
Community: "Income for local growers", "Community Food Bank"



Culture: "Señor Cilantro", Mexican decor
Health & Wellness: "Organic"



Ecological: "Pesticide Free"
Health & Wellness: "Organic"



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