Food, place and identity: consuming Australia's 'Beef Capital'

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Abstract

As social practice the consumption of food demonstrates the fundamentally social nature of the human body and subjectivity. Through eating, individuals are both incorporated into global networks of production and exchange, and incorporate themselves the meanings associated with those foods. Consumption is also, however, a spatially and temporally situated practice. This article argues that space and time must be analysed not only as sites at which food is consumed – with a view to mapping variability – but as social constructions that are themselves consumed and imbued with meaning. They are both signifier *and* signified. It goes on to explore the ways in which residents of Rockhampton (the 'Beef Capital' of Australia) constructed the 'place' in which they lived and their own food consumption practices. Residents demonstrated a high degree of reflexivity in their awareness of wider networks of social relations and the manner in which the identity of the 'Beef Capital' was itself consumed by 'outsiders' but, according to some, were rather less reflexive in their acceptance of the masculinist symbolism of beef and the experiences of marginalized groups within Rockhampton.

Key words: consumption, place, regional identity, social construction of food

Introduction

The consumption of food is both intensely personal and profoundly social. Through the act of eating, we both incorporate the elements of food into our bodily organisms, and are incorporated ourselves into a host of social networks. As the geo-politics of food production and distribution shows, eating carries with it potentially enormous social and environmental significance.

From the fair trade movement and the campaign against Nestle, to 'trade wars' between the United States and the European Community, it is hard to escape constant reminders of the complex and fluid relationships between the livelihoods of food producers, the health of agricultural environments, the economic performance of food exporting nations, the activities of transnational corporations and the ways in which we satiate our own hunger. At the same time that food activists compete to define a normative agenda for consumption practices, we are bombarded with a plethora of media images reminding us of the linkages between what we eat and how we appear to others – through both our body size and shape, and the desirability, or otherwise, of being seen to consume particular foodstuffs. We are also reminded of the role of food consumption as a focus for sociability and emotional intimacy, and as a marker of group identities.

This article has a particular concern with the spatiality of food consumption practices, an issue that has been substantially ignored to date in the otherwise burgeoning literature on the sociology of food. Not surprisingly, human geographers have been more willing to examine this issue, the bulk of whom have concentrated on the increasingly distantiated social relationships responsible for food provision that link, for example, producers in Central America with consumers in the United Kingdom via an intricate network of producers, agribusinesses and retailers. But as Arce and Marsden (1993; see also Marsden and Arce, 1995) point out, these are not only networks of food provision, they are also networks of meaning through which – in a multitude of contested episodes of social interaction – foods are constructed as meaningful commodities. This article draws on the work of a small number of authors who have sought, in particular, to explore the spatiality of meanings associated with food consumption (Bell and Valentine, 1997; Cook and Crang, 1996; Smith, 1996), each of whom offers variants on the argument that our subjectivity, or sense of self, is in some sense derived from the places in which we consume foods. As Bell and Valentine (1997) proclaim, 'we are where we eat'. But, importantly, 'where we eat' is not something that may be taken for granted; 'foods do not simply come from places, but also make places as symbolic constructs' (Cook and Crang, 1996: 140).

This article is based on a study that utilized focus group and life history interviews within the City of Rockhampton – the self-proclaimed 'Beef Capital' of Australia – to explore linkages between food consumption practices, the symbolic construction of Rockhampton and its surrounding region as a site for those practices, and the lives of Rockhampton residents. This research will be contrasted with the more substantial literature on the nature of these relationships in the metropolises; the point being not to defend Rockhampton in the face of its apparent dearth of cultural capital, but to offer an alternative perspective to the often textually based interpretations of regionality as a spatial-cultural construct evident in other studies.

Food, space, time and the body

The importance of space and time to the patterning of social relationships has been highlighted in the work of a number of social theorists (for example Giddens, 1990; Harvey, 1996; Lash and Urry, 1994; Latour, 1987, 1993; Thrift, 1996; Urry, 1995). A key feature of these analyses is the problematization of space and time as fixed geographic and temporal categories. Instead, space and time are regarded as social constructions, our understanding of which is fundamentally based on the categories through which we sort our experiences (Latour, 1993). 'Space' is thus conceptualized as both signifier and signified; as both a site at which food consumption may take place, and as a contingent and potentially contested set of meanings that may themselves be consumed through those practices associated with food. Similarly, while it is possible to map food practices temporally in order to examine the ways in which they have changed 'over time', it is equally possible to map the meanings through which their temporality is constructed. 'Nouvelle cuisine' and the 'Sunday roast', for example, hark back to disparate 'times' through their signification of equally disparate senses of temporality – the 'modern' and the 'traditional'. These understandings of space and time are embodied in the notion of 'place', the 'fleeting permanencies' that sometimes appear in space and time (Harvey, 1996). Where space and time may appear abstract, 'places' acquire identities, they are knowable and known.

Cook and Crang (1996) point to two types of geographical knowledges that may be embedded within foods: first, knowledge of the origins of foods and the social relations of their production; and second, the meanings of 'place' evoked by their consumption. Further, these types of geographical knowledges interact such that the first, in particular, is often obscured by the second; the images and sensations evoked in the act of consumption bearing little, if any, resemblance to the material conditions of many a food-stuff's production (see also Smith, 1996). This can perhaps be most clearly illustrated with reference to foods produced in the so-called Third World for consumption in the First. Smith's (1996) juxtaposition of the conditions under which coffee beans, for example, are produced, reveals something of a gulf between the relations of production that supply North American customers of the Starbucks chain with coffee and the romanticized meanings of place – drawing on both European café society and a smiling peasantry – that are also made available for their consumption. As Cook (1994: 232) states, 'there is a symbiotic relationship between the "material" production of a [food] and the "symbolic" production of its meaning(s)'. But the outcome of this relationship may be the production of 'ignorance', as actors within food networks engage in a diversity of representational practices aimed towards protecting their self-interest (Cook and Crang, 1996). However, there is also no guarantee that the meanings promoted

by retailers such as Starbucks will be taken up by consumers and every likelihood that they will, at least to a degree, be transformed as they are consumed. The importance of these meanings lies in the resources they provide for the meaningful incorporation of foods into social practices and subjectivities, 'in part through embodied performances of those meanings' (Cook and Crang, 1996: 140).

While the embodied nature of human experience has been largely neglected within the sociological enterprise (Turner, 1996), it is precisely this aspect of experience that is responsible for the powerful ways in which food is implicated in the development of subjectivities and identities (Maurer, 1996; see also Bourdieu, 1984; Falk, 1994; Lupton, 1996). The materiality of embodiment highlights the potential importance of geographical knowledges of food to the construction of 'selves', 'communities' and 'regions', since human subjects are just as knowable and known through their spatiality and temporality as the 'places' and the foods they consume. Thus, Fischler (1988) argues that not only does the absence of any distinct 'place' of origin for many industrially produced foodstuffs obscure the relations of production responsible for those foods, but it may also alienate consumers from their own sense of self as relationships between the ingestion of food, the place-bound meanings associated with that food and subjectivity are broken down. In terms of the current study, while we might not, on this basis, expect to find any crudely direct relationship between the promotion of a civic identity based on beef production with everything from local diets to self-understandings, we may expect the idea of such a relationship to figure prominently in Rockhampton residents' discourse of who they are and what they eat, even if only as points of departure in the identification of sites of contestation.

Methods

Cook (1994) argues that the centrality of symbolic production in the articulation of food networks necessitates the ethnographic examination of power relations across a number of locales through which commodities move. The importance of focusing on just one locale here, however, lies in the need to also understand how multiple artefacts may be utilized together in the production of meaning through situated food consumption practices. In order to explore how residents of the City of Rockhampton understood their sense of place and how this related to their food consumption practices, a series of four focus groups and five life history interviews were conducted during 1997.¹ Due to the exploratory nature of this research, a selection of adult residents of Rockhampton were identified at random from the electoral roll and invited to participate in single-gender focus groups that involved, in total, 12 women and 13 men. Although no specific selection criteria were used, those agreeing to participate were predominantly middle-

aged and older. Interestingly, while the women came from a diverse range of social backgrounds, most of the men had at some stage had a professional association with a food industry. Participants in the life history interviews were selected using theoretical sampling, and were targeted due to their very different experiences with food and their long-term residence in Rockhampton. All participants were either past, or close to, retirement age, and included one woman who, in addition to cooking for a family, had worked as a professional cook for 15 years; another woman who had also cooked for a family and spent periods of time working as a nurse and as a meat packer; one male vegetarian who had run both a pineapple farm and a fruit and vegetable shop; and three men who had spent almost their entire working lives on the killing floor of one of the local abattoirs (two of the former meat workers asked to be interviewed together). Reflecting the relatively low level of cultural diversity in Rockhampton, all research participants came from Anglo backgrounds.

Locating the 'Beef Capital' 1: contesting the region

If we accept Bell and Valentine's (1997: 17) argument that if 'the urban is about consumption, then perhaps more than at any other scale, the region is about food production', we should not be surprised to find a regional identity encapsulated in the notion of the 'Beef Capital'; especially if it is the case as Smith (1993, cited in Bell and Valentine, 1997: 17) argues that 'regional identity is constructed disproportionately around the kinds of work performed there'. Rockhampton, a regional centre of 62,741 people (ABS, 1996), sits just above the Tropic of Capricorn, 640 kilometres north of Brisbane. In 1994, the Central Queensland region for which it serves as the unofficial administrative and service centre had a human population of 308,615 and a bovine population of some 3.2 million (ABS, 1996). Rockhampton was the site for two of the region's four export abattoirs (Vercoe, 1996) but, reflecting its dependence on the struggling beef industry, was the most slowly growing centre in Central Queensland (ABS, 1996). Despite increases in the economic importance of education, tourism and extractive industries, the city has continued to promote a civic identity as the 'Beef Capital' of Australia by: hosting international beef industry symposiums including 'Beef '97' and 'Beef 2000'; considering the development of a beef theme park styled on Longreach's successful Stockmans' Hall of Fame; and adorning all major routes in and out of the city – including the airport – with life-size statues of bulls representing locally significant breeds.

On the surface, this appears to contrast dramatically with the multicultural culinary identities of metropolitan centres. Cook and Crang (1996), for example, examine the increasingly familiar promotion of London as a place in which it is possible to find 'the world on a plate' through the

availability of a diverse array of exotic cuisines. This they hold to be indicative of the touristic manner in which exotic cultures are displaced and appropriated for recomposition and consumption in the construction of London as a cosmopolitan metropolis. At the same time that such recomposition and consumption obscure geographical knowledges of the colonial imperialism that brought such cultural diversity (the spoils of empire) to London (Narayan, 1995), similar culinary processes have been evident in the former colony of Australia as a model of 'postnational' eating is developed that is popularly held to move Australians beyond the cultural cringe of inferiority to Britain and Europe and the supposed lack of a national cuisine (Probyn, 1998). In these accounts of the place-bound meanings of food, regionality emerges as a spatial and cultural context for the production of exotic styles and ingredients; from 'The Mediterranean Diet' to the *appellations d'origine* that guarantee the 'authenticity' and 'quality' of products such as wine grown in particular locales (such as Bordeaux, Champagne). Ideas of regionality are thus appropriated as elements in the construction of metropolises as cosmopolitan and sophisticated. Yet while generic notions of rural idyll feature prominently in the promotion of even highly specialized *appellations d'origine*, it would seem that the particular notion of the 'Beef Capital' lacks both the spatial specificity and cultural capital of such *appellations*. Not only is the centrality of beef to understandings of a 'proper meal' in decline, beef could come from almost anywhere. Rockhampton's only claim is that quite a lot of it passes through local saleyards and slaughterhouses. If anything, Rockhampton's mass processing and export of carcasses seem more redolent of the erasure of difference – spatial and cultural – associated with homogenization and 'McDonaldisation' than with the embodiment of regional uniqueness; and with archaic conservatism rather than sophisticated cosmopolitanism.

It is not surprising then that the notion of the 'Beef Capital' is at times the object of ridicule and dissent. As Gibson (1996) points out, Rockhampton's concrete bulls stand almost permanently defaced or 'impaired' (a reference to the frequent vandalism of their testicles) with little evidence of widespread community concern. This leads him to suggest that most residents have no deep affection for the bulls, but merely see them as inevitable. Outside the particular breeders' associations the bulls represent, Gibson (1996: 95) suggests that the bulls speak primarily of a 'defensive ordinariness' symbolically opposed to the vibrancy and cosmopolitanism of metropolitan life. In a global economy he believes is shifting from primary production and manufacturing to cultural processes of value adding, the bulls seem to say: 'We know who we are. Keep out' (Gibson, 1996: 93).

Other critics have focused on the strikingly masculine symbolism of the bulls. Early on the morning of 16 April 1997, for example, a small group of activists calling themselves the 'Fruit Collective' spray-painted graffiti on each of Rockhampton's bulls. Timed to coincide with the opening of the

Beef '97 symposium and the visit of populist right-wing politician Pauline Hanson, the Fruit Collective argued in a media release that 'The dominant culture of Rockhampton is indicative of the white, middle-class, patriarchal social structure that Pauline Hanson and her cronies are striving for' (*The Morning Bulletin*, 17 April 1997: 1). This reading equates the bloody and violent origins of meat in the slaughter of animals with oppressive and discriminatory relations between humans (see also Adams, 1990).² For groups like the Fruit Collective the bulls stand as a daily reminder of both the violence that they experience in their own lives, and the ways in which they are constructed as the 'other' by virtue of their gender, sexuality, race or ethnicity.

Both these examples raise the question as to how widespread opposition to the notion of the 'Beef Capital' is within Rockhampton; whether it is true, as Gibson (1996) asserts, that people are simply too parochial to care about epoch-shifting changes in the kind of society in which they live; and whether, as suggested by the Fruit Collective, food-based practices and the public art they have inspired tell us a great deal about how widely accepted discriminatory relations among the residents of Rockhampton are. While these questions cannot be adequately addressed here, it is possible to at least begin exploring such relationships among some of the 'ordinary' Rockhamptonites to whom Gibson so disparagingly refers. Again, the point here is not to engage in a defence of Rockhampton or its residents, but to extend our understanding of regionality and food consumption beyond those discourses generated in metropolises more neatly categorized as centres of consumption.

Locating the 'Beef Capital' 2: living and thinking Rockhampton

One of the most readily apparent features of the data generated through the focus group discussions and interviews conducted for this research was the extent to which participants generated a rapid consensus on a number of points such as: the virtues of living in the region; the variety of foods and food practices available to them relative to earlier times; and a preference for eating locally produced food. While researchers need always to be suspicious of the appearance of homogeneity among any loosely defined social group,³ the ready agreement among participants here is itself interesting. For even though the most obvious explanation for such homogeneity would be the parochial community described by Gibson (1996), one of the most striking aspects of research participants' understandings of the township itself and its association with the beef industry was the extent to which these drew on representations of the web of social relations within which both the City of Rockhampton and themselves were located. This was evident in a number of ways which are of importance here: first, in terms

of the temporality of social relations and their transformation alongside developments in the industrial and telecommunications infrastructure of Rockhampton; second, in terms of an appreciation of the integration of apparently localized food production, processing, retailing and consumption activities into nationally and globally distanced networks of provision; and third, in terms of understandings regarding how 'Rockhampton' is constructed and consumed by 'outsiders' (see also Urry, 1995).

At first glance this may not appear surprising. The ever increasing velocity and volume of movement of goods, services, information and people through space and time characteristic of late- or postmodernity (Lash and Urry, 1994) alter the relationships of people to each other and their perception of time and space. As the reach of social relations extends in time and space (Giddens, 1990), time and space themselves appear to compress (Harvey, 1989). The world seems 'smaller' and 'faster'. This does not in itself, of course, account for any particular knowledge that people may have of these processes. According to Beck (1992, 1994), reflexivity is induced by people's confrontations with the negative side effects of such processes. Reflexivity is not the outcome of an increase in 'knowledge' so much as the opening of social domains previously taken for granted to reflection and challenge. For Giddens (1991), reflexivity is induced through the disembedding of local contexts of social relations and the corresponding need for increased monitoring of the self and knowledgeability of the social. Despite their differences, in both cases reflexivity is described as a process through which agents are in some sense freed from existing constraints but thence forced to reflect on their own social conditions of existence (Lash, 1994: 115).

The changing nature of social relations – including those associated with food provision – was most immediately apparent when research participants evoked images of Rockhampton's past. Rockhampton was represented as a friendly, socially active, working-class town. Money was scarce, few people owned cars, and almost all engaged in subsistence food production to augment wages. According to John,⁴ a 78-year-old retired meat worker:

It was a friendly old town in those days ... I suppose we're old when we say these things, but the atmosphere was a lot better then. Worst thing to come to Rocky was the TV. As far as social life's concerned.

The experiences of Bill (62) were also typical:

Well in our childhood it was basic eh, just your meat and poultry and vegetables. We used to grow all our own vegetables, just for the house, like I do here grow a bit for myself. But we had cows when we were kids. We used to have fresh milk, always had plenty of milk and cream. And in them days there wasn't a great variety of stuff you could have anyway, not like it is today ... we just had the basic stuff. ... So yeah, it was just normal food, we never had anything flash. I can remember eating pumpkin stalks one year when we had no greens, peel the pumpkin stalks down and eat them for greens. It was in the war.

The food consumed prior to the explosion of variety that occurred following the Second World War was thus constructed as 'simple' and 'normal'. Yet despite the reservations many participants expressed about declining sociability over the same period, it was those very processes of the development of telecommunications and transport infrastructure symbolized by the television that were responsible for the comparatively incredible variety of foods, food consumption practices and food knowledges now available. This variety was discussed enthusiastically by the majority of participants. Indeed, it was suggested that anybody who didn't take advantage of this variety 'didn't know what was good for them'.

Research participants were highly aware that despite living in a food producing area, the foods that they actually consumed may have been sourced from almost anywhere, and that foods grown 'locally' were mostly transported to centralized processing and distribution points in Brisbane – the nearest metropolitan centre. The importance of space and time as material constraints in the determination of access to food were thus substantially diminished. But so too were symbolic constraints on access to food as 'traditional' food practices were challenged by what participants' understood to be their increasingly cosmopolitan tastes and concern to ensure the healthiness of what they ate. Thus, Mary (58), a professional cook, was able to express both her fondness for experimenting with different flavours and cuisines, while trying:

... not to buy overseas stuff. I get a bit annoyed when they bring in oranges from America and things like that because I think we grow a fair bit of that ourselves. I ... usually read labels on the canned stuff now but then you find out they're not marked correctly anyway. They say product of Australia and it's not. But I do try to get Australian goods.

The aforementioned disdain with which many participants viewed the gastronomically 'conservative' seemed to reflect the reflexive monitoring of the body and its conduct that, according to Giddens (1991, 1994), accompanies the loss of meanings associated with distinctively local practices as localized contexts are disembedded by processes of time-space distantiation. 'Traditional' meals evoked memories of childhood and parenting that many participants enjoyed from time to time, but few considered staples of their current dietary practice. Some, like Daphne (63), a former nurse and meatpacker, found themselves preparing 'traditional' food such as stews and pies when visited by their adult children while preferring 'lighter' and 'healthier' food such as salads and stirfries when preparing food for themselves.

It is important to note here that reflecting aesthetic dimensions of reflexivity (Lash, 1994; Lash and Urry, 1994), participants were often more concerned with matters of 'taste' in their modification of food practices than they were with health. Indeed, despite widely expressed concerns

about weight and diet-related health problems, most participants were prepared only to make carefully controlled concessions to medicalized constructions of what they should, or more often should not, eat. John complained:

My doctor put me on this diet. He told me I had cholesterol and triglycerides and put me on this diet and gor blimey, everybody's asking us has John got cancer? That's how much weight I'd lost. Anyway I got rid of it. ... 'Geez' I said 'I'm not going to die of starvation, I'll die of the complaint'. So I was back onto eating meat ...

For men, in particular, a body capable of hard physical labour – and therefore of consuming preferred foods irrespective of fat content – was considered normal. Medicalized constructions of diet were seen as contradictory (see also Gronow, 1997) and resisted in favour of constructions of the male body that emphasized processes of labour and consumption. While this may have reflected understandings of Rockhampton as a working-class town, it also reflected its integration into networks of exchange, communications and travel that made what were understood as increasingly cosmopolitan consumption practices possible.

This emphasis on cosmopolitanism and diversity in participants' constructions of self is quite at odds with Gibson's (1996) analysis of the public art of Rockhampton and what he believes it to signify about local culture. In a 'shrinking' world, Gibson's analysis assumes that the more reflexive and cosmopolitan people become the less they will identify with signifiers of localism as exemplified by the notion of the 'Beef Capital'. As paradoxical as it may seem, however, it was participants' very awareness of the wider social networks in which they were immersed that seemed to make the association of Rockhampton with some kind of distinguishing characteristic so important even if, in a further paradox, the particular signifier of distinctiveness associated with the city is one that is known to signify archaic rurality and conservatism to many 'outsiders'. For participants, however, the title of the 'Beef Capital' did not signify only those aspects of Rockhampton directly related to the beef industry. Trudy (mid-30s) explained her feelings towards the 'Beef Capital' label in this way:

It's home. I love Rocky. You hear people bagging it and carrying on. But ... to be honest with you, I love those [bull] statues ... I'm proud ... I like it being the 'Beef Capital', and I'd hate to see them take that away from us. ... We need a lot more industry to keep people here, and [allow] our young people to stay here so they don't have to go anywhere to get jobs and what have you. Not too many places have the Kershaw Gardens, the Botanical Gardens, the Crocodile Farm, the Dreamtime [Cultural Centre], the Caves ... beaches right along the coast. We are very very lucky.

Rockhampton was seen as a place with 'a lot going for it'; from wide, clean, tree-lined streets to friendly people and close proximity to the Great

Barrier Reef and a number of national parks. That the specific title – the ‘Beef Capital’ – did not refer specifically to any of these attributes was almost incidental as it came to signify them anyway for many research participants. This occurred both through the establishment of a unique identity which somehow encapsulated a multitude of attributes, and through the relationships that residents believed to exist between what the city is known for and how this supports a viable and vibrant regional economy and, in turn, their own lifestyles. The most obvious aspect of these relationships was perhaps the role of the beef industry in providing employment which, irrespective of whether participants were directly involved, was believed necessary to keep people in the city and to support other businesses. Of perhaps greater importance here though is the awareness research participants had of the ways in which Rockhampton was constructed by non-residents and, in particular, their awareness that Rockhampton was often constructed in quite negative terms as a hot, dry cultural backwater.

How do Rockhampton residents respond to such constructions? Participants stressed the opportunities that were opened up through the unique identity of the ‘Beef Capital’. While it was seen as problematic that negative perceptions based on ‘ignorance’ of the ‘true’ features of the area may reduce visitor numbers, it was also believed that the same unique features that led to stereotyping of the area could be used to draw people in through events such as Beef ’97. Indeed, participants were enthusiastic about almost any proposal that would promote increased flows of people through the city. From the perspective of many research participants it appeared almost immaterial what it was that was singled out as a signifier of what it was that made Rockhampton unique; about what it was that made Rockhampton a known and knowable ‘place’. This article will now turn more specifically to questions raised by the symbolic and material consumption of food in the ‘Beef Capital’, suggesting that for residents at least, meanings associated with place are very much on the menu.

Consuming the ‘Beef Capital’

Despite their belief that the food they ate could come from almost anywhere, research participants still raised the issue of place frequently in their discussion of food experiences and preferences. The area in which they lived was not merely a site at which food was bought, prepared, exchanged and ingested, but a source of food from which it was considered desirable to catch, grow or purchase as many of their requirements as possible. The ability to catch or grow their own highlighted at least one potential advantage of being spatially and temporally located somewhere in which this was possible. Fishing expeditions featured prominently among participants’ stories about memorable experiences with favourite foods; the ability to engage in such activities being clearly linked to, particularly male, participants’ senses

of self and place. Mostly, however, eating locally produced food meant buying locally produced food. This constraint rendered any clear sense of the spatial and temporal boundaries of the 'local' ambiguous, as participants were forced to rely on product labels or known and trusted suppliers. As illustrated in the earlier statement by Mary, knowing that food may have come from almost anywhere contributed to confusion about its source. It often became unclear when participants stated that they preferred to buy local produce whether they were talking about food produced in Rockhampton, Central Queensland, Queensland or Australia.

Preference for 'local' foods, however understood, is undoubtedly based to a degree in the desire of people to support their 'local' economy and thus, indirectly, themselves. It is also evident here, however, that the desire to buy 'local' is reflective of the relationships between the consumption of food and subjectivity, particularly in the context of risks to both embodied and symbolic aspects of the self. Beef provides a useful example here due to the contradiction between its close association with the identity of Rockhampton and its generic nature that means it may easily be sourced from elsewhere.

The most obvious way in which beef consumption may pose a risk to the self is in terms of its potential chemical or bacterial contamination. According to Australia's largest meat retailer – the Woolworths supermarket chain – food safety, not price, has become the prime concern for consumers of meat products (*The Land*, 21 August, 1997). While this view was certainly not shared by all participants in this research (as Trudy declared, 'it's what's left in your purse when you go through the checkout'), the safety of meat and other food products was a key concern. The mixed feelings that this created (see also Lupton, 1996) was related by a number of participants to the increasing 'distance' between producers and consumers associated with the industrialization of food production and processing. During their childhoods, for example, meat had been purchased from local butchers who had, in turn, purchased livestock from local farmers. Despite the presence of large abattoirs in the town all their lives, these participants expressed far greater confidence in the highly localized networks of production, processing, retailing and consumption they believed to have existed and the ability, if necessary, to trace products through them.

Visibility and familiarity were thus of some importance in helping participants resolve their concerns over food safety. Interestingly, the key feature of the contemporary food industry's response to food safety and quality concerns is the development of Quality Assurance programmes that trace products through every stage of the commodity chain from the point of production to the point of consumption (see Lockie, 1998). In contrast with the possibility in years gone by of purchasing from a highly localized commodity chain, however, sophisticated and 'scientized' monitoring and

record keeping have replaced 'local' knowledge. Such schemes ask consumers to disregard their own lack of knowledge and to place their trust in bureaucratic procedures put in place to monitor compliance with scientifically defined models of 'best-practice'. But the 'place' of production remains invisible and the product devoid of history or origin. One possible outcome of this situation is a rejection of the so-called scientific basis of Quality Assurance programmes and risk assessments. This was evident among the retired meat workers who participated in this study, all of whom were familiar with Quality Assurance programmes, but who believed nevertheless that food safety problems had worsened considerably at the very same time that slaughtering and processing practices were subject to ever increasing vigilance. According to Ken (71), prior to the introduction of a new industrial award in 1966 that saw a more mechanized system of slaughter and tightened safety practices:

There was more blow flies than you could poke a stick at. There was cats, rats. Rats used to breed in the freezer. ... And then in later years they brought in all this hygiene and that ruined the place. Because I maintain that the germ that was looking after the other germ, they cleaned him out. ... You go there now, you got to be like a doctor now when you go to work. Before you used to go there and there was one bloke never used to wash his clothes from when he started work to when he finished at the end of the season. And he used to go in in the morning and his trousers would be standing up and he could step in them, [standing up] in the fat and the blood and the grease. No such thing as hygiene, no. [But] nobody died.

The potential for rejection of 'scientized' Quality Assurance schemes is also evident in the growing domestic and international markets for organically (chemical-free) grown foods (Dumaresq and Greene, 1997; Hudson, 1996) – much of which rests on a rejection of high-input industrialized production processes (James, 1993) – and in the mistrust that a number of participants expressed in pre-prepared foods and the accuracy of labelling. According to Bill, 'the quality is not the same as what it was, because you don't know what you're eating this day with spray and stuff'. However, consistent with Fischler's (1988) argument referred to above, it was evident that while a number of participants were happy to simply purchase food from retail outlets they were confident provided high quality products, others were much more comfortable if they knew where these products were sourced, even if that source turned out to be from inter-state. At least they 'knew' what they were getting.

The importance of food maintaining a sense of place certainly did not provide participants with an imperative free of contradictions or dilemmas. By far the most telling was the perception that local beef was simply of poor quality. While there were a number of views expressed, the most common was the view that the drought and tick resistant *bos indicus* cattle bred in the tropics were simply too tough. Other participants believed that all

the high quality meat was exported, leaving only the leftovers for the local market. As a result, many participants stated that while they would prefer to buy local beef they would not. Instead, they favoured retailers and butchers who they knew 'imported' beef into the region from either southern Queensland or Victoria. While participants discussed the problem of locating high quality meat enthusiastically – swapping information on retailers, butchers and different processing and storage techniques – most were confident that they could buy meat that they were happy with most of the time. Of greater concern, again, was the image of Rockhampton. As Trudy stated:

We're living in Rockhampton, [which] is supposed to be the 'Beef Capital' – so it would be nice to be able to enjoy the meat – but also it's embarrassing ... not getting good quality when everywhere you look there's bulls.

This view was shared even by the Chairman of Beef 2000 who declared more recently that he 'felt ashamed to come from the Beef Capital of Australia and not get a good piece of meat' at a major Beef '97 event, the Beef Ball (*The Morning Bulletin*, 6 February 1999: 2). Research participants may have been, on the whole, happy to ignore the negative perceptions that many 'outsiders' had of the 'Beef Capital' identity, but ranged from defensiveness through anger over the local quality issue.

Conclusion

The act of ingestion is central to the relationship between food and subjectivity, but we do not need to put bovine concrete, or flesh, in our mouths to consume those meanings associated with the 'Beef Capital'. To many residents of Rockhampton, the notion of the 'Beef Capital' represented an assertion of local identity and specificity in a global environment in which the accelerating movement of goods, services, information and people both exposed and threatened such specificity. Potential contradictions between a civic identity based on (what to many would be) symbols of conservatism and backwardness, and self-identities that were rather more cosmopolitan, were acknowledged, but seen as less important than the opportunity to promote the City provided by this identity. Despite embarrassment over the quality of meat available locally, it seemed almost incidental that no *appellation d'origine* could be associated with Rockhampton's beef once it left the region. To these residents, Rockhampton's bulls were symbolic of almost everything positive to do with the 'place' in which they lived. But it is also clear that the views of participants are not representative of all Rockhampton residents. Indeed, analysis of the data generated through this research with a clearer focus on the domestic economy of food preparation and consumption reveals a good deal of merit in the Fruit Collective's reading of the symbolic masculinism of the 'bull' and its implicit homophobia, ethnocentrism and sexism (see Lockie and Collie, 1999).

The point here is neither to celebrate nor deconstruct the self-identities of research participants but to begin the task of examining the embedding of geographical knowledges in food practices. Clearly, the construction of 'place' as cosmopolitan and sophisticated via acts of food consumption is not solely a metropolitan phenomenon. What was perhaps more interesting though was the detailed knowledge participants collectively demonstrated both of the conditions and relations of production of the food they consumed themselves, and of the visual and gustatory consumption of Rockhampton by 'outsiders'. Geographical knowledges in the form of the meanings of place evoked by food consumption did not obscure entirely knowledges of the origins of that food, but created contradictory imperatives with which participants were confronted. While it is possible that the proximity of participants to sites of production – both spatially and professionally – rendered the origins of food more visible, it is also likely that the contradictions that they knowingly encountered between preferences for locally produced foods on the one hand, and diversity and quality on the other, are shared more widely. It is also likely that participants' constructions of issues such as food safety and health are widely shared. Are, however, the positive meanings associated by participants with the idea of the 'Beef Capital' so likely to be widely shared? Awareness that the civic identity of the 'Beef Capital' may have lacked the cultural capital of well known *appellations d'origine* again aroused contradictory responses, but in what participants perceived to be a 'shrinking world', it seemed that in the end it was more important for a 'place' to be known for something than not to be known at all.

Notes

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- 1 It is important to note that while these methods allowed exploration of the theoretical issues guiding this research and the construction of an ethnographic account addressing these issues, they were certainly not suitable for the construction of a comprehensive ethnography of food practices in Rockhampton. It is also important to note that due to the small number, and relative homogeneity, of people involved, no attempts are made to generalize from these participants to the wider population of Rockhampton.
- 2 This reading of the symbolism of meat is also consistent with a number of ethnographic studies into the cultural aspects of meat consumption. Broadly speaking, within the Western societies meat is symbolic of virility, strength, aggressiveness, power, status, lustfulness, energy and health, while vegetables are symbolic of 'purity, passiveness, cleanliness, femininity, weakness and idealism' (Lupton, 1996: 28; see also Fiddes, 1991; Beardsworth and Keil, 1997).

- 3 Particularly where, as here, only small samples have been taken or where methods are used that potentially encourage participants to reach consensus so as to avoid disagreement and conflict.
- 4 Pseudonyms have been used to conceal the identities of the participants.

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