“FARM TRUCKS, NOT SEMIS”:
A FARM-TO-TABLE IMAGINARY AND THE WORLD OF ITS PRODUCTION

by

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Part I: Introduction

In September of 2013, the fast food chain Chipotle released a short animated video entitled “The Scarecrow.” A frightening depiction of animal welfare abuses and environmental degradation associated with modern food production, the film follows a scarecrow worker at a company called Crow Foods, Inc. The very premise of the video cultivates a sense of unease in the viewer; after all, something must be amiss in this world where scarecrows are ruled by crow masters! The video invites the viewer to follow the scarecrow through a door in a mural depicting a romanticized farm into a dark factory, where he is whisked off by a massive conveyor belt. Part of the scarecrow’s job, apparently, is to fix the cracking exterior of the factory displaying idealized farm and livestock-raising images. Behind each askew panel is a factory-farming nightmare: when the scarecrow peeks between the boards proclaiming “all natural” chicken production, he spies machines injecting a chicken with a mystery growth hormone-like substance that causes it to immediately double in size. Likewise, hidden behind an unhinged panel of a happy dairy cow statue the scarecrow finds stacks of cows confined in metal boxes, milked by rapidly-pumping machines. Whenever the scarecrow’s conscience gives him pause, a mechanical crow harasses him into continued complicity. After work, the scarecrow leaves the city, passing by a billboard boasting the Green Revolution promise of “Feeding the World” amidst giant oil drill-like metal crows in a corn-stubbled, deforested agricultural landscape.

Images A & B: In Chipotle’s ad “The Scarecrow,” scarecrow workers are ruled by crow masters as they patch the crumbling façade of Crow Industries’ factory. Image credit Chipotle Mexican Grill.

Images C & D: Behind the façade lie factory farming nightmares. Image credit Chipotle Mexican Grill.

The video is a haunting depiction of modernity at its most disconcerting, painting an unsavory portrait of disparities between the claims of Crow Foods, Inc. (“All Natural,” “100% Beef-ish,” and “Feeding the World”) and hidden realities of animal abuse, environmental degradation, and disillusioned, guilt-wracked workers. But, Chipotle suggests, all is not lost yet. The scarecrow returns home to his farm, a patch of oasis in a ravaged landscape, and is struck by inspiration after seeing a red pepper ripe on the vine (as nature intended, we infer). He gathers wooden crates of fresh produce in the bed of his rickety pickup truck and heads into the city, where he sets up a taco stand in an alleyway under the banner “Cultivate a Better World.” Ultimately, the scarecrow succeeds in shooing away the squawking mechanical crow, creating a sense of hope that a more "natural" order could (and must) be restored in the food system. By supporting this “ethical farmer” through consuming food produced in a more natural way, the ad suggests, we can participate in a less troubling and alienated relationship with food.
Images E & F: The local farm as last bastion of natural food production in a devastated agricultural landscape, and inspiration for solving the problems of industrial food production. Image credit Chipotle Mexican Grill.


Within a month, the three-minute video had surpassed 6.8 million views on YouTube. That Chipotle’s ad could immediately “go viral” hints at the resonating power of a vision of finding meaning in “local food” as the faults of our modern food system are made increasingly visible. This video, ironically produced by a fast food chain with 1,500 restaurants nationwide staffed by over 37,000 non-unionized employees, draws on a decades-old farm-to-table restaurant imaginary emerging out of the intersection of changing culinary norms and 1960s and 70s environmentalism in the United States. It is also self-conscientiously modeling itself after fine-dining restaurants, which have increasingly incorporated farm names and normative noun-moderators (for example, “local,” “organic,” “natural” and “family-farmed”) on menus. Chipotle sources “ingredients that are grown or

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2 As Chipotle’s annual report from 2012 offers: “Our vision is to change the way people think about and eat fast food. We do this by avoiding a formulaic approach when creating our restaurant experience, looking to fine-dining restaurants for inspiration (my emphasis). We use
raised with respect for the environment, animals and people who grow or raise the food,” which they claim to accomplish through purchasing at least some locally-produced food, defined by Chipotle as within 350 miles of a particular restaurant location.³

Chipotle’s video is a successful depiction of American eaters’ anxiety about modern food production, reflecting a discomfort with industrial farming. In his influential book *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, journalist Michael Pollan sums up the industrial food system thus:

> Considered as a whole this system comprises a great machine, transforming inputs of seed and fossil energy into outputs of carbohydrate and protein. And, as with any machine, this one generates streams of waste: the nitrogen and pesticides running off the cornfields; the manure pooling in the feedlot lagoons; the heat and exhaust produced by all the machines within the machine—the tractors and trucks and combines.⁴

In its video, Chipotle builds a farm-to-table imaginary, a counterpoint to the industrial images offered by Pollan; one that suggests that a better world can be cultivated by dining at restaurants purchasing foods in a more humane and environmentally responsible manner.

This particular farm-to-table imaginary Chipotle is appealing, seemingly offering a way out of complicity with massive problems of the globalized food system widely discussed by popular media, activists, farmers, and chefs nationwide.

The farm-to-table geographical imaginaries that Chipotle has employed in its advertisement campaign are not confined to the digital realm; typically they are emplaced, produced by the many different actors involved in the production, circulation, and high-quality raw ingredients, classic cooking methods and a distinctive interior design and have friendly people to take care of each customer—features that are more frequently found in the world of fine dining.” Chipotle Annual Report 2012. Available: [http://ir.chipotle.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=194775&p=irol-reportsAnnual](http://ir.chipotle.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=194775&p=irol-reportsAnnual). Accessed October 16, 2013.

³ Chipotle 2012. By this definition, onions grown in Rockford, Illinois could be considered “locally purchased” by a Chipotle restaurant in Minneapolis, two states away.

consumption of “local food.” In Chipotle’s video, the scarecrow stands in for all farm-to-table actors. In the public imagination and popular literature, the visible actors are the discerning chef and the ethical farmer. However, within the world of farm-to-table geographic imaginaries, the range of actors involves a much wider cast of characters including food producers, farm laborers, processors, chefs, cooks, food purchasers, dishwashers, servers, and consumers, among others. These imaginaries produce and deploy geographic knowledges even as they materialize in the ways they shape relationships, sediment different types of knowledge about food, and articulate with farming practices. After all, imaginaries don’t just represent; they affect and move.

In current popular geographic imaginaries of food, ecological harms associated with modern agricultural production are all too often shrugged off as externalities, and social injustices are seen as simply the result of disembodied market processes. Farm-to-table imaginaries, on the other hand, encompass and are attentive to the places and people that produce and transform food, and an appreciation for qualities antithetical to the modern industrial food system. Although farm-to-table imaginaries may not be scalable to the national or global levels, and are all too often blind to the class dynamics they participate in and shape, I argue that they nonetheless create possibilities for changing social understandings of and relationships to food that deserve scholarly investigation.

This master’s thesis delves into the world of farm-to-table relationships in Madison, Wisconsin, to explore the production of one such geographical imaginary with attentiveness

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to the lived realities (intentionality, values, and participatory strategies) of those participating in it. This thesis gives shape to the world of farm-to-table restaurant sourcing in Madison. Part one introduces Madison’s local food movement, including an overview of key features of farms and farmers that participate in farm-to-table imaginaries. Part two explores the interstitial spaces between farm and restaurant, describing the lived realities of the participants in farm-to-table geographic imaginaries utilizing the framework of a socially-embedded market. Although restaurants are often a small slice of the pie that enables the production of “local food” in terms of overall purchases, the creation of geographic imaginaries surrounding local food involves complicated interpersonal histories and politics. These relationships result in different social relations between farmers and restaurant purchasers, as well as unique farm ecologies as farmers collaborate with restaurants to cultivate particular plant varieties, raise rare or specialty breeds of livestock, and develop new products. Part three shifts focus from farm to table, to explore the ways in which geographic imaginaries are produced and reproduced by participants, and consumers come to be enrolled in the imaginary. Finally, the concluding section warns of the limitations of a farm-to-table imaginary, sketching out problems within the edges of its vision, and the shadows beyond.

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Farm-to-table restaurants are a small part of a broader contemporary food movement that has attempted to re-embed food systems within locales and create closer connections between producers and consumers in the context of vast, globalized industrial food chains. This movement “links the production and consumption of food to personal, planetary and economic health… rooted in a critique of industrial agriculture as ecologically, socially, and economically destructive.”

Sociologist Thomas Lyson calls these direct marketing strategies by farmers expressions of “civic agriculture,” differentiated from “commodity agriculture” through their tight linkages to the communities in which they are embedded. The markets they participate in are, like all markets, thoroughly social and “infused with cultural norms and meaning;” in this case, however, the closer ties between producers and consumers creates an economic context “suffused with social ties.”

Sociologist Jack Kloppenburg lauds local food systems as anti-corporate and anti-global, supporting the creation of “foodsheds” that allow us “to ground ourselves in the biological and social realities of living on the land and from the land in a place that we can call home.”

Although the “foodshed” concept suggests a natural landscape, scholars remind us that “local food” is largely an urban construction. In California, Richard Walker found that changes in restaurant sourcing due to the adoption of California cuisine entailed alterations in farm supply chains close to cities as markets for fresh produce, organics, luxuries and

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10 Hinrichs, 2000.
exotic crops increased beginning in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{12} DuPuis, Goodman and Harrison argue that the dichotomization of the city and the country (and therefore consumption and production) has obscured urban influences on food politics, calling for a reconceptualization of local food systems as “products of political relationships that cross categories of economy and identity.”\textsuperscript{13} Likewise, Blay-Palmer and Donald argue that food studies needs to be relocated from a traditionally rural focus to the “city-region” context, and that the “new food economy” should be seen as a realistic and innovative way to effect change in the agri-food system.\textsuperscript{14} Lucy Jarosz brings alternative food networks directly into conversation with urbanism, arguing that urbanization and rural restructuring are processes critical to the formation of these new food networks.\textsuperscript{15}

This literature on ‘urbanizing’ local food is part of a vast body of critical geographical and sociological agri-food scholarship, much of which has focused on calling attention to the more socially pernicious elements of the local food movement.\textsuperscript{16} Julie Guthman warns that the food movement partakes in a discourse of neoliberal governmentality that “encourages subjects to make few demands on the state but rather to act through the market,” which has “circumscribed the politics of the possible to that which can be obtained through ‘voting

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} E. Melanie DuPuis, David Goodman, and Jill Harrison. “Just Values or Just Value?: Remaking the Local in Agro-Food Studies,” in Terry Marsden and Jonathan Murdoch, eds., \textit{Between the Local and the Global: Confronting Complexity in the Contemporary Agri-Food Sector}, (Oxford: Elsevier, 2007).
\item \textsuperscript{15} Lucy Jarosz, “The City in the Country: Growing Alternative Food Networks in Metropolitan Areas,” \textit{Journal of Rural Studies} 24 (2008).
\end{itemize}
with your dollars.” Additionally, by constructing food with certain qualities as conscientious, reflexive and otherwise “good,” scholars have pointed out that local food movement participants inadvertently demonize those who are alienated by the white spaces of local food, its labor requirements, and high price tag, among other qualities. In other words, the food movement has the potential to reinforce class privilege by contributing to the production of “a segregated food system where ‘ethical’ eaters are understood as affluent, responsible, and knowledgeable, leaving those with less economic and cultural capital to shop in less prestigious, less desirable, and less ‘ethical’ food system niches.”

This scholarship suggests that efforts to create more direct relationships and community through local food often fall far short of their own goals, perhaps even undermining them. Although Community Supported Agriculture endeavors, farm-to-institution projects, farmers' markets and other direct-marketing endeavors move closer to the decommodification of food, scholars note that they remain rooted in commodity relations and market-based social behavior. These efforts are therefore seen as having limited ability to build community. Likewise, scholars have demonstrated the limitations and dangers of consumer-based approaches to affect change in the food system. The ethical consumer rhetoric of “voting with one’s dollar” demonstrates the inherent (and unequal) tensions between citizenship and consumerism. Alison Hope Alkon’s Black, White and Green: Farmers Markets, Race and the Green Economy examines farmers markets through the

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22 For example, Johnston 2008; Alkon 2012.
framework of what she terms the “green economy,” defined as “a set of relations and practices in which the production and consumption of goods becomes a strategy toward environmental and social change.”\(^{23}\) Despite its rhetoric, these scholars argue that the green economy and consumerism in general offer little potential for collective political and social change in the food system.\(^{24}\)

The threat of co-optation of alternative food movements by the industrial food system is, additionally, a consistent and divisive thread in the agro-food studies literature. The complex interplay of food movements and corporate practices has been demonstrated at length.\(^{25}\) Meanwhile, a practical literature encouraging the movement of “alternative” food through conventional distribution systems is at odds with scholars hoping for more radically emancipatory change in the food system that remakes social relations alongside ecological practices.\(^{26}\) Harriet Friedmann argues that we are currently in the grips of a corporate-environmental food regime that has appropriated the efforts of social movements to facilitate renewed capital accumulation; from this perspective, there are no “alternatives.”\(^{27}\)

At the heart of many of the debates in the current agro-food literature are questions of reform and scale; specifically, an interrogation of “the local” as a site of reform.\(^{28}\)


\(^{25}\) For example, Guthman 2004, Belasco 2006.


discussing the limitations of localism in the food movement, Allen quotes David Harvey to say that knowledge garnered at small scales is “insufficient to understand broader socio-ecological processes occurring at scales that cannot be directly experienced and which are therefore outside of phenomenological reach.” The local is therefore questioned in its usefulness as a site of knowledge as well as a site of change. An exchange between Allen, Guthman, Kloppenburg and Hassanein published in *Agriculture and Human Values* in 2006 is illustrative of the debates in the literature regarding the appropriate realm for reform in the food system. Allen and Guthman argued that Farm-to-School (FTS) programs “in their efforts to fill in the gaps created by political and economic neoliberalization and by employing its rhetoric…are essentially producing neoliberal forms and practices de novo.”

In their response, Kloppenburg and Hassanein argue that “Allen and Guthman see local FTS initiatives as impotent tools of neoliberalism. We see new opportunities to create innovative practices and policies in the social and political and economic spaces that have opened up at the local level.”

From this perspective, one might expect restaurants to feature regularly in agri-food literature as among the worst of offenders. Indeed, geographer Julie Guthman argues that restaurateurs, not consumers or producers, were a driving force in establishing organic food as gourmet—starting at one restaurant in particular. For adding the prefix “organic” to the term *mesclun* on the menu of her nationally-renowned Berkeley restaurant Chez Panisse, Guthman claims that restaurateur Alice Waters “unintentionally, institutionalized a certain

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30 Allen and Guthman 2006.
31 Jack Kloppenburg and Neva Hassanein, “From Old School to Reform School?,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 23 (2006).
set of meanings for organic.” To meet restaurants’ standards, salad mix had to be attractive—and they would pay a pretty penny to ensure the highest quality. Thus, “organic shed the image of the twisted stunted carrot showing up at the local food-co-op to the splendid display of mesclun on the chef’s dish.” It also became “a precious commodity” that could fetch high prices, particularly for the delicate washed, dried and bagged product that required substantial capitalization on the part of growers and painstaking labor from workers. As Inwood et al. has pointed out, restaurants’ participation in local food systems “does not necessarily align them with the ecological and social justice themes of the broader alternative agri-food movement.”

Yet, with the exception of Guthman and a few others, on the topic of restaurants the agri-food literature remains surprisingly silent. Despite the participation of restaurants in food systems at scales ranging from local to global, restaurants have yet to be appreciated by scholars as important agri-food players. Even the alternative agri-food literature, much of which engages with the direct-market outlets of CSAs, farm-to-school, and farmers’ markets, encompasses little research focused on the role of restaurants as an important part of the diverse marketplace making “local food” possible. This dearth of literature is particularly troubling because so-called farm-to-table restaurants play crucial roles in the formation of geographic imaginaries about local food; imaginaries that have become powerful enough for cooptation by an industry they were initially deployed to oppose.

I argue that restaurants’ longstanding engagement with local food and the recent burgeoning of farm-to-table restaurants warrants a careful examination of the ways in which

33 The Provençal word mesclun refers to a salad mixture of lettuces and edible leaves. Guthman, 2003.
34 Ibid.
35 Inwood et al., 2009.
they have participated in food movements, and the politics therein. Farm-to-table restaurants are particularly illustrative of socio-ecological relations and urban ideas about the rural countryside. Examined closely, locally-sourcing restaurants become more than simply articulations of the green economy and sites of green consumerism; they are also complex spaces of knowledge production of local food at the intersection of rural and urban that have transformative potential, warranting further study in their own right. Environmental historians, cultural geographers, and environmental sociologists have the tools to begin this work. What is missing is the conversation among them regarding food and restaurants, specifically. Bringing together insights from environmental history, cultural geography, and environmental sociology can help us to think carefully about restaurants as spaces where labor transforms agricultural products into foods infused with social and cultural meaning, and where ways of relating to food are continually produced.36

From environmental historians, we know that food is itself a rich and complex object of study that bridges the gap between the material and the symbolic; in the eloquent words of historian Douglas Cazaux Sackman, it is “the stuff of identity, the material world metastized and turned into meaning.”37 Over the past decade, a growing body of environmental historical literature has seized upon food eclectically, drawing on rich examples to demonstrate the cultural meanings and ecological implications associated with different foods. This is a relatively new tack for environmental historians, since the field has traditionally examined places of production, focusing on “growing, catching and harvesting

things” rather than their consumption. 38 These food-focused environmental historians have demonstrated the fruitfulness of using food to expand understandings of the environment to new frontiers, including the human body, and to explore the many ways that our ideas about the food we eat have the power to rework the world around (and inside) us in numerous, often unexpected, ways. 39

The work of cultural geographers and environmental sociologists supports these claims, and helps to provide mechanisms through which these transformations occur. For example, environmental sociologists Stiles et al. claim that we are moved by ‘ghosts of taste’ that conjure presences in food, making (political) claims of appropriate social relations. 40 These ghosts, symbolic connections between people and food, include “faces and places of relationality,” revealing themselves “in the ways we perceive the quality or taste of food.” 41 Similarly, geographers Ian Cook and Mike Crang argue that food does not “simply come from places, organically growing out of them, but also make[s] places as symbolic constructs, being deployed in the discursive construction of various imaginative geographies.” 42 This is accomplished, in part, through what Cook and Crang (following Marx) term a “double commodity fetishism” that simultaneously limits knowledge about its disparate places of production and creates the impulse to “re-enchant” foods by differentiating them through geographical knowledge. 43 In Chipotle’s video, for example, the disconnect between Crow Industries’ advertisements of bucolic farm production and the realities of their factory-

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38 Nicolaas Mink, “It Begins in the Belly,” Environmental History 14 (2009). Indeed, environmental historians have had much to say about the transformational effects of agriculture on landscapes; see Cronon 1983; Cronon 1992; Feige 1999
39 See for example, Nancy Shoemaker, 2005; Cindy Ott, 2012; and John Soluri, 2005.
41 Stiles et al., 226.
42 Cook and Crang, 1996.
43 Cook and Crang 1996.
farming animal welfare and environmental abuses represents the filling of a vacuum of meaning formed by the displacement of commodities from places of production to those of consumption through representational politics (for example, through ads, billboards and labels used to sell them).\textsuperscript{44}

Taking food as a point of departure gives us good reason to put restaurants on the table as an object of study, since restaurants are key spaces in which agriculture becomes food. Sharpening our gaze on restaurants, then, invites us to rethink dining at a restaurant as more than simple consumption of a product, to consider the imaginaries about food into which we are enrolled in order to ask how food moves us, in what ways, and to what ends. So-called farm-to-table restaurants, in particular, are especially fruitful sites of examination for illuminating possibilities of (and limitations to) constructing different imaginaries surrounding food. In these restaurants, food itself is more than the object onto which imaginaries are projected—it is itself part of the claims offered by farm-to-table restaurants, playing an important role in the formation of food subjects, and the “training” of different kinds of consumers. The world of these imaginaries has complicated social and ecological relations embedded within it; relations that are only partially presented by the imaginary. Bringing together literatures from sociology, geography, and environmental history can begin to illuminate the processes and relations through which agricultural products become “local food,” and by which farm-to-table imaginaries affect consumers, enrolling them into the imaginary and forming what geographers Allison and Jessica Hayes-Conroy call a “visceral politics.”\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{44} Cook and Crang 1996.

The Imaginary: a Brief Genealogy

Up to this point, I have been using “imaginary” without providing an explanation or (indeed) a thorough definition of the concept and its usage in geography. While the concept of a geographic imaginary can be defined in the simplest sense as a “taken-for-granted spatial ordering of the world,” its usage as a human geography concept has a long and complicated intellectual history that deserves more thorough treatment. In this final section of my literature review, I will sketch out a brief genealogy of the term to reveal its complicated history and better situate my work within a larger geographic literature.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* reveals a broad outline of the word’s long history in the English language. As an adjective, the etymology of “imaginary” stems from the Latin *imaginarius*, meaning in the first instance unreal, fictitious, or pretended. As a noun, the term first appeared in the 4th century to indicate a Roman standard-bearer, an officer tasked with carrying the emperor’s image. In the late 16th century, the term came to indicate something imagined. It is in the mid-20th century, however, that “imaginary” came to be redefined in the sense in which geographers use the concept today.

As a way of describing a crucial structuring part of the unconscious, “the imaginary” appeared in psychological and psychoanalytic literature from which it was brought into the social sciences and humanities. As conceived of by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in the 1950s, the imaginary was one of three orders (alongside the symbolic and the real) situating subjective experiences in dialogue with perception and an external world. While the

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symbolic according to Lacan consisted of a world of signifiers and the real was that which cannot be symbolized, the imaginary was the internalized image formed between the self and the symbolic.\footnote{Dylan Evans, \textit{An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis}, (New York: Routledge, 1996). A useful overview can also be found at the University of Chicago's Theories of Media keywords glossary, “symbolic, real, imaginary.” Available: http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/symbolicrealimaginary.htm.} An understanding of “the imaginary” defined loosely along these lines circulated in French intellectual circles, discussed in Bachelard’s \textit{Air and Dreams} and Sartre’s \textit{The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination}, among other influential works. The concept, accordingly, made its way into geography through multiple intellectual strands, including through followers of the works of French philosopher Henri LeFebvre.

LeFebvre’s spatialization of “the imaginary” in his text, \textit{The Production of Space}, proved foundational to future geographic work. According to LeFebvre,

> There is thus a sense in which the existence of absolute space is purely mental, and hence 'imaginary'. In another sense, however, it also has a social existence, and hence a specific and powerful 'reality'. The 'mental' is 'realized' in a chain of 'social' activities because, in the temple, in the city, in monuments and palaces, the imaginary is transformed into the real.\footnote{Henri LeFebvre, \textit{The Production of Space}. (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1974; reprint, Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 251. English translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith.}

As LeFebvre suggests, imaginaries are more than just representations, since they are materially implicated through a process of ‘worlding.’ Following LeFebvrian understanding of the imaginary, Ed Soja, David Harvey and others brought the concept firmly into the geographical lexicon. Later geographic works, such as Derek Gregory’s \textit{Geographical Imaginations}, have built on understandings of the concept and more firmly established it in the geographic lexicon.\footnote{Derek Gregory, \textit{Geographical Imaginations} (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1994).} In this thesis, I mobilize the concept of geographical imaginaries as a tool to explain how ideas about food and its origins come to be formulated, understood,
and shared.

**Positionality and Methods**

It should be mentioned that many of the scholars most critical of the local food movement are themselves participants in it. Sociologist and green economy critic Alison Hope Alkon writes of ‘letting her hair down’ at the North Berkeley farmers market, where she is a frequent marketgoer. Geographer Julie Guthman, who has critiqued the local food movement at length, writes that she is “one of those annoying San Francisco Bay Areafoodies who shop at the farmers market once, twice or sometimes thrice a week and get[s] very excited about the deep yellow hues of egg yolks from pasture-raised hens.” Although for Guthman the food movement provides an opportunity to ‘opt out’ rather than an avenue for structural change in the food system, it’s worth noting that she does in fact opt out.

Like Alkon and Guthman, I did not come to my studies of the local food movement (nor restaurants’ involvement in it) as an impartial observer. Two years prior to entering graduate school, I chanced across an ad for a waitstaff support position at L’Etoile Restaurant in Madison, Wisconsin, where I planned to move after graduating college in a few months. L’Etoile, a nationally-recognized farm-to-table restaurant, was founded in 1976 by a back-to-the-land, subsistence farmer turned chef named Odessa Piper. From the early days of the restaurant, Piper’s sourcing practices aspired to be regional and anti-industrial.

By that point, I had already fallen in love with food—the thing itself (caramelized cauliflower roasted in the oven and brushed simply with olive oil and salt, the warm explosion of flavor encapsulated within the taut skin of a vine-ripened cherry tomato), but

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51 Alkon, 2012.
52 Guthman, 2011.
also the ways food could connect you to so many things beyond your plate. I found myself
drawn to the idea that eating in an environmentally sustainable and socially just way could be
pleasurable. This idea came directly from Berkeley restaurateur Alice Waters, as food writer
Ruth Reichl conveyed so eloquently in her description of Waters’ restaurant Chez Panisse:

The restaurant stood for pure products, small farms, and sustainable agriculture, and
we went there because it was a place where you could eat fabulously without feeling
apologetic. Their food was grown by people who cared for the earth and served by
people who cared for one another.54

This idea, echoed by Slow Food’s call for “good, clean, fair food,” was to have
tangible impacts on my life, both immediate and long-lasting. Twenty pounds gained before
graduation, for one; years of working nights, weekends and holidays when friends and family
relaxed and celebrated; but also the growing draw of places and people concerned about the
connections between farming, cooking, and social change.

My first night at L’Etoile, I was reserved and watchful and truly astonished by the
intricate dance that is service in a fine dining restaurant. I found myself in awe not only of
the carefully sculpted plates of food, but also the intensity that each employee brought to his
or her job, taking seriously everything from polishing candle-holders to laying tiny hickory
nuts on individual crackers. Over the next several years, I tasked myself with learning as
much as I could while navigating the shifting, often-contradictory expectations of restaurant
customers, cooks, and fellow waitstaff.

Although Odessa Piper sold L’Etoile in 2005, its sourcing philosophy has remained
in place even as the farm-to-table concept has gone nationwide. One year after my arrival,
the restaurant moved to a new, larger location where its farm-to-table values became
inscribed in the physical space of the restaurant itself. A bar designed to look like an old silo

54 Ruth Reichl, *Comfort Me with Apples: More Adventures at the Table* (Random House Trade
topped with polished black concrete lay at the center of the restaurant’s white-tablecloth landscape, and a sliding “barn door” made of copper demarcated the entrance, though the menu prices formed the more substantial barrier to entry.

At L’Etoile, I was able to gain a participatory perspective on farm-to-table practices. The restaurants’ employees knew many of the restaurant’s producers by name, and had visited a number of their farms on periodic “field trips” throughout the region. As I traced products moving through the loading dock, transformed in the kitchen, and placed ceremoniously at the table, it became clear that those of us working at the restaurant were selling a good deal more than food—we were peddling an experience of local food and reflecting an ethos that one should pay for the things one cares about. The farm-to-table discourse I was participating in (and creating) rested heavily on the idea of close-knit relationships between the chefs and environmentally responsible farmers from whom they purchased ingredients.

I was fascinated from the beginning to know more about the dynamics and politics of L’Etoile’s supply chains. At the same time, I got to know these farmers, and grew to care for and consider many of them friends. I watched a beef farmer increase his herd size to accommodate the restaurant’s growth; I saw the chef bail out a long-term supplier that was unable to make it to market that week due to mechanical trouble. These were the success stories, the ones that fit within a larger discourse of farm-to-table restaurants as supporting hardworking, environmentally sustainable local farmers. I knew how L’Etoile experienced its relationships with farmers and how these relationships were conveyed to the staff and at times to customers, but I wondered how farmers had experienced their interactions with L’Etoile and other locally-sourcing restaurants in Madison. What did this market mean to them? How did they navigate the limitations, challenges and opportunities afforded by
working with restaurants? How, in other words, had farmers experienced the involvement of restaurants in the local food movement?

This master’s thesis represents an attempt to answer these questions—to examine the role of restaurants in the local food movement at close range, to understand the significance of my own participation in farm-to-table restaurant sourcing, and to parse out some of the politics of “local food” through an exploration of relationships between farmers and restaurants. Research for this thesis entailed twenty interviews with twenty-two participants in farm-restaurant relationships during the summer and fall of 2012. Four of these were purveyors (three chefs and one “forager”) at three locally-sourcing Madison restaurants, and seventeen were farmers who reported selling products to Madison-area restaurants. Several of these were producers whom I had met previously who indicated interest in my research; a handful I approached at the Dane County Farmers’ Market; and most I identified through the REAP (Research, Education, Action and Policy on) Food Group’s 2012 Southern Wisconsin Farm-Fresh Atlas. The remaining participants were found through a snowball method as those I spoke with suggested key individuals they believed I needed to include in my research. Interviews were semi-structured that followed a flexible schedule, ranged from twenty minutes to two hours in length, and took place in a location of the participants’ choosing. Interview recordings were transcribed and qualitatively coded.

55 Each farm listed in the Farm-Fresh Atlas participates in a “Sustainability Pledge” whereby they claim to be “family or cooperatively owned, committed to reducing the application of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, treating animals with care, respect and access to outdoors; protecting land and water resources; providing safe and fair working conditions; selling Wisconsin products they have grown on their farm or helped produce.” REAP Food Group. “2012 Southern Wisconsin Farm Fresh Atlas: Your guide to local food and the people who bring it to our tables.” Available: [www.farmfreshatlas.org](http://www.farmfreshatlas.org).
Although these interviews form the bulk of evidence for the claims laid out in this thesis, my research was informed in crucial ways by my continued work at L'Etoile. From the beginning, I was equally committed to participating in and observing restaurants’ involvement in the local food movement. To foreground the ways my experiences at L'Etoile informed my work, I’ve interspersed personal narrative throughout the thesis. As social scientists have long known, there are innumerable challenges involved in studying a community in which you consider yourself a member as well as a scholar. My own ties to L'Etoile opened some doors that might otherwise have been closed in my research; it constrained others and most certainly changed the questions that I asked of my research participants and the responses they gave me. My research certainly cannot be held apart from my own positionality, with the complicated and at times contradictory subjectivity it entails.
Part 2: Farm-to-Table Roots

Background

We try to support local as much as we can, so what we’re doing is basically just forming relationships… Instead of having a one truck restaurant, having—We have, you know, probably around a hundred purveyors that we get all of our produce from.—Madison farm-to-table restaurant purchaser

The twentieth century marked a revolution in eating practices as Americans began to purchase meals prepared outside of the home in record numbers. Prior to this period, eating publicly in coffee houses, tavern, and hotels remained a rare event, reserved for those kept away from home by work or travel; at the end of the century the average American family ate over nine meals each week outside of the home.

Accordingly, the restaurant industry has grown to employ over 11 million people and half of all adults have worked in a restaurant at some time in their lives. Restaurants have become, as anthropologist Amy Trubek suggests, our “second kitchens.”

To facilitate these changes, semi trucks rather than farm trucks became the norm in restaurant distribution across the United States and beyond in the second half of the twentieth century, attached to globalized networks of foodservice distribution commodity chains. Restaurant purchasers now have the opportunity to source all of their ingredients (not to mention dry goods and everything from mops to salt and pepper shakers) from a single distributor. The advent of these modern foodservice distribution channels vastly (and rapidly) simplified networks of relationships that food purchasers, like chefs, required to

56 Interview 12.02
source ingredients.\textsuperscript{60} Despite the ease of sourcing far-flung products from foodservice distributors, restaurants have increasingly highlighted the locality of products featured on their menus.\textsuperscript{61}

Although there were a number of local-sourcing “pioneers” from numerous regions in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, one restaurant in particular is regularly credited with launching the nationwide farm-to-table sourcing trend. Michael Pollan writes, “Chez Panisse was the first to share bylines—pride of ownership—with the men and women who grow the food, recognizing that many of them are as gifted as any who have passed through the fabled kitchen.”\textsuperscript{62} Chez Panisse has indeed trained countless cooks and chefs who have gone on to open their own restaurants, often in the San Francisco Bay Area, espousing a farm-to-table ethos. One such chef, Russell Moore, wrote “Chez Panisse’s most far-reaching contribution to the restaurant world is raising a generation of cooks who don’t know another way of buying produce except directly from farmers.”\textsuperscript{63} In a 2007 article in Agriculture and Human Values, Inwood et al. conceive of this spreading of the adoption of local food sourcing in the culinary world as a “diffusion of innovation” in which Alice

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{60} The consolidation of purchasing from many to a handful of purveyors happened quite rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1968, for example, the Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly reported that restaurants still placed on average a massive 710 phone calls to 80 wholesalers and accepted 607 deliveries to procure food for just one month. By 1972, however, the sales of the top three food distributors had nearly tripled and the number of calls and deliveries began a precipitous decline. William J. Paternotte, “Supplying the Food Service Industry,” \textit{Financial Analysts Journal} \textbf{29}:6 (1973), 56.

\textsuperscript{61} One 2006 survey of Kentucky restaurants, for example, revealed that over fifty percent of respondents advertised themselves as locally sourcing. Tim Woods and Jeffrey Herrington, “2006 Kentucky Restaurant Produce Buyer Survey,” \textit{Department of Agricultural Economics} (2008). \\
\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Ibid} \\
\textsuperscript{63} Moore, 143.
\end{footnotesize}
Waters was a key “innovator” of local sourcing. Waters’ interpretation of Chez Panisse’s influence, however, takes its role a step further, describing its adoption of local sourcing as part of a “Delicious Revolution” that aims to change the way Americans relate to food. Having attended the University of California, Berkeley during the Free Speech Movement of the 1960s, the language of revolution is no accident. Eating is, according to Waters, a political act. She sees Chez Panisse as serving “not just food, but ideas” about food and culture that are “to be propagated from Berkeley back out into the world.”

Although Chez Panisse has certainly been widely influential and is often the most audible voice in the room when it comes to restaurants’ involvement in the local food movement, it is by no means the only restaurant that emerged from the 1960s with revolutionary goals. Historian Warren Belasco has demonstrated that many “countercultural” establishments in the 1960s and 1970s self-consciously saw food as a catalyst to foment larger change. In the Midwest, L’Etoile founder Odessa Piper was a pioneer of what would become the farm-to-table movement and a key “innovator” of farm-to-table sourcing in Madison. Piper’s vision of farm-to-table had a distinctively countercultural flavor, as she acknowledges:

> The back-to-the-land movement gave us the first wave of America’s unique farmers and cooks and proto artisans. We had read E.F.Schumacher’s Small is Beautiful. We had viewed the planet from outer space for the first time. We bought land and

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repopulated the abandoned towns and opened new schools that would teach ecology to our children.\textsuperscript{67}

Raised in a large family in the Northeast, Piper had spent the summers of her youth foraging in the Maine woods and cooking from scratch as a matter of economy.\textsuperscript{68} After a stint at a New Hampshire “sustenance commune” in true countercultural fashion, Piper hitchhiked to Wisconsin with a friend and found herself on another farm—rather than sustaining just its occupants, this farm was founded by Joanna Guthrie with the intention of supplying a restaurant that was to open in Madison several years later called the Ovens of Brittany. But Guthrie’s health was failing and amidst tragedy the restaurant’s management began to pull in separate directions. When Piper found the opportunity to open her own restaurant in 1976 with friend Jim Casey, she took it.\textsuperscript{69}

With no formal training as a chef or restaurateur, Piper attempted to make ends meet while cooking from scratch—by purchasing small amounts from her sister’s farm and selling croissants at the fledgling farmers’ market. Although at this time Piper jokes that vendors were far more likely to garner citations than praise from city officials, Piper’s croissant stand was a success from the beginning.\textsuperscript{70} Piper habitually used the money she made from sales to buy leftover products from farmers, and would turn around and stuff croissants with market produce and cheese and bake them. One Saturday, an unexpected rainstorm decimated community attendance at the market. With no customers, Piper found herself with hundreds of leftover croissants just as farmers packed up most of the produce they had brought to town.

\textsuperscript{67} Odessa Piper, personal communication.
\textsuperscript{68} Interview 13.05
\textsuperscript{69} Interview 13.05
\textsuperscript{70} Interview 13.05; Odessa Piper personal communication.
In a gesture of resignation as much as goodwill, Piper distributed the croissants to the farmers around the market. Piper describes,

All the farmers got these delicious bags of all kinds of filled croissants. At the end of the market—they were required to stay in the rain until the end because those are the rules—I hear all these footsteps trudging up our stairs at L’Etoile, all these farmers bringing spinach and flats of strawberries and just dropping it off gratis because they were in the same boat. They could technically bring the produce back to the farm but what would they do with it? Piper would later remember this as a key turning point for the restaurant, highlighting the interweaving of natural events and human actors in the formation of a nascent farm-to-table embedded market. Creating a regional food system free of the problems associated with the modern industrialized food system became central to Piper’s mission at L’Etoile. As she explains in the forward to a book titled *The Flavor of Wisconsin*:

In 1976 when I opened my restaurant L’Etoile across the street from the State Capitol, I couldn’t obtain adequate quantities of ingredients that were once icons of the region—and L’Etoile had only fifty seats! I know I wasn’t the only cook in Wisconsin who dreamed of an end to our unnecessary dependence on produce trucked in from afar. Under-ripe, over-irrigated, sealed in plastic, and factory farmed; what a nightmare! Now, only a few decades later… we have begun to “re-value” regional ingredients and food traditions.

By the time I embarked on this project, farm-to-table practices had become widespread enough that journalist Michael Pollan could pen in 2011 that “it’s become a cliche of restaurant menus to mention farms” and restaurants could realistically expect its guests to both recognize and appreciate their local sourcing practices. According to Piper:

Wait staff recitation of the provenance of their ingredients, including the name of the cows, has become irony. I will confess to you that I had a role in all of this. As early as the 80’s I began naming farms right on my menu as a way to put my guests in

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71 Interview 13.05.
closer touch with what they were eating. It got to the point where a typical night’s menu read like a gazetteer map.\textsuperscript{74}

The rise of this new genre of restaurant advertising its conscientious sourcing practices emerged over the decades following Chez Panisse, L’Etoile and other farm-to-table “pioneers.” Although this takes many forms, these restaurants rely on a discourse of environmental sustainability that often hinges on the idea of close relationships between farmers and the restaurant, third-party certification practices (such as organic, fair trade, and humane), and nebulously-defined “local food.” This discourse appeals to an urban romanticized image of agriculture, making visible underlying modern urban anxieties about the role of people (and agriculture) in nature.\textsuperscript{75}

\textit{Farmscape}

“You’ll know my farm when you see it,” the farmer told me by way of directions, instead of offering up the usual address or landmark. She was right. The hour’s drive from Madison had yielded corn, soybeans, and hillsides dotted with the occasional exurban ‘house with a view’ of idyllic (if somewhat parched) farmland. With straight rows and clean lines, row upon row of nearly identical plant stretched toward the sun and rippled in the breeze. My destination was a square of calico in a quilt of solid prints. Even to the casual observer this was a living landscape; bright flowers hummed with pollinating insects and signs of painstaking human labor were everywhere. Within the tightly bounded space, fifty plant species had replaced one. This was not the unnamed intergenerational family farm, the capital-intensive industrial vegetable operation, or the fields of a mid-sized dairy.

\textsuperscript{74} Odessa Piper personal communication.

\textsuperscript{75} This is not a new sentiment and in fact arises from a longstanding historical precedent; Raymond Williams’ \textit{Country and the City} reminds us that the impulse to mourn a lost rural way of life can be traced back in time through English literature to Eden itself, the original paradise lost. See Williams 1973.
Comments from neighbors made the farmer aware that they perceived this place as a curiosity and an anomaly. The fenceline was impeccably maintained; this was the boundary demarcating prairie grasses from weeds. Although farmers on both sides of the fence sweated in the heat of the prolonged drought and waited on the rain, they followed logics and imperatives apart; ultimately their products would travel different paths to different markets. The diversified farm’s carrots, onions, and greens would be delivered to Madison by the farmer herself where they would be featured by farm name on the chalkboards, menus, and websites of farm-to-table restaurants. The neighbors’ corn, on the other hand, would be rendered indistinguishable; poured in a single stream into a local elevator, a mark of its quality would be its perfect uniformity.

The small-scale, diversified farm I’ve described is representative of many of the farms that sell products to Madison-area restaurants. Just as this farm is enmeshed in a matrix of large-scale commodity crop agriculture, the “local food” it produces does not exist apart from the agricultural system and its political economic conditions. Quite the opposite—the stark boundaries of this diversified farm, embedded as it is in a sea of grain, differentiate it from its neighbors and add value to its products. Differentiation, Bloom and Hinrichs explain, “adds value to produce through strategies such as processing and labeling,” bringing price premiums for producers based on consumers’ health, environmental or geographic concerns and adding an ethical element to marketplace exchanges.76

Studies have shown that producers of “local food” who direct-market their products are on average one-third the size of farms that market their products conventionally (188 and 540 acres, respectively).77 Additionally, they are more diverse and more likely to adopt

76 Bloom and Hinrichs 2010 op cit.
alternative production methods.\textsuperscript{78} The farmers I interviewed during the course of research were no exception. Their farms ranged generally from 10 to 100 acres,\textsuperscript{79} and vegetable producers grew between 50 and 150 different varieties, many additionally raising several types of livestock. Although less than half the 17 farmers interviewed were certified organic, all used claims of environmental stewardship in marketing their products.

It could be claimed that such producers of “local food” are more urban than rural. The farmers I spoke with all have close ties to Wisconsin’s urban areas. Many rely on income from off-farm jobs in Madison or use the labor of urbanite field hands, interns, or worker-share Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)\textsuperscript{80} members. A handful of the farmers participating in this research were themselves once urban-dwellers who, disillusioned with their career paths, turned to farming as part of a search for meaningful livelihoods.

These farms’ proximity to Madison’s year-round farmers’ markets, grocery stores, and restaurants allows them to spread risk among many different market venues. Although much has been written about the potential of CSAs as a method of providing farmers with a secure income regardless of crop failure, etc., even the farmers I spoke with who cited CSAs as their primary focus for selling their products regularly sold goods at other markets. The different outlets these farmers use include farmers’ markets, farm stands, grocery stores,

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\textsuperscript{78} Starr et al. 2003 \textit{op cit.}
\textsuperscript{79} The largest farm was over 500 acres, but encompassed conservation projects and non-agricultural land use as well as cultivated fields and pastures.
\textsuperscript{80} There are a variety of CSA models and definitions, but in general CSA refers to a partnership between farmers and consumers in which consumers pay in advance for farm products that they receive in allotments (“boxes”) throughout a growing season. See Galt, Ryan. 2011. Counting and mapping community supported agriculture (CSA) in the United States and California: contributions from critical cartography/GIS. \textit{ACME: An international e-journal for critical geographies}. 10:2; Laura DeLind, “Considerably More Than Vegetables, a Lot Less Than Community,” In Jane Adams, ed. \textit{Fighting for the Farm} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).
CSAs, and restaurants. Indeed, it is the mixture of these different markets that makes possible the production of “local food.” Restaurants are just one piece of the puzzle, and a complicated piece at that. For those farmers who have chosen to put more of their eggs in the restaurant basket (and all farmers with whom I spoke mentioned the risks inherent in this strategy), maintaining close relationships with restaurant purchasers was crucial.

The “local food” farmers who participated in this research spoke of their communities as less geographical than ideological—farmers referred to a community of “like-minded individuals,” long-time CSA members or market customers, chefs and supporters of “family farms.” Often these communities are urban-based, rather than the farmers’ rural neighbors. These farms are sometimes awkward fits in the rural communities in which they are embedded, and the different logics to which they attend can at times cause tense moments.

These “local food” producers are in a larger sense, however, both urban and rural, as are their commodity crop-growing neighbors since urban and rural change are inextricably linked through shared history and processes of mutual transformation. Simply tracing flows of products reveals that this transformation is deeply material; just as clay from Michigan and white pine from northern Wisconsin became the walls and floors of Midwestern cities, the crops, meat and dairy produced in southwestern Wisconsin are in one form or another literally metabolized by urban eaters. The farm is an excellent place to start to reveal the socio-ecological relations of the products that circulate between country and city.\(^\text{81}\) Simply

looking at places of production, however, cannot fully account for the meanings, values, and motivations that also serve to draw these items into existence.

Urban restaurants serve as a bridge between city and country. Farm-to-table restaurants typically purchase ingredients directly from producers in a combination of several primary ways: through shopping at the farmers’ market, standing orders with farmers, and responding to weekly availability lists that farmers provide. Farmers may drop off samples to encourage purchasing through these three venues, and may directly work with a chef when making decisions about what to plant, raise or produce in upcoming seasons. These interactions take place in different spaces, from the digital realm of emails and text messages to the face-to-face interactions at restaurants’ back doors and farmers’ market stands. It is important to note that sales to restaurants in Madison are typically conducted at wholesale rather than retail price—perhaps as much as twenty percent lower than at a farmers’ market, farm stand, or through a CSA share.82

Most of the farmers I spoke with (whether they worked with two or twenty restaurants) said that they were not interested in increasing their sales to restaurants or in working with more restaurants, citing numerous reasons for their hesitancy. Through many anecdotes, the volatility of the restaurant industry surfaced as the primary cause of wariness. There was the occasional anecdote of frustrating experiences with chefs—the worst of which was the tale of the chef who promised to buy an entire season’s worth of a particular unusual vegetable crop he knew to be a staple on another chef’s menu, then never picked up the boxes and thereafter avoided the farmer’s stand at the market. This was in addition to the risks of restaurants burning down (as with the local-sourcing Underground Kitchen in

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82 This lower profit margin associated with restaurant sales has implications for both the ways that farmers balance sales to various markets and the relationships between farmers and restaurant purchasers that I will discuss in the next chapter.
June of 2011), chef turnover, and the frequency of late payment. Late payment, of course, was preferable to no payment—I heard from a number of farmers the statistic that “fifty percent of restaurants go under.” One well-established farmer who has worked closely with restaurants for nearly half a century sighed,

Restaurants, it’s a tough business. I don’t know. I don’t know what it is. They come and go. It’s not, I wouldn’t advise a farm to, you know, stake their fortune on restaurant sales. They’re…they can be small and painful and it’s almost the only time that we never got paid was when a restaurant closed that we were out $5,000 that we never saw, you know?83

Restaurants, in other words, have a far from spotless reputation amongst farmers. And yet, many farmers I spoke with work regularly with a number of area restaurants and carefully steward relationships with chefs. In fact, even the farmers I spoke with that do not consistently seek out restaurant sales do sell to restaurants (or have in the past), either semi-regularly at the farmers market or irregularly as market, weather and crop conditions demand. Just as “local food” market vegetable growers diversify their crops, they diversify their market outlets. The typical vegetable farmer I spoke with sells regularly at the farmers’ market, through some sort of CSA or buyer’s club, to retail outlets, and to the occasional restaurant.84 Farmers see restaurants as an integral component of the local food movement, part of what makes small-scale regional food systems possible. They do not function the same way as farmers’ markets, CSAs, or retail outlets—nor should they be expected to. They are a different animal altogether.

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83 Interview 12.10, S1. Names and, at times, non-essential identifying characteristics have been changed to protect participants’ confidentiality.
84 For those that do specifically market to restaurants, however, it was not uncommon for that market to comprise up to 20-30% of sales; for one farmer I spoke with, it forms 80%, but that was clearly an outlier. So, restaurants are for some farmers a substantial market.
The Nature of the Product

Farmers’ uses of and strategies for restaurant sales varied dramatically based on the nature of the product changing hands. For the vegetable producers I spoke with, restaurants typically formed a sort of overflow market that was merely a small component of many different sales avenues that kept the farm afloat, but helped with cash flow during the non-peak farmers’ market season and winter and helped to offload products when necessary. Even if farmers only sold to restaurants at the farmers’ market, they could be big buyers. One chef I spoke with reported having spent a massive $10,000 dollars at a single Saturday morning, orders of magnitude greater than what a typical customer might spend.

Because restaurant purchasers visually assess vegetables while at the market, “showing them what you’ve got” is a popular refrain among vegetable farmers. One farmer who relies on farmers’ market sales to chefs for a third of his business explained that he has never specifically marketed his products to chefs, but rather focuses on bringing the “most unique, tasty, visually appealing stuff to market,” which he then lets “speak for themselves.”85 This strategy is echoed by a Rodale Press article on the “ABCs of Marketing to Restaurants” in which the author argues that, when selling to restaurants, a product “needs to be different, better, more dazzling than what is offered by the big food suppliers.”86

At first glance, this appears to be a cut-and-dried case of Guthman’s “twisted stunted carrot” turned into visually appealing yuppie chow. While chefs are certainly playing a part in this “gourmetification” of farmers’ market fare, the story becomes more complicated on

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85 Interview 12.07
closer examination. Depending on the uses of the ingredients, appearance may not matter to chefs at all. Just as chefs might covet the baby onions and perfectly-shaped carrot, they also purchase products that are too ugly, large, or strange-looking for the typical market customer—like the two-pound tomato or “seconds” that market customers passed over—for further processing. Similarly, for farmers across the board, restaurants had an important role in absorbing unusual, one-off, or experimental products that the average market or retail customer might not be interested in.

While the use of visually-appealing displays are useful for farmers in appealing to general market customers and chefs alike, farmers have also developed strategies geared more directly toward restaurant sales. One such tactic is growing unusual, heritage, or specialty items—including those specially requested by chefs. University extension literature targeted toward helping farmers increase restaurant sales suggest that farmers carve out a “niche” whereby they offer a chef a new product—one North Carolina cooperative extension article urges, “Everyone has tomatoes and squash—grow something new, exotic or different. Think outside the box and ask chefs what they would like to have.” Another strategy for vegetable producers is providing chefs with products that are typically unavailable at certain times of the year. In Wisconsin, where seasonality is especially important, the products of farmers who able to extend their growing season into the winter through use of hoop or greenhouses hold particular appeal.

Meat producers, on the other hand, face an entirely different set of constraints. Unlike diversified vegetable producers whose product offerings vary widely from week to week and season to season based on local growing conditions, meat producers typically

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know the products they will have available from the moment of purchasing, hatching, or delivering an animal. Their primary task is to sell all of the different components of the animals they raise, from tenderloins to offal. For meat producers, working with restaurants poses a particular challenge since chefs typically want to purchase only certain cuts. As one pork producer explained:

The problem you’re gonna have with restaurants is you’ve got, invariably, “Well I want fifty pounds of tenderloins, I don’t want anything else” or “I want pork chops I don’t want anything else.” So the question is where do you market the rest of the stuff?\(^88\)

The meat producers I spoke with cited two main strategies for “marketing the rest of the stuff”: selling the whole animal, and selling the animal whole. The first strategy (selling the whole animal) entails offering different cuts of meat to a hierarchy of purchasers—certain restaurants get first choice, a retail outlet such as a grocery store might get second choice, and the farmers’ market would absorb as much of the rest as possible. This strategy means taking each market seriously, from soup bones to steaks, and having the name recognition and interpersonal skills to regularly sell the less desirable cuts. As a spinoff of the more traditional “selling the whole animal” strategy, one diversified meat producer I spoke with, in addition to selling to established restaurants, opened her own restaurant in order to utilize some of the more unusual cuts of meat in-house.

The second strategy (selling the animal whole) involves selling the entire animal to a particular restaurant customer. The restaurant can purchase the unbutchered carcass to break down in-house, or they can receive the animal already portioned into a variety of cuts, including ground and organ meat.\(^89\) Although retail outlets and CSAs will generally accept a variety of cuts without issue, selling the animal whole is not always a popular strategy with

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\(^{88}\) Interview 12.09, S1.

\(^{89}\) Interview 12.09.
restaurants, likely due to the increased skilled labor required to prepare lesser-known meats and the difficulty of selling these to customers expecting more familiar fare. One farmer reported losing a number of restaurant accounts when switching to this approach. As he explained:

We still find a lot of reluctance of people wanting to buy the whole hog, I mean, it’s an educational process for people to buy a whole hog… You’ve gotta have a special type of restaurant. Everybody talks about the snout to the tail, you know. It sounds good in the media and everything else, but a lot of them don’t follow it, you know. But there are a few.90

This farmer’s distinguishing of the restaurants that follow “snout to the tail” (as well as other kinds of farm-to-table) sourcing practices and those that do not highlights the importance of the extent to which a restaurant is committed to farm-to-table sourcing, and hints at the complicated social relations embedded in a farm-to-table economy in the production of conditions making possible a farm-to-table imaginary.

Lastly, the importance of taste in chefs’ evaluation of farmers’ products cannot be overstated. It is no coincidence that Alice Waters calls her crusade to change the way Americans eat a “Delicious Revolution;” this concept rests on perceptions of enhanced flavor of foods produced by farmers supplying local food markets.91 Likewise, in the fifth edition of its instructional text The Professional Chef, the Culinary Institute of America lauded

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90 Interview 12.09
91 Of course, a difficulty in analysis here is that there is, as the adage claims, no accounting for taste. Taste, as anthropologists have long known, is both socially constructed and culturally produced. Flavor, on the other hand, is something more as it is both inherent to a food product itself even as one’s perception of its qualities on ingestion are heavily contextually influenced. Texts ranging from popular to scholarly have noted that the qualities that make agricultural products good global commodities (consistency, durability, ease of transport, slow ripening) are not necessarily consistent with producing the most flavorful product (though its particular flavor can become desirable based on the changing tastes of consumers’ palates). See, for example, Friedberg 2009, Amy Trubek, The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Michael Winerip, “You Call That a Tomato?” The New York Times, June 24, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/24/booming/you-call-that-a-tomato.html.
the freedom chefs had gained from the seasons and geography itself as industrial agriculture “extended the seasons” of fruit and vegetables, but noted that the flavor of produce was often improved when purchased from local producers. Although some produce shipped quite well, the CIA allowed, locally grown items were “always preferable” in terms of variety and flavor.

In many cases, it was flavor that led chefs to seek out local growers in the first place. As chef Dan Barber of famed farm-to-table restaurant Blue Hill at Stone Barns in Westchester County, New York explains: “[G]enerally, the food with the most flavor comes from farmers who are local or regional, or integral to a community. You can't treat farming like a car-manufacturing plant and expect that it will produce anything great to eat. That's why chefs have become advocates for everything from water rights to farm-workers rights to farmers markets. Chefs are powerful because we are curators of what's truly delicious; we're driven by pleasure.”

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93 Ibid.
Part III: At Market - Social Relations of an Embedded Market

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the world of farm-to-table geographic imaginaries in Madison is composed of a myriad of actors that each plays a part in the construction and deployment of these imaginaries. The complex and dynamic relationships among these actors are key to the creation and perpetuation of the imaginary, forming the material basis to which the imaginary is tightly linked. The reshaping of social relations embedded in restaurant sourcing is accomplished through the triple processes of ‘relationship marketing,’ ‘innovation diffusion,’ and ‘training the chef’ away from a distribution mindset marked by the purchase of ingredients as commodities disembedded from localities, seasons and producers. This chapter focuses in particular on the direct connections between restaurant purchasers and the farmers they source from to give shape to the socially embedded marketplace of farm-to-table ‘worlds.’

*Relationship marketing*

Saturday mornings in summer and fall on Madison’s Capitol Square are bustling, festive affairs. Farmers’ stands encircle the state capitol building as musicians, singing groups, and activists gather at the each corner. The freshly scrubbed, carefully selected produce gleams appealingly at passersby from the farmers’ tented stands as marketgoers amble in a counterclockwise direction around the square. Restaurant purchasers, typically chefs, come early when the crowds are thin, pulling wagons and carts behind them as they circumnavigate the square. They stop frequently to chat with producers about Sunday’s Packers game, pest problems, the season’s drought, the farmers’ kids—and, occasionally, the food changing hands. Far from hindering business, the slow rhythms of market chitchat

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95 Innovation has been defined by agri-food scholar Inwood et al. as simply the purchase of local food, though I argue that farm-to-table innovations are plural and ongoing. Inwood et al. 2009.
between producer and restaurant purchaser are an important feature of the embedded market, comprising what several farmers I spoke with referred to as “relationship marketing.”

This term has gained traction among local food farmers in part due to journalist Michael Pollan’s lengthy coverage of farmer and self-described “relationship marketer” Joel Salatin in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. According to Pollan, Salatin holds that reformation of the food system “begins with people going to the trouble and expense of buying directly from farmers they know;” that “the only meaningful guarantee of integrity is when buyers and sellers can look one another in the eye.” Pollan notes that while Salatin’s customers take comfort and pleasure in their link to Polyface Farm as the source of their food, this direct connection serves an instrumental purpose since it allows Salatin to recapture the portion of the “food dollar” that typically winds up in the pockets of middlemen. “The value of relationship marketing,” Pollan asserts, “is that it allows many kinds of information besides price to travel up and down the food chain: stories as well as numbers, qualities as well as quantities, values rather than ‘value’.”

In more scholarly terms, Pollan’s relationship marketing can be understood as an important feature of socially embedded local food marketplace. Following sociologist Clare Hinrichs’ work on farmers’ markets, the social embeddedness of direct-marketing outlets is always qualified by a certain level of marketness (the dominance of price considerations within economic transaction) and instrumentalism (the prioritization of economic goals and opportunistic behavior to achieve them). In Hinrichs’ framework, marketness and

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96 Pollan 2006, 240.
97 Pollan 2006, 244.
98 Hinrichs 2000.
99 Ibid.
instrumentalism form a “conceptual shadow” to the embeddedness of local food systems that is always present. As Hinrichs explains, “Social ties and personal connections in no way preclude instrumental behaviors or the relevance of price. In practice, all jostle side by side.” This reading of embedded markets tempers the romanticized views of local politics that critical agri-food scholars eschew, or an overly simplified reading of the embedded market that “conflates spatial relations with social relations.” At the same time, Hinrichs cautions that marketness and instrumentalism are not necessarily bad; though too much can “sour” an embedded market, she argues that some might in fact be necessary to its proper functioning.

Relationship marketing of the sort that occurs between producers and restaurant purchasers thus demonstrates both communal and instrumental characteristics of the embedded market. Relationship marketing is an ongoing process that involves the maintenance of close communication between farmer and restaurant purchaser. As one farmer, Julia, explained:

> What we try to build is relationships. With relationships we try to get what the restaurants want. And it’s a different way of thinking because the restaurants are then therefore your boss, and what they want is what you get for them.

Building these relationships, however, requires more than just open channels of communication. They also involve the development of a hierarchical provisioning system solidified over time through trust-building practices.

Farmers vigorously protect relationships with particular restaurants with whom they have longstanding connections quite vigorously, making sure that the chef had his (and it usually is a his) choice of the best products, to always fill an order when possible. Sam, a

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100 Hinrichs 2000, 301.
101 Interview 12.08, S1
purchaser for a locally-sourcing restaurant, is quite aware of farmers’ hierarchical relationships with various restaurants. His goals in forming bonds with producers are also instrumentalist in a sense. From his perspective, the relationships he has with farmers help him gain an advantage when competing with other purchasers for limited quantities of a farm’s products:

Those kinds of relationships are essential. And then you gain priority, I guess, is what I’m saying. So like if you called today and he only has six cords of sweet cherries left and he’s waitin’ on someone else to call but I called first so I get ‘em. Just because that other person…. So it’s kind of like the relationship but it’s kind of like a race.  

Julia framed her work in developing relationships with restaurants in the following (particularly instrumentalist) manner:

It’s, it’s building a network and a relationship with the chefs that they know that you’re gonna have the quality and the consistency and the quantity of that product, those are the most important things in marketing to restaurants.

These relationships are not formed simply through responsible business practices, as Julia’s comments might indicate. Relationships between farms and restaurants in the embedded marketplace often go far beyond this provision of “quality, consistency and quantity” of products. Marketing advice to farmers aiming to work with restaurants reflects the complexity and social embeddedness of selling directly to restaurants; one leaflet published by the University of California, Davis Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program suggests that farmers use such tactics with chefs as: “help them out (massage their egos); start with a compliment” and “Keep the relationship friendly and personal. Consider giving gifts periodically, especially if they are related to your farm.”

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102 Interview 12.02
103 Interview 12.08, S1
104 Gail Feenstra, Jeri Ohmart and David Chaney, “Selling Directly to Restaurants and Retailers,” University of California, Davis Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, 2003.
Reducing relationship marketing to simple instrumentalism, in other words, does not do justice to the subjectivities created through the social relations involved in the process of embedding the local food market within locales and communities. Embedding chefs within local food networks is itself a complex and time-consuming process. These relationships do not happen overnight; they can take years (sometimes even decades) to establish. Moreover, working directly with farmers on a regular basis requires restaurant purchasers to undergo a serious shift in how they conceptualize sourcing in the first place.

“Training the Chef”

“We used to sell to a lot of restaurants but they keep changing chefs and then you gotta train, I call it train a new chef.”—Jeff, Madison area diversified vegetable farmer.105

Although in certain ways the logic of restaurants and the logic of farms aligns nicely, what made sourcing from distributors so convenient in the first place is that it resolved key challenges farmers and chefs run into when working with each other, such as reliance on variable local conditions. Moreover, foodservice distributors often serve as sort of personal warehouses for restaurants. By as early as 1962, the Culinary Institute of America (CIA)’s classic textbook, The Professional Chef, encouraged culinary students to put the burden of storing food on large-scale foodservice distributors until just before it was to be cooked and served, a key service for restaurants doing constant battle with the perishability of its raw materials.106 As previously described, products in warehouses and across supply chains around the globe became available at chefs’ fingertips at nearly a moment’s notice in the decades following World War II. Farmers definitively do not and cannot serve this purpose,

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105 Interview 13.01
nor can they be used by chefs as simple substitutes for distributors. As one diversified vegetable farmer and long-time seller to restaurants, Jeff, explained to me:

Restaurant kitchens are about this big (indicates small amount with hands), they don’t store a lot of stuff. So their mindset is daily, last minute, call and get stuff. That doesn’t work for a farm that has things in the field, has a crew that has a lot of different things to do, so we need to plan, schedule a time, we like a couple of days to do that. We’d like to be able to, you know, have half a day if you did have a big rainstorm it’s not just business as usual when it’s pouring rain. We might continue to harvest but the pace goes down considerably, mud sticking to your boots.107

In other words, this farmer’s limited wares are in the field; they require labor, both natural and social, and a certain set of weather conditions to extract.

The dominant culture of restaurant sourcing taught in culinary schools and reproduced within the kitchens of restaurants nationwide reinforces what I refer to here as a distribution mindset. Chefs and cooks, either directly through culinary schools or indirectly through social networks and on-the-job training, are trained to look for the very detailed product specifications that large-scale foodservice distributors offer, and expect to fit these specified products into their menus, rather than fitting menus to available products. An organic diversified vegetable farm’s products, on the other hand, are not standardized in a way that commodified foodstuffs in a globalized system have been historically bred, synthesized, and otherwise produced to be.108 Many of the farmers I spoke with viewed overcoming the distribution mindset as a key challenge in working with restaurants, and a first step in what Jeff astutely called “training a new chef.”109

107 Interview 12.10
109 Interview 13.01
One meat producer sympathized with the difficulty of disengaging with the distribution mindset:

Well I think that’s the biggest challenge with all this. Cause a lot of the guys working in restaurants, women too, they’re used to just picking up the phone and calling like a Neesvig’s or whatever and say, “Gimme a case of pork chops,” or “Gimme this” and when they start dealing with the local farmers it’s not as convenient for them.\(^\text{110}\)

The successfully “trained” restaurant purchaser is “the forager.” The forager might in some instances be a chef who holds a position of authority in the kitchen and makes decisions regarding both ingredient purchasing and ingredient utilization; in another instance it may be an assistant or intern who is mainly in charge of retrieving and obtaining pre-identified foods; alternatively it could be a more independent restaurant employee who “scouts out” the food landscape for desired characteristics of ingredients. In its many forms, the forager is a key character in producing the farm-to-table imaginary as well as in the working out of the complicated interpersonal dynamics of the embedded marketplace.

Former Chez Panisse employee Alan Tangren describes “foraging” as juxtaposed to the receiving of distributor’s wares:

Fortunately we were not well acquainted with the conventional wholesale meat and produce dealers with their endless stacks of cardboard boxes bursting with what most other restaurants accepted as fresh and fine. Instead, we would poke around local markets, picking through piles of green beans at the grocery store or using just the hearts of leaf lettuces. Without knowing it, we had planted the seed of “foraging”.\(^\text{111}\)

For Tangren, foraging meant an endless hunt in urban foodways for freshness and flavor. It also implied ethical judgments as foragers are by definition discerning. As Tangren describes, the forager was not only responsible for the provisioning of ingredients; he or she was also

\(^{110}\) Interview 12.09, S1.

to be “in a way, the conscience of the restaurant.”

Because a forager judges ingredients based on their relative merits rather than their adherence to strict specifications, the mark of a successfully trained forager is in large part his or her flexibility. Paul Johnson, owner of Monterey Fish, wrote favorably of Chez Panisse’s famous flexibility with ingredients:

I was always impressed with how they could deal with the unpredictability of what I would bring. If the menu read rock cod and I walked in with California halibut straight off a local fisherman’s boat, there was always encouragement and appreciation—never complaints.

Likewise, a Madison farmer praised one Madison restaurant’s team of foragers:

You call them, you email them, they’re so excited, they’ll take almost anything you offer them because they just wanna bring this food into the restaurant and they’re very willing to figure out what happens next after you bring it into the restaurant.

In Madison, several farm-to-table restaurants have specified “forager” positions. The very use of the term “forager” itself does a good deal of work; after all, the verb “forage” carries significant historical baggage. Early definitions of the term included “the action of foraging or providing forage (i.e. stored, often dried, fodder for horses and livestock); hence, a roving search for provisions of any kind; sometimes, a raid for ravaging the ground from which the enemy draws his supplies.”

The term “foraging” has more recently been in use by wildlife ecologists to describe animal behavior and tradeoffs in food seeking. When used to describe restaurant purchaser’s activities, therefore, “foraging” has a naturalizing effect—one doesn’t “forage” in the catalogs of foodservice distributors, after all. One forages for uncultivated species like morel mushrooms and wild leeks in forests and fields, and watercress in streams. Appropriating the term for broader restaurant purchasing implies by

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112 Ibid.
113 40 Years of Chez Panisse, 70.
114 Interview 12.06
extension that this search for ingredients through working directly with local farmers is a more “natural” way to obtain food.

Additionally, the use of the term “forager” highlights that training the chef is much more than simply a change in shopping strategy; it is a transformation in worldview. The different purchasing practices associated with “foraging” are attached to different ways of working with ingredients in the kitchen, including the innovative repurposing of tools and techniques. At Piper’s L’Etoile, this meant that chefs used to receiving meat in serving portions had to learn how to butcher animals using bandsaws and how to work with previously unknown or unused muscles.116 “This approach,” Piper admits, “yielded a lot of variations on pounded veal schnitzel.” In characteristically enthusiastic manner, she adds, “But oh it was the best!”117

The “training” of chefs and cooks may have begun in many ways at the market, but it clearly stretched back into kitchens and dining rooms. Piper explained:

I made it a point at my restaurant to bring line cooks out with me, to invite them to come out with me to do the farmers market…. I would sit down with them after market and I’d say, OK I got this this and this in today, and here’s a slot on the menu where I think these ingredients would really be ideal… And then I would encourage the line cooks to engage with me in a back and forth of how we could use those ingredients and turn it into some amazing prep and end up on the menu… It did involve some sharing of the authority and some of the prestige of the chef but I was willing to do that because what I got in return was just an insane amount of commitment on the part of the line cook to make that dish as absolutely beautiful as it could be and absolutely delicious.118

As chefs passed through L’Etoile’s and other locally-sourcing restaurant’s kitchens and went on to work at other restaurants or perhaps open their own establishments, they brought with them ideas about local food, local sourcing practices, and personal ties to

116 Odessa Piper personal communication.
117 Ibid.
118 Interview 13.05
farmers gained during their “training.” As one farmer explained about his relationship with a particular chef who started out at L’Etoile:

“He would move around… then every time he’d move we’d pick up a new restaurant. Cause our theory was we’d stick with a chef, and we’d stick within a restaurant.”

The nebulous “diffusing” of local sourcing practices on other restaurants in town was referred to by a diversified vegetable farmer as “the L’Etoile effect.” She explained:

You see little glimpses of the L’Etoile effect in other places I think, just in terms of being a diner in other places and seeing menus and the way that other people are approaching local seasonal concepts I think that L’Etoile is definitely setting that bar pretty high and people are striving to meet it.

The ability to change a menu based on seasonality, regional variation, and product availability requires a certain amount of autonomy on the part of restaurants in terms of menu decision-making, and a trained and flexible staff. It therefore should come as no surprise that higher-end, independent restaurants are, as Huber et al. discovered in Iowa, the most willing purchasers of local foods. Starr et al. corroborated these findings, stating that “…the majority of chains, despite their concern with quality, do not have enough decision-making independence to respond to requests to purchase locally.”

L’Etoile, like Chez Panisse, owes its ability to “set the bar” in terms of local-sourcing expectations to both its relatively high menu prices and its national culinary acclaim. Selling to L’Etoile is seen as a coup by many Wisconsin farmers, an endorsement by the arbiters of taste that they take pride in and regularly use in advertising materials on their websites and at the farmers’ market. One farmer explained:

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119 Interview 13.01
120 Interview 12.06
122 Starr et al., 2003.
Probably one of our premier accounts is L'Etoile. And it goes all the way back to Odessa Piper, I mean, they were our first restaurant account which we felt really good about cause they’re consistently ranked in the top fifty restaurants in the nation, Odessa’s a James Beard award winner, the current owner Tory Miller also won a James Beard award this year, so that’s like the Cadillac to get in.\footnote{Interview 12.09, S1} Another farming couple I spoke with, who I’ll refer to here as Sandra and Jerry, described how, when Odessa Piper would come to their stand at the farmers’ market, other market customers would take careful note of her purchases. Sandra explained, “Odessa came back the next week and bought some other product from us. And Odessa had a following so when people would see what Odessa bought they’d maybe come over and buy the rest.” Jerry added, “It was really kind of funny, because they’d kind of hang back and wait til [Sandra]’s done talking with her and then Odessa’d leave and they’d all swarm in and wanna buy what Odessa bought.”\footnote{Interview 12.08}\footnote{Pollan 2006, 251.}

It is not happenstance that when Joel Salatin’s Polyface Farm delivers to Charlottesville’s white tablecloth restaurants once a week, it does so in a van on the side of which hangs a sign reading “ON DELIVERY FROM POLYFACE, INC. FOLLOW ME TO THE BEST RESTAURANTS IN TOWN.”\footnote{Interview 12.10, S1} According to Pollan, farmers’ connections with chefs “shone the bright light of glamour” on them, “turning many of them into menu celebrities.” Farmers in southwestern Wisconsin have perceived “an explosion” of locally sourcing restaurants in the past several years after several decades of slow, steady growth.\footnote{Interview 12.10, S1} This explosion has had great significance for local farmers, and is linked to changes in material practices as well as ideas about local food. The imaginary, after all, has very real effects.
Limitations of the Embedded Market

The social embeddedness of the farm-to-table community economy, however, does have its limits, and can be a double-edged sword. The personal relationships and the informality of sales between farms and restaurants, typically seen as useful in enhancing trust, can at times present difficulties for farmers.\textsuperscript{127} During a semi-structured interview with one farming couple (whom I’ll refer to here as Joe and Betty Thomas), the conversation turned to the question of whether a restaurant has ever asked them to do something differently than usual.\textsuperscript{128} The Thomases, whose work with restaurants comprises a full twenty percent of their overall sales, didn’t miss a beat. Joe looked me in the eye as he replied, “Oh all the time. We always have to do special things…. That’s the thing with the restaurants, you know.”\textsuperscript{129}

Over the course of my research, a number of other comments made by farmers echoed Joe’s claim. The provision of one “special thing,” squash blossoms, provides a particularly illustrative example. These delicate beauties, prized by chefs, are extremely perishable; in order to obtain them, Sam informed me, restaurants have to establish a relationship with a farmer who can deliver them directly, freshly-picked.\textsuperscript{130} Aliza Green, chef and James Beard Award-winning author, wrote in the introduction to her 2006 cookbook,

\textsuperscript{127} Geographer Ryan Galt has characterized the tendency of CSA farmers to consistently fill their members’ boxes with a good quantity and quality of products (despite the initial goals of CSA programs to have members ride out the seasons, good or bad, alongside farmers) as “self-exploitation.” While farmers’ relationships with restaurants fit less neatly into this category, they can similarly lead to difficulty drawing lines based on economic rationalization alone since, as with CSAs, farmers often make sacrifices to keep their restaurant customers happy. See Ryan Galt, “The Moral Economy is a Double-Edged Sword: Explaining Farmer Earnings and Self-Exploitation in Community Supported Agriculture,” \textit{Economic Geography}, 89:4 (2013), 341-365.
\textsuperscript{128} Interview 12.09
\textsuperscript{129} Interview 12.09
\textsuperscript{130} Interview 12.02
You could say (and you’d be right) that I’m a fanatic about ingredients. As a chef, I would do almost anything to get the best available and cook it fresh…, when I wanted to serve zucchini blossoms, I found a local grower to pick only the plump, succulent female blossoms, not the more plentiful but hairier and less desirable males, in the early hours of the morning and deliver them the same day. I’d receive these delicate, short-lived beauties fully-opened and ready to stuff and serve that same night.131

From a restaurant purchaser’s perspective, an important benefit of developing close relationships with farmers is that they can make these sorts of requests of farmers, involving additional labor both in the field and delivery truck. For farmers balancing the needs of a diversified market, the special requests of chefs can indeed be burdensome. One diversified vegetable farmer explained the difficulties of being on the receiving end of these requests:

Well, restaurant chefs, the really good ones are more of an artistic bent rather than… You know, menus are made, you know, at six o’clock and the restaurant opens at six-thirty and the kitchen is just scrambling to be ready with thirty minutes for a menu that just came into [the chef’s] head, you know? And he would do things like, at about the same time he would be calling our farm. And this is, like we said, six o’clock on a Friday night, to get ready for the big weekend. And he’s saying, “Oh I really need some squash blossoms”… [A]nd of course we’re packing up the truck, closing up the door, ready to get some much needed sleep before our trip here for the market and he’s calling saying, “Go out and pick me —” And many times, I personally did it. Just for him.132

This farmer regularly invites chefs to come live and cook on his farm. These chefs, he claims, are the best-trained of all:

[T]hey just like, a lightbulb goes on in their mind. “I get it.” And some of them have gone on to have their own restaurants and they’re just a joy to work with. Because they understand, you know, the farmers’ side of things and don’t just call at 6 or 9 at night, “Oh, can you get me some squash blossoms.”133

Sometimes, though, a more developed relationship between a farmer and restaurant purchaser meant that the farmer felt more comfortable saying no. Another diversified vegetable producer explained:

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132 Interview 12.10
133 Interview 12.10
If he can get the same kind of thing somewhere else, you know I'll- I mean, this is something that's the consequence of relationship over time, I feel like I can say to him, “You know I don’t have that much of this so, you know, if you can get it somewhere else I can sell all of this (at market).” (And he'll reply) “OK, no problem, I'll get it somewhere else”.\footnote{Interview 13.04}

And yet, even this farmer qualified his response:

But then if it’s something that he can’t, then yeah you know you kind of, you know, try to say, you know, I kind of need to get this amount for it but I'll give you a deal on some other stuff down the road.\footnote{Interview 13.04}

An additional issue presented by working with restaurants is the concern of “local-washing.” Sam, the restaurant forager, explained to me that while he purchases upwards of 80 percent of the ingredients for the restaurant directly from local farmers, he regularly obtains some ingredients from distributors—though the items and amounts purchased varies seasonally.\footnote{Interview 12.02} At a certain time of the year, for example, it doesn’t make sense for the restaurant he works for to make thirty gallons of stock with tiny, tender spring onions. For the several months while Wisconsin’s underground crops are maturing, Sam “bend[s] the ethics a little,” purchasing stock onions from a large distributor.

Using distributors to fill in gaps and bolster local food purchasing, however, is quite different than the other way around, which is a much more common practice. Not all “farm-to-table” restaurants source locally to the same degree, in part because of structural constraints that manifest in the tradeoffs associated with operating a restaurant in a broader sense.\footnote{The twin costs of labor and food are major expenditures that are interwoven in complicated ways. The basic logics of menu pricing demonstrate the give and take of balancing a restaurant’s budget. As one might expect, if both labor and food costs of a foodservice establishment are high, the menu’s price point will also need to be high to break even—more so to make a profit. However the labor and food costs can vary dramatically} Within the banality of the daily playing-out of foodservice logics lies the crux of a
predicament for farm to table restaurants: with high food costs across the board, restaurants are pressured to compensate elsewhere. One potential “fix” is to purchase a few things locally at a higher cost while compensating by purchasing others from the largescale distributors their proclaimed ethos eschews—the locally purchased cucumbers resting on a bed of lettuce from California’s Central Valley, alongside tomatoes grown in the Mexican desert. Not all restaurants are this conscientious, however; sometimes, the locally sourced cucumber is mixed with conventionally sourced cucumbers and advertised as “local” atop that same salad.

The ubiquity with which farm-to-table restaurants, even the most ardently locally-sourcing, ‘bend their ethics’ has not gone unnoticed amongst the farmers they work with. Joe and Betty Thomas\(^ {138} \) told me with a seasoned cynicism about one common way that restaurants claiming to source locally mislead diners. Joe informed me:

> Some of these restaurants...there's a bunch of em, “oh we’re buyin’ local” and this and that. Well, you know, they buy a little bit but then you look at, when we drop off stuff we go in the back and there's a Sysco truck. They're pulling off the very same things. So they take a little bit of the local and mix it with the—but boy they’ve got that all over their menu and stuff like that.

Betty, a bit more diplomatically, added,

> Or what does local mean? I mean, when you go—This one time we went into a restaurant in Madison and we said, you know OK I wanna get a steak, where did it

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\(^ {138} \) Interview 13.07

from dish to dish. A steak, for example, is a relatively expensive raw ingredient, but it requires very little labor to prepare and serve. Raw vegetables, on the other hand, might be inexpensive relative to meat and other ingredients, however the labor required to transform them into their final consumable form might be far greater. Yet, a steak typically fetches a higher price than a vegetarian dish regardless of the dish’s complexity or level of difficulty to prepare. To compensate for this conundrum, rather than pricing each menu item based on a fixed markup (say, forty percent higher than the labor and food costs imbedded in each dish) industry experts suggest a ‘weighted average’ approach that “allows the “stars” to save the “dogs’” (the ‘stars’ being the best sellers with the highest profit margin). See Donald E. Lundberg and John R. Walker, *The Restaurant: from Concept to Operation*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1993), 67.
come from cause you’ve got it listed as local, didn’t name the farm or nothin’, just got it listed as local. Ok, where’s it from? It was IVP in Green Bay, a big packing thing, that’s local because it’s in Green Bay.

Joe continued,

Or the other guy says we buy it local out of Baraboo, it’s called SYSCO. (Betty laughs) And this goes on and—I would say the majority of the restaurants are guilty of this.

Another farmer, Max, agreed,

There’s been restaurants that we’ve left because their philosophies aren’t like ours and they want us for the wrong reasons. There’s been restaurants that greenwash, they want our name… And then as soon as we figure it out that they’re, this isn’t like what we thought, you know, they don’t really wanna buy local.139

In fact, not only have Joe and Betty experienced firsthand the commingling of products from farm and semi trucks at the back doors and loading docks of Madison’s restaurants; some scholars advocating food system localization encourage this sort of omnivorous sourcing. In their 2003 article, for example, Starr et al. emphasize:

In encouraging restaurants and institutions to buy local, it is important to conceptualize this transition as less than a total commitment. It does not mean changing their whole menu constantly. It can mean just integrating Colorado staples (like potatoes and beans) into the menu, regularly buying a few local high-quality year-round specialty items (salad mix, quinoa, winter squash, honey, goat cheese, herbs), stopping by the farmers market for a few seasonal items, offering a seasonal special, or adding one local year-round menu item, like Colorado potato pancakes with Colorado applesauce.140

For Starr et al. and others, purchasing some things locally is not only better than nothing; buying anything local, it seems, qualifies a restaurant as “locally-sourcing.” The ambiguity of the meaning of local and multitude of perspectives leads to contestations over how “locally-sourcing” comes to be defined and qualified. If buying one pound of carrots from a local farmer qualifies a restaurant to be considered just as “locally-sourcing” as a restaurant that

139 Interview 12.08, S2
140 Starr et al. 2003. My emphasis.
purchases fifty pounds a week, why buy the additional forty-nine pounds? Moreover, as Betty rightfully asked, what does local mean in the first place?

As with other powerful, values-laden, and intractably vague terms (for example, “sustainable” and “community”), the very elusiveness of a definition is itself a defining and meaningful feature of the term “local.” It implies geographic proximity without a clear delineation of boundaries or circumscription in scale or scope. Supporters of the local food movement have attempted to corral the many values imbued in the use of the word “local” by developing a definition of the term, though each time the term elides circumscription.\footnote{A 2009 study of “local” restaurant purchasing in Ohio, for example, defined local in terms of simple, clear-cut geopolitical boundaries, defining it as “any produce, dairy or meat products grown or raised in the State of Ohio.” Yet, researchers soon found that they had to expand this definition to portions of neighboring states for metropolitan areas that spanned state lines. Inwood et al. 2009.}

Attempts to define “local” in terms of a framework of distance a food has traveled have been heavily scrutinized by scholars.\footnote{See James E. McWilliams, *Just Food : Where Locavores Get it Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly*, (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2009); Michael Carolan, “Avoiding the “Traps” in Agrifood Studies,” *The Sociology of Food and Agriculture*, (New York: Routledge, 2012).} Less simplistic conceptions of local (such as sociologist Jack Kloppenburg’s “foodshed”) more successfully capture the amount of work done by the word “local,” though they are certainly no less problematic from the perspective of translating into practice.

Odessa Piper’s definition of local, influential to the world of Madison farm-to-table imaginaries, in many ways follows Kloppenburg’s foodshed conception rather than a food-miles approach. She explains: “I realized quite early on that it is not one definitive distance, like a 5 or 500-mile radius. If you try to exclusively follow that logic you will be frustrated because context is everything. Or maybe you are one of those rare people who can also
count the number of angels on the head of a pin.”\textsuperscript{143} Piper prefers to think in terms of “regional reliance” instead, which she defines as “a larger swath of society participating in the foods of their region and the pride that the benefit that accrues to the entire culture when you have foods with their place, their identity, their place of taste intact and when they are celebrated within a region.”\textsuperscript{144} She clarifies that by regionally reliant she does not mean regionally exclusive,

Of course we’d use lemons, you know, of course we would feature some ocean fish, particularly things like wild salmon when it was in season. But any of these ingredients I drew upon from outside my region I always made sure that they were in season in their location. So we had a lot of citrus on our menu during the time of the citrus season in California, we would have wild salmon on our menus during the run of wild salmon. But the vast majority of our ingredients would be from nearby.\textsuperscript{145}

During our conversation, Piper elaborated that, for her, region is defined by three “pillars:” the first involves the physical geography, encapsulated by the watershed concept, and the second involves a “holism” in production that leaves a “taste of its place” intact. The third, she admits, is the most complicated—it is “the distance we the eaters are willing to travel to the ingredient.” She explained,

Regionality is a relationship. It’s not just one point on a map, it’s two points. It’s a point of origin and when it’s received and ingested and I think that we as eaters bring values and social connection and commitment to the foods that we choose to eat and we’re reinforcing regionality when we prize and cherish and identify ingredients as being from where we live.\textsuperscript{146}

Piper’s conception of local, like Kloppenburg’s, is far from definitive—and for good reason. Although its vagueness can cause frustration on the part of those attempting to implement local food systems, the persistent openness of local as a concept and the continued debates over its meaning are necessary to maintaining the reflexivity in the food

\textsuperscript{143} Odessa Piper, personal communication.
\textsuperscript{144} Interview 13.05
\textsuperscript{145} Interview 13.05
\textsuperscript{146} Interview 13.05
movement called for by critical agri-food scholars such as DuPuis and Goodman.\textsuperscript{147} Its openness also, however, leaves farm-to-table imaginaries vulnerable to cooptation, as we have already seen in the example of Chipotle’s Scarecrow video.

Thus far, this thesis has focused on the paths food takes to the restaurant table, including the formation of relationships between restaurants and farmers. Now, we turn to the table, to examine this particular site of worldmaking, where consumers are enrolled into the imaginary as a way of disorienting them from a globalized food system and creating different subjectivities through various media (décor, menus, server narratives, etc.) but primarily through food itself.

\textsuperscript{147} DuPuis and Goodman 2005.
The couple sits at the table, expectantly though not a little ill at ease amongst the polished plates, sparkling glassware, and gliding waitstaff dressed in solid blocks of color. They look lost, stiff in their nice clothes, adrift in a sea of white tablecloths. I walk up to the table pleasantly, reassuringly. In my right hand is a small plate containing two small, round crackers topped with dollops of cheese and jam. I clear some space on the table with my left hand, and say “Good Evening!” as I drop the plate in the center of the table as though it’s the most natural thing in the world to be feeding two strangers tiny crackers while using what outside of this particular room would be immediately perceived as outdated formal language. It took me years to feel comfortable with this simple act of setting down two crackers at a table. When I first started working at L’Etoile, the crackers were made with hickory nuts, a smooth layer of fresh goat’s milk cheese crowned with a perfect half of a hickory nut that had been hand-shelled by a retired couple who claimed cracking the nuts helped their arthritis. Odessa Piper called the crackers “shamans,” much in the same way she once referred to my position as host as a “local food ambassador.” We were showing people the way, one bite-sized cracker at a time.

I introduce myself to the couple. I tell them about the cracker and I can see the two of them visibly begin to relax. They ask about the farmers’ market, which would take place the next morning right outside the floor-to-ceiling windows facing Madison’s capitol building. Two years previous to this moment, from the Capitol lawn to the restaurants’ entrance had been filled with protestors, but we don’t talk about that. Today, just children playing in the grass and the occasional wedding photo shoot. The next morning would see one hundred and sixty side-by-side tents, selling products grown from Door County in the north to the Driftless Area in the south, though with the summer’s drought the vegetables
would be tiny, not a lettuce leaf in sight. The Dane County farmers’ market is a spectacle—double-wide strollers, ambling in the baking Wisconsin sun, chitchatting with friendly farmers. As I describe the market, all of my physical actions and my facial expression radiate calm and I can see that my charges are easing into the rhythms of the restaurant. “Head cheese!” the woman points to a line on the menu. “My grandmother used to make that, back on the farm. In those days using all the parts of the animal was a matter of necessity.” Satisfied that they are becoming comfortable, I leave them to settle in. In the back of my mind, tightly controlled panic. I have five other tables, and they each need my presence five minutes ago. I rapidly reprioritize, and walk with measured pace toward the kitchen.

Through the swinging doors, a different world. “Corner!” I call sharply as I round the bend, another server closing the distance between us with a delicate tower of baby lettuces in one hand and a fan of nearly transparent slices of beef tenderloin in the other. We expertly dance around one another. The cooks alternate between bent attentiveness, delicately placing microgreens on top of perfectly-cooked filets and arranging tomatoes with a surgeon’s precision, and fluid motion as they smoothly turn, reach, squat and rise with a practiced economy of movement in the tight quarters behind the stainless steel line. The sous chef eyes the line cooks warily, silence punctuated by occasional reproach or staccato correction; “yes, chef” the inevitable answer of the cooks with bent heads, busy hands as “hands!” calls the expediter. And that’s what I am, two hands, gripping the edges of plates draped with food. “Three-oh-seven. Strip to one, branzino to two.” The plate of steak in my left hand, fish in my right, I repeat, “Three-oh-seven. Strip one, branzino two.” I commit these phrases to my short-term memory and map them onto the floor. Outside of the kitchen, I slow my pace, cede the right of way to “guests” and wind around the bar to the front of the restaurant. I think again, “strip to position one, branzino to position two” as I
approach table 307. Making the snap assessment that this table is rather old-fashioned, I set
the fish down first in front of the woman first, though the other plate is heavier and hotter
and all I want to do is get it out of my hands as quickly as possible. I perform chivalry for
them. “Enjoy,” I urge, backing away graciously as the couple eyes their food with
anticipation.
Part 3: At the Table - Producing an Imaginary

Tastes and Ghosts: Farm-to-Table Possessions

Writing anything is a treason of sorts. Even the cold recitation of facts—which is hardly what I’ve been up to—is never the thing itself. And the events described are somehow diminished in the telling…. Our movements through time and space seem somehow trivial compared to a heap of boiled meat in broth, the smell of saffron, garlic, fishbones and Pernod.—Anthony Bourdain, *Kitchen Confidential.*

In one sense, food in the grocery store aisle or on the plate (like the proverbial dead man) tells no tales. Cook and Crang draw on Marx’s concept of the commodity fetish to explain the ways that agricultural inputs, once turned into commodities, become divorced from the social, spatial, and ecological relations of their production. Under capitalist modes of production and consumption, the displacement of food from “worlds of production” into “worlds of consumption” creates a void of geographical knowledge, hiding food’s connection to the people and places that produced it. As David Harvey explains, the “grapes that sit upon the supermarket shelves are mute”—we cannot see on them the “fingerprints of exploitation” or know their place of origin.

The muteness of food commodities, particularly in light of a globalized food system rife with inequalities, is disturbing. As Michael Pollan argues in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma,*

What is perhaps most troubling, and sad, about industrial eating is how thoroughly it obscures all these relationships and connections… But forgetting, or not knowing in the first place, is what the industrial food chain is all about, the principal reason it is opaque, for if we could see what lies on the far side of the increasingly high walls of our industrial agriculture, we would surely change the way we eat.

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150 Cook and Crang 1996, 141.
152 Pollan, 2006, 10.
Revealing the hidden social relations of production of foods, or getting “behind the veil” in Harvey’s framing, is necessary if we are to take moral responsibility for our actions in the world.153 Sweeping aside the veil, however, is not the only important work that must be done. Following Cook and Crang, the veil itself is more than simply an opaque blocking of vision from reality; it is also a screen onto which stories can be projected, resulting in a “double commodity fetish.” Since foods are displaced from worlds of production into worlds of consumption, any subsequent “placing” of foods is then the result of active social construction. The double commodity fetish both limits consumer knowledge about systems of food provision and simultaneously emphasizes geographical knowledges that are deployed to ‘re-enchant’ and differentiate food.154

These socially produced knowledges are strategically deployed through what Cook and Crang term the representational politics of culinary circuits—to add value to products, to make moral claims, and to make distinctions between the self and the other, among other purposes, with the effect of “re-enchanting” and differentiating food commodities.155 Following anthropologist Heather Paxton, Odessa Piper refers to an “economy of sentiment” embodied in food “that is transmittable in its flavor and in its vitality and in its integrity and in its story” to customers. “My job as the chef,” she told me, “is to communicate that.”156

The deployment of these knowledges is significant, for it is through them that foods “make places as symbolic constructs, being deployed in the discursive construction of

153 Cook and Crang 1996.
154 Cook and Crang 1996, 132.
155 Ibid.
156 Interview 13.05
various imaginative geographies.” Imaginaries, like other kinds of stories, have the potential for transformation—they do not just describe a world, they create it, often in unexpected ways. These imaginaries can thus be “productive, participatory, ontological interventions that might call into being alternative worlds.” They have the power to materialize by the ways they affect and move; to change the world through the poststructuralist project of changing the ways we understand and speak of it.

But food, our proverbial dead man, in a sense does not itself tell stories; the naked eye cannot see the fingerprints of exploitation; places of production and consumption are spatially and temporally distanced from one another. And yet the dead man does find ways to speak—food can conjure “ghosts of taste;” “everyday séances” involving possessions that shape the ways that we experience food. These ghostly presences, conjured contextually through the representational politics of the double commodity fetish, are felt through embodied experience as food is viscerally taken into the body. Although food may be silent on the question of the social and ecological relations from which it was produced, it remains a powerful substance in itself. The smell of garlic and fish bones in Anthony Bourdain’s bowl is experiential in a way that defies the written word. Farm-to-table restaurants are one place where such possessions occur, where consumers are enrolled in farm-to-table imaginaries.

“Culinary Circuits of Knowledge Production”

As this master’s thesis has argued, local food is not just simply formed through the physical pathways that food moves along from farm to plate; it also formed through the

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157 Cook and Crang 1996, 140.
159 Cameron 2012.
160 Stiles et al. 2011.
meanings it gains along the way. Fine suggests that cooks, servers and customers themselves
together form a complex culture of production; farmers form the fourth pillar in the
production of farm-to-table imaginaries, with of course innumerable others playing
supporting roles. In other words, as Odessa Piper argued:

Chefs alone can’t pull off this revolution. Our waitstaff also needs to make farm
visits, our dish staff needs to understand why they need to spend extra time cleaning
farm soil off the deliveries coming in our back door, and our bookkeeper needs to
know… she’s going to be managing hundreds of farm accounts rather than a couple
of Sodexo accounts.

This culture of production, forming what Cook and Crang term “culinary circuits,” comes
together to produce and reproduce farm-to-table imaginaries at the table.

According to Inwood et al., “chefs and restaurants occupy an important intersection
in the food distribution system that allows them to potentially generate greater interest in
local foods among their consumers as well as the farmers and distributors they “source”
from,” increasingly so as chefs become public personalities that are celebrated in mainstream
media outlets. Inwood et al. see personal relationships and interactions as key to the flow
of information across individuals and groups. “In the case of local foods, then,” they argue,
“the dining experience and personal interactions with restaurant kitchen and wait staff may
be one important avenue of generating awareness or reinforcing interest in local foods
among the consuming public.”

Culinary ideology as mediated by cooks and chefs is an important factor in the
transformation of local foods and the production of farm-to-table imaginaries. Many farm-

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162 Interview 13.05
163 Cook and Crang 1996.
164 Inwood et al 2006.
165 Inwood et al 2006.
to-table restaurants have been heavily influenced by the tenets of nouvelle cuisine, a culinary movement originating in France in the 1970s. Nouvelle cuisine, a radical break from its fine dining predecessor haute cuisine, called for an abandonment of classical highly regimented French cooking traditions of in favor of the values of “truth, lightness, simplicity, and imagination.” The practical application of nouvelle cuisine typically involves light cooking of fresh products with an emphasis on presentation and innovative techniques, or letting ingredients “speak for themselves.” At Piper’s L’Etoile, this entailed avoiding overly complicated dishes—what she refers to as putting “too many divas on the stage.” As she explained:

I’d try and not obscure the ingredient with too many chef-y techniques. Use as many as appropriate but no more in order for the integrity of the ingredient, its outline, to be visible. Sometimes for me that meant not putting too many fantastic ingredients on the plate... You can’t listen to a great diva if another one is hollering in the background.167

Often, cooks following the tenets of nouvelle cuisine are frustrated by customers that do not fit within this canon, feeling that “the legitimacy of their aesthetic standards is being invalidated by external demands.” Part of the work of farm-to-table restaurants, then, has been to bring consumer demand into line with the canon of nouvelle cuisine.

The ways that local food comes to be transformed in the kitchen in accordance with (or in opposition to) situated culinary ideologies and norms, including nouvelle cuisine, are part of food’s social life as it travels from farm to table, gaining meaning along the way. As sociologists argue, however, food is not the only product that is sold in restaurants; rather,

167 Interview 13.05
“consumers are buying a particular kind of social experience.”¹⁶⁸ This social experience is largely produced through the work of servers, who behave in predictably unpredictable ways.

A server’s job is to keep customers, management, and kitchen staff happy, within reason; mandates that are rarely well-aligned and require constant renegotiation. Moreover, keeping customers happy is no simple endeavor. In a 2009 New York Times blog post titled, “100 Things Restaurant Staffers Should Never Do,” Hamptons seafood restaurant owner Bruce Buschel inadvertently flags the shifting ground that is server etiquette, issuing proscriptions such as:

62. Do not fill the water glass every two minutes, or after each sip. You’ll make people nervous.
62 (a). Do not let a glass sit empty for too long.

And:

76. Do not ask if a guest is finished the very second the guest is finished. Let guests digest, savor, reflect.
77. Do not disappear.¹⁶⁹

Servers operate in the interstitial spaces between the rather contradictory imperatives listed above, as well as the physical spaces between the kitchen and table. Servers’ employers are in a sense both the establishments that hire them and the customers they serve since the federally mandated minimum wage for servers (as well as other tipped employees) was at the time of this thesis two dollars and thirteen cents.¹⁷⁰ The majority of the wage, then, comes not from the restaurant payroll but from customer tips. Servers rely on restaurants to offer employment, but they are also expected to respond to two bosses: restaurant management

and customers. Servers’ basic “scripts” are regularly altered to accommodate the needs and desires of different customers. Accordingly, autonomy from management is necessary so that servers can accommodate the specificities of their customers. Because of this particular configuration of compensation, a server’s “worth” is under constant judgment and the means of their livelihood is meted out in the form of tips under the guise of punishment and praise. Often, characterizations of servers are decidedly unkind—for example, Mars deems servers ‘vultures’ who need the support of a group, but act alone ‘at the feast.’

The characterization of servers as simply “serving” their guests, however, is woefully incomplete. Although a subjectivity encouraged by the act of waiting tables and through its compensation structure pushes servers to tailor their service to different customers’ desires, they are also helping to produce those desires in the first place even as they communicate stories told by farmers and chefs at the table. Servers’ roles, then, are as important in perpetuating farm-to-table imaginaries as farmers’ on the farm, chefs’ at the market, and cooks’ in the kitchen. As one farmer explained:

But the front of the house, they’re the most important people you’ve got. You have to have great chefs but just that one person out in the front can ruin everything.

The stories told at the table about local food matter in the first instance because they differentiate products in a world of products. As previously discussed, differentiation brings producers price premiums based on consumers’ health, environmental or geographic concerns and adding an ethical element to marketplace exchanges. According to Bloom and Hinrichs, “a farm-based brand can help even out power imbalances along the value chain by

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174 Interview 12.08
giving producers more control over the product.” With printed labels and advertisements, farmers can carefully craft and maintain the visual stories that are told about their farms and products. But what happens when the farm story is orally conveyed by restaurant staff, or through menus and advertising that restaurants control rather than farmers? These sorts of stories can be slippery creatures, taking on lives of their own. The ways that servers talk about farmers’ products therefore matter a great deal, require education in their own right, and warrant a watchful eye, as I will demonstrate in this chapter.

Farmers participate in circuits of culinary culture not only through the provision of foodstuffs, but also through the telling and stewarding of these tableside stories about local food. Farmers’ stories, moreover, can be important in getting a product through a restaurant’s door in the first place, perhaps as important as the more tangible qualities of the product. One farmer explained the beginning of a longstanding relationship with a Madison restaurant thus: “[The chef] liked our product. He liked our story. Which seems to be very important, that there is some kind of story that goes along with the product.” Prescriptive literature from university extension services echoes this claim. A UC Davis pamphlet warns: “Be sure that you are ready with the “story” of your farm. Make it a story, if you haven’t already.”

Farmers “make” these stories in a variety of ways, starting with the telling at the initial point of contact with a restaurant and continuing through a number of avenues thereafter. One particularly effective strategy, according to a number of farmers who work regularly with Madison-area restaurants, is inviting restaurant staff out to the farm. The visits that I participated in ranged from more formal or participatory (helping with harvesting,
making apple cider, etc.) to more informal community building through sharing food and stories. Each, however, began with a tour. By getting cooks, chefs, servers and others to “see” the farm, farmers hope that this particular vision of the farm will come to be invoked at the table—a ghost to be conjured in a sort of pleasurable haunting that draws customers into farm-to-table imaginaries.

Several of the farmers I spoke with kept a close eye on the ways that restaurants are representing them at the table. Often, this meant reviewing menus and advertisements from restaurants, making the occasional tactful phone call when necessary. For those farmers who rely more heavily on restaurant sales, their watchful eye can be a good deal more involved. One farmer I spoke with, Max, makes a point of eating occasionally at the dozen or so restaurants in town that serve his beef. Recently, he ordered a burger containing his ground beef, advertised by his farm name on the menu. When questioned about the patty’s origins, the server said he didn’t know, but told the farmer he thought it came from a nearby dairy farmer. Max, who prides himself on his environmental sustainability efforts and the flavor and quality of his beef and who has staked his livelihood on the currency of the stories told about his products, corrected the server and promptly stopped selling to that restaurant. Max followed up with the restaurant’s owner, whom he informed:

You’re gonna have to do some work with these folks. If you think selling local is easy and your people aren’t supporting it, then your front line… It’s your front line. If you really believe in buying local like you just said you did, then you need to instruct your front line that that’s what you’re doing.  

Then, to me, Max explained:

That’s what the farm visits, why they’re are so important, get people out and see. “Well, I think it comes from this old dairy farmer.” No.

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178 Interview 12.08
179 Interview 12.08
When smoothly functioning, the culinary circuit of knowledge production formed by kitchen staff, servers, farmers and customers can shift imaginaries, with material consequences. Of course, it is difficult to pin down the ways in which imaginaries get mapped onto landscapes, to trace the material effects of collective imaginings. One such small moment where we can witness the transformative power of the imaginary is the case of the rutabaga.

For the unfamiliar, a rutabaga is a starchy root vegetable similar to a turnip that grows well in Wisconsin’s northern climate. Jeff, the long-time diversified vegetable producer, had been an early investor in the concept of providing local and seasonal food year-round, and not simply during Wisconsin’s relatively short growing season. Winter, however, posed a particularly stark challenge to local eating. To attempt to account for seasonality, Jeff began growing a variety of root vegetables and experimenting with their storage since, as he told me, “None of us really knew in great detail what a winter diet in Wisconsin looked like, so there was a lot of trial and error.”

Learning to store rutabagas and other root vegetables effectively, however, was not enough. As Jeff explained,

We can grow rutabagas… but there’s very little market for rutabagas. They’re considered old fashioned and people had to eat them during the Depression. You didn’t have anything else, but why would you go looking for a rutabaga, you know? In other words, consumers had to learn to want to go looking for rutabagas. Enter his relationship with L’Etoile’s Odessa Piper. Jeff laughed,

Odessa, gutsy little Odessa. She cooked rutabagas and put em on [her menu]. She developed a root mash that would take different mixtures of potatoes, parsnip, always threw some garlic in there, sunchoke, and a little rutabaga, turnip. Instead of mashed potatoes, it became various root mashes, you know? That was brand new.

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180 Interview 12.10
181 Interview 12.10
By putting rutabaga in particular on the menu, Jeff notes, “She was able to elevate the lowly rutabaga and boring mashed potatoes to something exquisite and five-star.” Twenty years later, Jeff’s farm planted two and half acres of rutabagas and he felt confident they would sell. Jeff pointed to another, larger lesson he draws from the example of the rutabaga: “Over a long period of time [working with restaurants] really helped us establish our name as a farm… The same thing it did to the lowly rutabaga, it did for us too, you know?”

Elevating the lowly rutabaga (and Jeff’s farm) was a more involved process than simply listing the vegetable on a menu. It drew on the complex circuit of culinary culture previously described. It also, importantly, drew in the remaining pillar that has been alluded to throughout this thesis but so far not explicitly addressed: the receiver of the plate of food, the subject of food ghost hauntings, and the recipient of the farm-to-table imaginary. I am referring, of course, to the consumer.

*Enrolling the Consumer*

From the moment of entry into a farm-to-table restaurant, the consumer (in this case, the diner) is presented with various representations of the farm invoking farm-to-table imaginaries. The restaurant’s very name (in Madison, for example, “Graze,” “Harvest,” “Forequarter,” “Heritage,” and even “Pig in a Fur Coat”) often invokes imagery of the places, people, animals, and traditions from whence their food came. Through the restaurants’ doors, features such as maps, chalkboards, place and farm names on menus, and even structural features of the restaurant itself\(^\text{182}\) summon farm-to-table imaginaries in the minds’ eye of its guests. Kitchens are often “open”—either part of the dining room itself, or

\(^{182}\) Recall, for example, L’Etoile’s sliding copper barn door and its silo-shaped bar from Chapter 1.
visible through prominently-featured windows through which customers can watch the work of the cooks in transforming ingredients in an act of display as much as transparency. The spaces of farm-to-table restaurant, as with other types of restaurants, aspire to create for their visitors a particular experience.

This experience is linked heavily to a particular consumer that farm-to-table restaurants both cater to and produce. In *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Michael Pollan argues that the modern, industrial food system with its “freshly fractionated biomass—the sugars and starches, the alcohols and acids, the emulsifiers and stabilizers and viscosity-control agents” requires “a certain kind of eater—an industrial eater—to consume these fractions of corn, and we are, or have evolved into, that supremely adapted creature: the eater of processed food.”

A local food system, he claims, on the other hand “implies not only a new kind of food producer, but a new kind of eater as well,” one whose “sense of taste has ruined him for a Big Mac, and whose sense of place has ruined him for shopping for groceries at Wal-Mart. This is the consumer who understands—or remembers—that, in Wendell Berry’s memorable phrase, ‘eating is an agricultural act.’”

A function of the world of farm-to-table imaginaries, consciously or otherwise, has been to produce this post-industrial subjectivity in diners. At Waters’ Chez Panisse and Piper’s L’Etoile alike, this has been an outright goal. At Piper’s L’Etoile, each night’s menu included the story of its ingredients, what Piper refers to as an “emotional snapshot” of the

184 Pollan, 2006, 184.
185 Pollan, 2006, 185.
season, and a note thanking diners for appreciating regional foods and supporting local farmers. In reference to these menu notes, Piper explained to me:

That was something that I said to my dinner guests, and that was something they really took seriously, like they felt that they were investors in local agriculture. *That they were part of the solution. That they were part of the very necessary transmission of the value of that ingredient to the greater culture.* Like, it didn’t stop with the chef’s artistry, or it didn’t stop with the waiter’s description. But it just kept going, and that they had a role as well in perpetuating both the existence and the story of these ingredients through their appreciation.

Consumers are thus not simply passive recipients of farm-to-table imaginaries; rather, they are enrolled in the process throughout their experience in the space of the farm-to-table restaurant. Through that experience, farm-to-table restaurateurs hope, comes transformation. A transformed consumer participating in a farm-to-table imaginary is, following Stiles et al., in a sense “possessed;” haunted by ghosts of taste, and envisioning food as necessarily storied. This farm-to-table consumer should taste the difference in the food in a way that makes the food itself powerfully transformative as part of a larger argument painted through the imaginary. It is at the table, then, that the consumer is imaginatively transported to the farm.

In her book, *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir*, anthropologist and writer Amy Trubek writes, “Perhaps I am a naïve culinary optimist. I know that Wal-Mart, McDonald’s, Olive Garden, and Sysco dominate our culinary landscape… How can I possibly believe that in an era of global convenience cuisine there is also emerging a modern cuisine du terroir, with fidelity to place and season?” She answers her own question,

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186 The specific phrasing Piper used: “Some of the finest foods to be found anywhere in the world are in our own Back yard. We thank you for supporting all the local growers who supply L’Etoile and for valuing their commitment to these patient arts.” Odessa Piper, “assortedMENUMESSAGES.doc” 1998-1999, personal communication.
187 Interview 13.05. My emphasis.
“ Appropriately enough, I can believe it because of something I ate in a restaurant.”

Trubek, a native Madisonian, writes of this particular food, “I took a bite and was stunned.”

The particular food item that enrolled Trubek into a farm-to-table imaginary was none other than the hickory nut, Odessa Piper’s shaman, consumed at L’Etoile.

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188 Trubek, 2008, 139.
**Conclusion**

This particular soufflé was good, not great; its texture was slightly grainier than it should be, which makes me think I may have beaten the eggs a little too long. But it tasted wonderful, everyone agreed, and as I rolled the rich yet weightless confection on my tongue, I closed my eyes and suddenly there they were: Joel’s hens, marching down the gangplank from out of their Eggmobile, fanning out across the early morning pasture, there in the grass where this sublime bite began.

—Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*

Farm-to-table imaginaries are powerful stuff. Just as they conjure Joel Salatin’s hens for Michael Pollan, the imaginative geographies they call forth in the mind’s eye of consumers offer alluring alternatives to Harvey’s mute grapes on the supermarket shelf and the disturbing imagery of factory farming exposés. In many ways, farm-to-table imaginaries have supported the efforts of local food activists to create viable regional food systems embedded in local places with shorter and more equitable supply chains. These imaginaries are linked to material realities for those participating in the world of farm-to-table restaurant sourcing: farmers, chefs, servers, eaters, and others. For farmers selling products directly to Madison restaurants, this market provides them with one outlet through which to sell their goods, a way to differentiate and add value to their products, contributing to the production of a socially embedded marketplace. Farmers are able to capture higher prices for their goods than they would otherwise be able to through longer distribution chains linked to commodity markets. Additionally, those who share in farm-to-table imaginaries are able to, however briefly, disengage from the mindset of Michael Pollan’s “industrial eater” or, for restaurant purchasers, what I’ve called a distribution mindset, offering the possibility of developing alternative subjectivities; different ways of relating to the people and places from whence their food came.

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189 Pollan 2006, 273.
A farm-to-table imaginary appeals to deeply-held urban notions of the agrarian ideal, offering, as Julie Guthman and Michael Pollan have claimed, a way for eaters to “opt out” of the modern, industrial, globalized food system and to reimagine themselves as part of a more natural way of producing food. It is a beautiful imaginary, and the social and ecological relations embedded within it can be heartfelt, linked to material practices of careful environmental stewardship, and truly inspirational on the part of those involved. And yet, there are dangers here, for the imaginary has edges beyond which its participants cannot always see, and in the shadows beyond are dangers that we cannot afford to ignore.

Michael Pollan argues that “storied” food helps one to better grasp one's embeddedness in social and ecological communities, with “threads of narrative knitting us together as a group, and knitting the group into the larger fabric of the given world.”190 A group, however, is defined not only by who is included in the knitted fabric, but also who is not—food in this case “serves both to solidify group membership and to set groups apart.”191 Even as these imaginaries help to materialize a socially embedded marketplace and transform social and ecological relations among participants, however, they create a symbolic “Other”192—in this case, a representation of the industrialized modern food system, whose logic and activities provide the demon against which farm-to-table efforts are measured. A danger of thinking of this system as Other is that it isn’t really an Other at all; it is us, too. The local farmer selling produce at the farmer’s market and featured on the menu of Madison’s locally-sourcing restaurants remains an island in a sea of grain, flanked on all sides

192 For a helpful overview of how “Other” has been used in geographic literature, see Anna Secor’s entry in the Dictionary of Human Geography. Anna Secor, "Other/Otherness,” *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009).
by commodity crop production that cheaply feeds urban areas a plethora of grain-based foods.

Some would argue that the subjectivities produced in and through farm-to-table imaginaries are the production of neoliberal eaters, leading us to ask whether we should look to consumers to transform the food system in the first place. I would argue that the danger is not the creation of these subjectivities per se, but when these come to be seen as a complete answer to the question of how to transform the food system. Participating in a farm-to-table imaginary risks perpetuating a delusion that, by “opting out” of consuming products of an industrial food system, we therefore have no obligation toward the people and places outside of the imaginary. Moreover, from within the imaginary those people and places that provide the vast majority of food consumed by American urban-dwellers are cast in a shadowed light—as the Other, they are therefore unethical, and unethical by choice.

Problematically, a bifurcation of the food system into small, local, artisanal and big, global, industrial is deeply embedded in class relations. As Julie Guthman has warned, understanding alternative consumption patterns as “reflexive” and indicative of individual ethical decision-making risks ignoring that such “good food” is often out of reach for non-elites and inadvertently demonize those who are alienated by the white spaces of local food, its labor requirements, and high price tag. In other words, the food movement has the potential to reinforce class privilege by contributing to the production of “a segregated food system where “ethical” eaters are understood as affluent, responsible, and knowledgeable, leaving those with less economic and cultural capital to shop in less prestigious, less desirable, and less “ethical” food system niche.” The reflexive eater’s counterpart, Michael

194 Johnston, 2011.
Pollan’s industrial eater, is by this logic understood as unreflexive, unhealthy, and somehow individually at fault for taking part in an unethical, globalized food system. Likewise, a divided food system of small and large-scale farms has repercussions for places of production as well as consumption. Sociologist Thomas Lyson warns against encouraging a food system marked by a “starkly bipolar production and marketing structure,” positing that we must instead support an “agriculture of the middle” that can sustain rural agricultural communities across the United States.\(^{195}\)

Additionally, the labor of many of those producing farm-to-table imaginaries (including myself) often remains obscured in the imaginary itself. Even as farm to table imaginaries have raised aloft producers, artisans, and chefs, the labor of other restaurant workers remains underappreciated and even purposely hidden. This leads one to wonder, what has happened to Ruth Reichl’s Chez Panisse, where the food prepared was “grown by people who cared for the earth and served by people who cared for one another”?\(^{196}\) I fear that as the “farm-to-table” trend has gone nationwide, the second part of that phrase has been lost in translation. This is not to diminish the ways that farm-to-table restaurants have played an important role in “raising aloft” the small-scale farmer but rather to underscore that the double commodity fetish, like the commodity fetish itself, can serve to obscure certain kinds of labor as it reimagines a food landscape.

We live in a time when one in thirteen Americans work in the restaurant industry.\(^{197}\) In the vast majority of cases, the true cost of labor is not included in the menu price when dining at a full service restaurant. Farm-to-table restaurants account for this more than most, since the farmer sees a higher percentage of the revenue than through typical commodity

\(^{195}\) Lyson and Guptill 2004.
\(^{196}\) Reichl, 2011, 16.
\(^{197}\) National Restaurant Association, 2013.
distribution channels. We should not forget, however, that much remains to be done to create a culture of production (and consumption) surrounding food that is both socially and environmentally “ethical.” In terms of restaurant labor specifically, how might we begin to imagine a future where we care about the plight of the hardworking farmer, chef, dishwasher, cook, host, and server alike? Labor activist Saru Jayaraman argues that restaurant labor needs a “Michael Pollan moment.” In other words, we need to continue to reconceptualize what it means to eat ethically, and to question the subjectivity that is called into being by sitting at restaurant tables more broadly.

Clearly, then, there is much work to be done to make our food system more socially just as well as environmentally responsible, from farm to table. ‘Local food’ itself is contested terrain, and, as I have demonstrated, it is certainly not free of power relations. Recognizing the limitations of both local food and its farm-to-table geographic imaginaries, however, does not excuse the environmental and social problems of the modern industrial food system—the exploitations of agribusiness, the devastating downward spiral of prices farmers receive on global commodity markets, the environmental inundation of agricultural chemicals that have been detailed at length by scholars, journalists, and activists. As Stiles et al have cogently argued, “We must avoid essentializing “local” food and be wary of a falsely apolitical localism. But we must also avoid letting “global” giants off the hook for the nutritionally impoverished, environmentally destructive, culturally homogeneous diet they spread while making claims that are blatantly false.” As I have demonstrated, the geographic imaginaries produced in and through farm-to-table restaurants, imperfect though they may be, do facilitate a different way of relating to food with its own set of social

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199 Stiles et al., 2011, 235.
relations and ecological practices deserving of close scholarly scrutiny.

Cook and Crang argue that, rather than simply deepening and thickening superficial consumer knowledges, we should think more carefully about “the spatial settings and social itineraries” of the use of imaginaries. From this perspective, we should not be quick to dismiss farm-to-table imaginaries, but rather ask what functions they serve, and what potential they hold for opening new spaces for alternatives to remake the food system. Following Clare Hinrichs, this remaking involves “neither a revolutionary break nor a radical transformation” but instead “deliberate, sometimes unglamorous multipronged efforts in areas where openings exist to do things differently.” While the creation of a more ecologically and socially responsible food system will absolutely require policy change at the level of the federal government, including an overhaul of the subsidies that have sweeping effects across the country and, indeed, the world, it will also require social and emotional change, and the cultivation of receptivity to a different way of connecting to food. Farm-to-table imaginaries are one way of producing this. This thesis offers one tracing out of a farm-to-table geographic imaginary and the blind spots just beyond its edges, to understand the world in which it is produced and, in doing so, illustrate some of the ways it can and cannot transform the food system.

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199 Cook and Crang, 1996.
Epilogue: Closing time

The candles are burning low on the tables, and the last check has been dropped. The waitstaff sits in the back, quietly giving one another a hard time as necessary, smoothing over grievances and relieving tension, commiserating and celebrating in turn, and recapping the tougher moments of the evening. Some of us are getting cranky, our feet hurting, patience running low. Part of me thinks it’s past time for a drink, but I know I need to go home. I have an early morning of reading, writing, the work of an academic ahead of me. I’ll sit at a café and browse the little notebook that I use for both menu notes and jottings during academic talks, material details committed to memory and forgotten interspersed with questions I struggle to answer: “moving between/among epistemologies to be able to talk to different people & not approach groups as cartoons” and “lemon panna cotta with butternut squash and plum sorbet, rabbit rillettes, bacon-mushroom pâté,” followed by, “if stories are imaginary, what is the purpose of this imaginary?” Reconciling these fractured narratives, this is the task of making a life as a participant-observer, as a geographer-in-training, and ultimately as a person who cares about the effects of her actions on the world; this is the challenge of maintaining the integrity of both kinds of work that I value and find meaning in. This is not always the most comfortable of spaces, but I am privileged to occupy it and as the night draws to a close, I know it.
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