

The Significance of Community Capital in Generating and Upholding a Local Food Movement

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Abstract

This study uses a qualitative approach to investigate factors motivating restaurant owners in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, to source their menu items locally and, secondly, farmers around Oshkosh to provide them with products. I initially hypothesized that the connection between the supply of goods from farmers and restaurant owners primarily stems from profit but found after non-random interviews with four restaurant owners and three farmers from the region that the profit pursuit thesis is invalid. For my research purposes, *local* is defined as coming from within a 60-mile radius. Food is a foundational component of daily life, and with it comes specific ritual and behavior, which can be studied through a sociological lens. Through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in Oshkosh's local food movement, I shed light on various themes including: emphasis on community, instances of false advertising, socioeconomic status of restaurant clientele, accessibility of local farmers to restaurant owners, the future of the local food movement, and variation in local product percentages among restaurants. More research should be done on this topic in general and more specifically in the Fox River Valley region of Wisconsin.

Introduction

This study generally explores factors motivating restaurant owners in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, to source their menu items locally and, secondly, area farmers to provide them with products. The research falls somewhere between micro and macro sociology because I study individuals in face-to-face interviews while simultaneously investigating the widespread social processes at play within the Oshkosh community. Because food is a foundational component of daily life, and with it comes specific rituals and behavior, I chose to focus on the local food movement. The city of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, has never been researched before in this regard.

My initial hypothesis stated that the sole reason for partnerships between restaurant owners and local farmers stems from profit. After facilitating non-random interviews

with four restaurant owners and three farmers from the area, my hypothesis was nullified. Substantially more than profit contributes to local food partnerships. Six key sociological themes prevailed throughout the process including: emphasis on community, instances of false advertising, socioeconomic status of restaurant clientele, accessibility of local farmers to restaurant owners, the future of the local food movement, and variation in local product percentages among restaurants. Each area should be delved into for further study.

Literature Review

Many contributors to literature surrounding the local food movement have a similar viewpoint on the importance of social capital in eliciting productive relationships between local farmers and purchasers (restaurant owners, grocery stores, etc.). According to Flora and Flora, social capital can be defined as an attribute of communities, a group-led phenomenon wherein “norms [are] reinforced through a variety of processes: forming groups, collaborating within and among groups, developing a united view of a shared future, forming or reinforcing collective identity, and engaging in collective action” (2008, 117). The collaboration between farmers and purchasers to exchange products is what is currently sustaining the local food movement.

Flora and Flora’s social capital framework is deeply rooted in Pierre Bourdieu’s social practice theory, which argues that humans find meaning in life through routine social interactions as they apply order to the world (Bourdieu 1977). This theory is deeply embedded in Andrew Nelson’s work with “locavore” chefs in Canada (Nelson 2014). He finds that chefs in Alberta capitalize on the relationship between social and cultural goals. By routinizing interactions between themselves and their producers, they can share financial risks, market their local menu items, and diversify product types (Nelson 2014, 57). Marsden et al. also utilize the social practice theory as a means for furthering short food supply chains in rural areas (2000). In order for short chains to spread over space and time, producers must work together to identify rural spaces and use them more innovatively (2000, 436).

Another common element throughout the literature is discussion regarding an excess or lack of financial capital. While Nelson suggests that social practice is enough, Allan Ortiz and others do not (2010). He argues that farmers lack the financial resources and organizational skills necessary to effectively market their products to local dining establishments. According to Zeppa and Li, even if direct marketing was more successful, many people would not change their consumption patterns (2006). They suggest a disconnect whereby “the implication is that promotion campaigns that rely on energy, nutrition, and fair prices may be very well received by consumers but will not significantly affect their behavior” (2006, 9). They conclude that preexisting attitudes such as an appreciation for cooking are what most readily translates into local food purchasing (2006).

While many authors do not address it by name, financial capital can be defined as the “resources that are translated into monetary instruments that make them highly liquid” (Flora and Flora 2008, 175). Starr et al., in their study on direct marketing between farmers and restaurants, concluded that quality, not price, determines local purchasing (2003). While cost does not matter as much to the consumer, it matters

quite a bit to the farmer. “The American farmer is an endangered species,” and based on Starr et al.’s telephone questionnaire responses, many look to partner with restaurants to secure loyal buyers willing to pay a consistent price for a variety of products (Starr et al. 2003, 314). Farmer persistence, state and national direct trade policies, and educational programs must be amended so that local farmers see more financial success.

Furthermore, Patricia Allen defines “a socially just food system [as] one in which power and material resources are shared equitably so that people and communities can meet their needs, and live with security and dignity, now and into the future” (2010, 3). While Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) and farmers markets are a direct response to these inequities, many economic constraints are still in place, like subsidies on crops more readily grown by industrial agricultural facilities (2010). Lastly, Hinrichs views social and financial capital as “difficult to separate” (2000, 300). For example, CSA is foundationally built on monetary exchange, yet shared values make the exchange much more personal.

Wilkinson’s and Van Auken’s community models also fit in very well with my local food movement project. In Wilkinson’s article, community is justified as a viable alternative to spatial systems theory (Wilkinson 1968). Van Auken, an environmental sociologist at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, defines community as “an inclusive web of interconnected relationships that develops in a particular place through a process of repeated social interaction in local society, which is shaped by the landscape it inhabits” (Van Auken 2014, 69). Essentially, communities emphasize social interaction, which culminates in interdependence. After completing, transcribing, and coding several interviews, I have found that the stakeholders in Oshkosh’s local food movement, mainly restaurant owners and local farmers, form a community that is hidden from the general public. While there are no formal agreements between restaurant owners and farmers, there are verbal ones that serve as the “social glue” that binds individuals together. They share a common set of values, which is demonstrated by restaurant owners bonding with other restaurant owners, farmers with other farmers, and restaurant owners with farmers, to discuss changes in consumer beliefs and attitudes. The city of Oshkosh serves as the common landscape in which most group members reside.

Methodology

Due to the fact that there is little literature that delves into the motivations behind partnerships between restaurant owners and local food producers, I chose to conduct qualitative, in-depth interviews with both groups in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. I had time during the scope of my three-month research period to interview four restaurant owners and three farmers. I transcribed interviews immediately after each session and coded by hand initially, but used a qualitative coding software program, NVivo, after all interviews were completed.

Preliminary restaurant respondents were recruited using various websites such as the Oshkosh Chamber of Commerce, TripAdvisor, and Urbanspoon, which led to my learning of the owners’ names and contact information. The first three respondents agreed to interviews after cold calls and emails. During interviews I asked for recommendations on whom to speak with next (snowball sampling), which was

extremely beneficial. While I took recommendations seriously, I purposely selected a variety of potential respondents to diversify the types of food service businesses reflected in my research. Food service businesses of interest included: traditional restaurants, bars, cafés, coffee shops, and supper clubs. Farmers were recruited mainly by restaurant owner recommendations as well as recommendations by environmental science students at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. While respondents were non-randomly selected, it seemed the most viable for my limited research timeframe.

I used qualitative interview techniques to prompt discussion on a variety of topics during my face-to-face interviews (see appendix A). For restaurant owners, I gained insight into the history of the business and clientele, their partnerships with local food producers, percentages of menu items that are locally sourced, and their views regarding the local food movement. For farmers, I elicited in-depth descriptions of their farm history, products, farming methods, partnerships with local restaurant owners, views regarding the local food movement, and thoughts on the industrial versus organic farming debate. My interviews were semi-structured and meant to be conversational so respondents felt comfortable voicing their opinions and telling stories. I distributed informed consent forms prior to the start of each interview per the Institutional Review Board's requirement. Each respondent signed and turned one back to me and some have kept a copy for their personal records. All names were changed in formal reports and presentations to ensure respondent anonymity. Interviews with respondents took 30 minutes on average. They were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, which took approximately two to three hours to complete per interview. Six key themes prevailed throughout the interviews including: an emphasis on community, instances of false advertising, varied socioeconomic status of restaurant clientele, accessibility of local farmers to restaurant owners, optimistic outlooks on the local food movement future, and variation in local product percentages among restaurants.

Findings

Emphasis on Community

A strong sense of community has been established between restaurant owners and farmers invested in the local food movement in Oshkosh, based on the responses from my small pool of respondents. The term *local* explains the importance of place in eliciting productive relationships between stakeholders, but everyone seems to know one another, which points to interdependence being a key theme in the movement. In order for farmers to form productive relationships with restaurant owners, they must have face-to-face interactions and samplings with restaurant owners and chefs so that their products will be introduced in house. This is evidenced in a conversation with farmer Angela.

Oftentimes it is a sit-down conversation with the chef like I did with [chef at local restaurant] and said you know . . . What is on your menu or what would you like to feature? And some of the things were like the nasturtium. . . . The edible nasturtium flowers like . . . “No one else in town has them on their salads. They are beautiful.” Boom. We will grow them for you. Or there are some Asian herbs and stuff that . . . [another local chef] wants to try out. . . . So it is a very organic process of you sit down with a chef, you look at their menu, you say “Oh, yeah, oh! You do red spinach. Oh, okay. . . . That is great” and then you

just kind of talk your way into “what can I grow for you?” (March 10, 2016). Farmers and restaurant owners are also very aware of the tastes of their clientele and cater to the various ethnic groups present in Oshkosh. Farmer Angela again stated:

I do absolutely pay attention to the makeup of the community. . . . I do make sure that we have some Asian influence. But we also have some traditional Germanic kind of food. Then we do really spicy hot peppers and that kind of stuff also for the Latino population. So I am always making sure that I am touching everyone (March 10, 2016).

Lastly, many interviewees exude a strong sense of pride for the Fox River Valley region. The majority are dedicated to strengthening the economy in and around Oshkosh and are against chain restaurants. As one farmer opined: “We have got good local, independently owned stuff. I am not bad-mouthing Panera. . . . I like eating Panera. You know? I am not demonizing all fast food. It is just that that money is not staying in Oshkosh” (March 10, 2016).

Instances of False Advertising

One restaurant owner, Diane, admitted to false advertising. While she claims a focus on serving the community and building relationships with local vendors, the restaurant partners with a multi-national food distribution corporation to provide the majority of their menu items. This may play into the “trendiness” of the local food movement in the year 2016. Lying to their customers proves to be fiscally advantageous.

This sheds light on a reason why the restaurant committing fraud is not receiving overt backlash from its clientele. Another reason for committing “sourcing fraud” is that many restaurant owners are under the assumption that local farmers will be unable to provide them the quantity/quality of products that their menu requires. Restaurant owner Marianne evidences this school of thought: “So we try to use as much as we can and there is just not a lot” (April 5, 2016). Other interviewees stress the difficulty of getting a uniform-looking product year-round and suggest that a seasonal menu is the only answer.

Socioeconomic Status of Restaurant Clientele

An initial research question that I was able to answer throughout the course of the three-month period was: Is the local restaurant clientele in Oshkosh of a certain socioeconomic status? The answer to that question after conducting research is a resounding “no.” Oshkosh restaurant owners cater to clientele from a variety of income levels as demonstrated by responses from these interviewees:

Our aim was that it would be a place for you to go and it would look nicer than usual, feel nicer than usual, but not really cost more than usual. But I mean from cheaper burgers on a Monday night at the bar to high-end celebratory dinners, we can do just about everything in between and I think that we have sort of pulled it off. You can think of it as a destination place for a special occasion (Curtis, Restaurant Owner, March 11, 2016).

It is all over the board. We get everyone. The winter clientele compared to the summer clientele is very different. Summertime we get a lot of people up from Illinois that come to go boating. A lot of families, people that come up. A lot of fishermen. Wintertime is more the local business where we get anywhere from farmers to teachers to just the normal factory worker. We pull from Fond du Lac to Green Bay across the lake to Sheboygan. So we have them coming from everywhere which is very nice. Very well-rounded I guess you could say (Marianne, Restaurant Owner, April 5, 2016).

The only exception to the conclusion that there tends to be significant variation among locally sourced restaurant clientele comes from the same restaurant owner who admitted to false advertising. There may be a correlation as to why individuals of higher socioeconomic status choose to dine at that particular restaurant opposed to locally sourced restaurants that purposefully appeal to people from a variety of income levels.

Accessibility of Local Farmers to Restaurant Owners

Another question I was able to address through my research was: To what degree are local farmers and restaurant owners accessible to each other? Accessibility is still relatively difficult at this time. Distribution seems to be the key struggle among farmers, since time is a luxury. While food distributors are becoming more conscious of consumer desires for locally grown products, it is difficult for farmers to get in contact with the right people. For many farmers, the most effective means of promoting their products to chefs and restaurant owners is by scheduling in-house tastings. While many successful partnerships begin here, efficiency is lacking. Farmers are also concerned that partnerships with restaurants will not generate enough revenue as restaurant owner, Curtis, elaborates on and is trying to remedy: “If you talk to the wrong farmer at the wrong time of the year even . . . every farmer that is small enough in scale is going to be concerned about selling to somebody like me. The answer I always got was ‘Well then how will I have enough food to take to the market on Saturday?’” (March 11, 2016). As I found out later, this interviewee’s vision alleviates the need for many farmers to go to the farmers market on Saturdays since a restaurant representative comes to them each week to purchase products for the same price that they would sell them for at market. It is beneficial for all involved.

The Future of the Local Food Movement

Many local restaurant owners and farmers have a rosy vision of what the local food movement will look like in the future (March 10, 2016). While I hypothesized that the consensus opinion among them would reflect pessimism, Oshkosh stakeholders do not see the local food movement as just a fad. Many mention the possibility of there being a co-op in town and a societal reversion back to gardening in the future: “In 10 years? Sure. There will be a co-op downtown. I think it is going to be a thriving local food movement again. I think we’ll get back to gardening too” (Angela, Farmer, March 10, 2016).

Marianne’s restaurant also hopes within 10 years to be growing all of its produce on site and freezing it for use over the winter. Marianne also mentions her hope for chain restaurants to be overthrown by local ones:

I guess you can get to the point where you freeze all your local vegetables and utilize them that way. I think that a lot more restaurants that are locally owned and not chains will probably begin to move that direction. Hopefully. I think they need to take over and get rid of the chain restaurants and . . . locally grow and give themselves the opportunity to give the people around here the money (April 5, 2016).

This again plays into the notion that people involved in the local food movement in and around Oshkosh exude a lot of pride for their community. Profit generated by chain restaurants does not stay in the area, as many interviewees seem to be aware.

Variation in Local Product Percentages among Restaurants

The final theme that emerged from my research is a great variation in local product percentages among restaurants, which depends heavily on the interviewee's definition of *local*. For my own purposes, I define *local* as coming from no more than 60 miles away. I found great inconsistency between restaurant owners as to how much of their menu is locally sourced. From 10 percent of the menu in the dead of winter to 75 percent of specials in the summer, there is considerable discrepancy: "And the percentage of the menu is probably a hard question," related one restaurant owner. "Percentage of the produce is probably 30 percent year round I would think" (Curtis, Restaurant Owner, March 11, 2016). Marianne states: "Summertime [we offer] more specials. Just because most of our specials will probably be locally sourced. I would say probably 75 percent of specials. Overall menu is kind of hard because of how much stuff you go through and what is not available for you. . . . Probably 30 percent" (Marianne, Restaurant Owner, April 5, 2016).

More research needs to be done to see if this is a consistent trend within the remainder of the Fox River Valley, state, or even nation.

Conclusion

While several compelling conclusions were drawn throughout the course of my short study, there is much more research to be conducted on this topic in the Fox River Valley. Other facets of the local food movement in Oshkosh, such as the city's year-round farmers market and controversial move toward a community co-op, should be addressed. Future researchers must also look to the roles that native Oshkosh residents play in the local food movement relative to the roles that non-native, university-affiliated individuals play. Research generated on this topic has the potential to shed light on the reasoning behind the successes and challenges of local food movements nationwide and other movements like it.

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Appendix A **Interview Outlines**

Local Restaurant Owners

1. Tell me about the history of your business.
2. Tell me about your clientele.
3. How did you come to partnering with local food producers?
 - a. Who initiated the partnership?
 - b. Why did you begin sourcing locally in the first place?
 - c. How has it been going?
4. What percentage of your menu items are locally sourced?
 - a. Which ones?
 - b. Are some items harder to get than others?
5. What do you know about the local food movement?
 - a. Do you know about its history in Oshkosh?
6. How do you envision the local food movement 10 years from now? 50?
7. Is there anything else you would like to elaborate on?

Local Farmers

1. Tell me about the history of your farm.
2. What do you produce?
3. Tell me about your farming methods.
4. How did you come to partnering with local restaurant owners?
 - a. Who initiated the partnership?
 - b. Why did you begin selling your products to restaurants in the first place?
 - c. How has it been going?

5. Which restaurants do you sell to?
 - a. What products are they most interested in?
6. What do you know about the local food movement?
 - a. Do you know about its history in Oshkosh?
7. How do you envision the local food movement 10 years from now? 50?
8. Tell me your thoughts on the industrial vs. organic farming debate.
9. Is there anything else you would like to elaborate on?