

Experiences of local food supply in Dorset UK: an autoethnographic reflection.

Dr Sean Beer,

Department of Tourism and Hospitality, Faculty of Management, Bournemouth University UK

For the last 25 years I have lived in the county of Dorset in the south of England. During this time I have been extensively involved in the local food movement. This involvement has primarily taken four forms. Firstly I was a board member of Dorset Food Links, which was a charity established to promote the consumption of local food. The organisation helped set up 11 farmers markets and also funded/organized other local food events. My second area of activity focused on running cookery demonstrations. These were designed to encourage the public to think about local food in terms of food and culture, sustainability and as a vehicle for developing their cooking skills. Thirdly I helped establish the Dorset food Hall at the Dorset County Show. This is the leading rural event in the county attracting more than 50,000 visitors over a weekend in early September. Fourthly I have viewed this work as an academic, albeit a highly engaged academic. Thus my academic involvement can be considered to be from an interpretivist constructionist viewpoint and at times one of advocacy and participation.

25 years would seem to be a good point in which to pause and reflect on what has happened with regard to local food consumption over a significant period of time. I think that interest in an awareness of local food has increased during this time. Some of this is as a result of local activities and some is as a result of the popularization of local food with in the media. In particular television food programs are very popular in the UK and one 'franchise', River Cottage featuring Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, was specifically based in Dorset. During this period, however, whilst interest and awareness might have risen, I doubt very much whether consumption of local food has increased in any significant way. Farmers markets are a particularly British middle-class affectation and make only a limited contribution to food supply. The numbers of butchers and fishmongers has declined. Farm shops are limited and other potential supply routes for local produce to consumers, directly and through the hospitality and tourism industries, have waned.

Small, but significant, amounts of public money have been spent on projects promoting local food and, although the brochures contain many interesting pictures, their impact has been limited. There are of course some great success stories. Often these are initiated by the private sector and it seems that core economic sustainability is central to the ongoing success of such ventures. One very successful initiative, which did have public sector pump priming, is the Local Food Links School Meals service. This provides school meals based on local produce to 35 schools in Dorset. If you are a chef, looking to food local produce to your diners, you are obliged to develop multiple supply chains of your own to create a truly local food experience.

In this paper I will be reflecting on these developments and looking to the future using the methodological approach of autoethnography.