



# What is the future of foreign food experiences?

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**ABSTRACT:** This article considers the impact foreign food experiences can have on an individual. Food can be transported across the globe and be a catalyst for understanding and integration, but it can also be used to emphasise the "otherness" that sets people apart from those around them. This may lead them to "gaze" on foods they are unfamiliar with distaste, or with a desire to understand and appreciate new culinary experiences. Using groups of international students who are in a "host" country, a live research project was created where they were asked to discuss their experiences of "foreign" food since arriving in New Zealand. Through a series of focus groups held as part of a research methods class, researchers sought to understand how students perceive and respond to "strange food". Five themes were identified: universal foods; great discoveries; things they will never like; benchmarking; and home foods. Apart from the value of involving students as co-creators in a live research project, this study noted the importance of food in hospitableness and feeling "at home", and raised the students' awareness of what it felt like to be confronted by strange experiences. It also discovered that while foreign food experiences can break down barriers in a global village, it can also serve to highlight, emphasise and reinforce a feeling of "otherness".

**KEYWORDS:** food, foreign student, New Zealand, otherness, strange, word cloud

## Introduction

Terms such as "global village" are often used to indicate that the world is shrinking, and that it is increasingly possible to get anything, anywhere, including food (McNeill, 2005a; 2005b). While it could be argued that this is a good thing, with wealth and opportunity being shared, it can also lead to a depressing homogeneity of high streets, airports, hotels and events (Augé, 1995; Fuller & Harley, 2004; Gordon, 2008; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Alternatively it could be that food is a reflection of the culture of a place, and an expression of a society and its people (Du Rand & Heath, 2006). Urry's (1999) tourist gaze argued that people travel to strange places to experience "difference", but then interpret (sometimes mistakenly) what they see through the lens of their own experiences, cultural background, and the dominant discourse of the day. One of the pleasures of foreign travel is trying new food and culinary experiences (Bell, 2010; Germann Molz, 2007; Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Williams et al., 2014). Neill et al. (2016, p. 140) use the term "refractive gaze" to describe people's reactions to "strange food" because "the refractive gaze encapsulates and extends existing gazes through experience, subjectivity, cultural and culinary capital accumulation". This article argues that international students are like tourists in that they travel to somewhere new, but then are also like local people because they stay for a semester, a year, or even a whole degree course. They also bring their own (and differing) values (Cavagnaro & Staffieri, 2015; Cavagnaro

et al., 2018). The "strangeness" of local food therefore slowly transforms into familiarity, if only as a survival strategy, or as a way to gain cultural or culinary capital. This exploratory, qualitative study explores those experiences in a way that takes the students along as co-researchers.

After setting the context for this study with a brief overview of the concept of globalisation and why international students are the subject of this study, this article considers the impact that food can have in creating an identity for a destination. This paper uses the concept of Urry's (1990) "gaze" and Neill et al.'s (2016) "refractive gaze" to consider students' openness to "strange food" experiences. It describes a qualitative study using focus groups to create word clouds around the key themes of food, familiarity and foreign experiences. Five core themes are identified from the data, and limitations and opportunities for further research are proposed.

## Food experiences

This study considers the responses of a group of international students (mainly Indian, European and Chinese) to food choices while studying hospitality and tourism management in Auckland, New Zealand. It identifies universal food, great discoveries, and things they will never like, as well as ways in which they managed to continue to eat food from home despite being in a strange environment. It was both an academic research study

and an opportunity for students to be involved in and learn from a live research study as participants and researchers.

Urry (1990) argues that tourists use what they already know and are familiar with to make sense of what they see when they are in a strange environment. The tourist searches out new experiences, but then uses their past experiences to interpret them. This means (given the dominant flow of tourism from developed to developing countries), that this gaze is often a Eurocentric, Western viewpoint (male, heterosexual, capitalist and white). Neill et al. (2016) proposed the term "refractive gaze" for tourists' attitude to food they come into contact with while on holiday, and suggest that such attitudes can range from "neophobic" (hating) to "neophylic" (loving) in new food experiences. Eating strange food depends on the traveller's attitude to risk, they argue. Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2014) suggest that the overall service environment and experience (where served, dining setting, and how it is served) also play a part in food tourists' satisfaction with local food experiences or culinary-gastronomic, experiences as they call them. They also make the point that culinary experiences often form an important part of the stories people tell on their return from their travels, and that they can be mundane but authentic day-to-day café experiences (Italian pizza or English fish and chips) just as much as special meals in Michelin star restaurants. All of them add to the traveller's "experience resume" (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014, p. 298) or build culinary cultural capital "back home", a point also made by others (Du Rand & Heath, 2006; Neill et al., 2016). The pervasiveness of social media has arguably increased the desire for unique culinary experiences. Robinson and Getz (2014, p. 690) argue such experiences are "an important place attribute" if only because they are memorable. They suggest food is not merely a fuel and therefore much more than just a "hygiene factor" on a holiday.

International students come to experience foreign food initially in much the same way as the tourists described above (Cavagnaro & Staffieri, 2015; Cavagnaro et al., 2018). What is more interesting though is to consider what happens to those international students as they move from "tourists" to "temporary residents" — do they hang on to their "home" culinary traditions? Do they assimilate the new into the old or the old into the new? Or do they abandon their home culture altogether for a new one? Who is "the other" in this situation? (Coelen & Nairn, 2017; Leigh, 2017). These are very large and complex issues, but this study attempts to start to shed some light on the culinary experiences of this specific group of travellers and thereby fill a research gap in the understanding of food experiences.

### Research approach

This research is exploratory, qualitative and inductive (Bryman & Bell, 2011). It could also be considered to be a case study as "a case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case" (Stake, 1995, p. xi). It is a case study of one institution, but the students come from a wide geographical spread, including China, India, the Pacific Islands and Europe. It reports on an individual's perceptions as they see them, not as they necessarily are, and is therefore an interpretivist study. The research captures these participants' first impressions of a new culture, and then asks them to reflect on how they have changed (or not) over time. This sample had a range of participants who had

been in New Zealand from anything from a few weeks to a year. This is addressed in the limitations section of the article. Two focus groups (a total of 25 students) of postgraduate students were divided into groups of five and asked to discuss a series of questions which were derived from the literature and from informal discussions between researchers. The research sought to understand "what", "why" and "how".

The opportunity to show how research can be done in an ethical manner was used to teach students about concepts such as informed consent, the difference between anonymity and confidentiality, and the responsibility the research has to ensure no harm comes to the participants as a result of the research. As Hochschild (1983, p. xii) puts it in the acknowledgements to her book, "I want to thank those in charge at Delta Airlines, who allowed me into their world in the faith that I meant well". All participants were presented with participant information sheets and consent forms, and invited to ask any questions prior to the focus groups.

They were then invited to discuss the following ten questions in their groups and write down key words or phrases which summarised their discussions around the individual questions.

- What (food) culture are you from?
- What did you know about food in New Zealand before you came?
- What is New Zealand food to you now that you are living here?
- What food experiences have you had since you arrived in New Zealand?
- Have you continued to eat food from "home" and if so how easy was it to do that?
- What new foods that you were not familiar with have you eaten while here in New Zealand?
- Have your food choices changed since you arrived in New Zealand?
- Are there foods you have tried that you still do not eat?
- Are there foods you did not know before you tried them, but now you eat them regularly?
- Is there anything about trying strange foods that you would like to share as a result of this research experience?

It was noted that although that was not an instruction from the researchers, one person in each group seemed to take responsibility for writing on the sheets, usually in the form of a mind-map/spider diagram, but sometimes in the form of a list. After this, each question was discussed with the whole class with the aim of stimulating a discussion and perhaps jogging participants' memories or thoughts, sometimes leading to further notes being made. The relaxed environment where participants knew each other led to quite lengthy and good-natured discussions over a two-hour period. Finally, all the sheets were collected and the students invited to reflect on the experience of being part of a research project before being thanked for their contributions. Participants were advised that the questions would also be emailed to them, and were invited to add further thoughts if any occurred later. No further responses were received.

The researchers then collated all the focus group responses for each question and created word clouds of each contribution. No attempt was made to count the frequency of responses as it was likely a word was used more than once in a discussion, but only noted down once. This is a limitation of the research that is noted later in this article.

## Key findings and discussion

This section presents the word clouds created from the outputs of the focus groups, and they form the basis of the discussion.

### What food culture are you from?

This question (Figure 1) was designed to stimulate discussion and be relatively simple and factual, but the respondents surprised the researchers by going beyond a pure description of a geographical region. The texture, style of eating and social space in which eating takes place were all commented on, showing that the participants understood the social significance of a meal experience.

### What did you know about NZ food?

This question (Figure 2) was designed as a kind of "null measurement" — what existing knowledge or pre-conceptions did they have. The responses reflected many things which New Zealand exports and is justly proud of (wine, Manuka honey, kiwi fruit, craft beers, seafood), but also comments about people's perceptions of the country as a whole (clean, Western, fresh). This ties in with Lepp and Gibson's (2003) view that foreign travel is a pleasure. Respondents' concerns also come through (no rice as staple; no chilli sauce) but this section was largely made up of positive responses and images.

### What is NZ food to you now?

The responses to this question (Figure 3) betray a certain disappointment in the reality of their New Zealand food experiences (full of calories, overpriced, huge portions, not spicy enough, disappointing), but also many positives (healthy food, fresh seafood, a combination of cultures, delicious, healthy and without artificial colouring or chemicals). Du Rand and Heath (2006) stress the important role that local and regional foods can play in promoting a region. The answers to this question show differing levels of acceptance and openness to new food experiences which could be summarised as: "NZ is very multi-cultural so you can get anything you want" versus "It is fancy, overpriced and not spicy enough".

### What NZ food experiences have you had?

The answers to this question (Figure 4) identified the importance of events and "special meals" with family and friends. In some cases the "discoveries" (such as "boiling rice") show how simple things can seem very "strange" to people who are not used to them (Urry, 1999). The "BBQ lunch at college" event mentioned above was an activity during induction week and shows the importance of food as a social glue as well as a new dining experience. A number of longer comments were also made which shed light on people's feelings when confronted with things which are different:

*I thought Marmite was Nutella chocolate spread ... As I had not had pork back in India my friends mistakenly served me pork on a pizza — it was tasty ... New Zealanders buy take-away food and go to the beach to eat it ... McDonald's cheeseburgers come with meat ... I notice when people go out as a family they don't just order a meal for themselves but they order food and put it in the middle to share...*

These comments betray a real sense of wonder, confusion and discovery for these people having their first New Zealand food



FIGURE 1: What food culture are you from?



FIGURE 2: What did you know about NZ food?



FIGURE 3: What is NZ food to you now?



FIGURE 4: What NZ food experiences have you had?

experiences and are a good reminder of what it feels like to look through the eyes of the "other".

#### Food from home

This question (Figure 5) was asked to see if respondents tried to hold on to their own way of preparation and eating when in a strange environment. Most did not seem to feel they were cut off from their native cuisines, neither the ingredients nor the cooking implements. As one respondent said, *"It was difficult sometimes to find authentic ingredients, but you can still find alternatives"*.

#### What new foods that you were familiar with have you eaten?

This question (Figure 6) certainly elicited some well-known New Zealand products such as fruit, wine, sweets (pineapple lumps contain sugar and chocolate, not pineapple) and pies, but also shows that some were using the experience to discover other "foreign" foods (Indian desserts, Indian curry, African foods, sushi). Whether these were "authentic" or a New Zealand variation is not known, but these are certainly examples of "eating the other" (Germann Molz, 2007, p. 77).

#### Changed food choices

This question (Figure 7) asked respondents to reflect on how their food habits had changed since their arrival in a strange country and culture. What came through strongly was the cultural aspects of eating (forbidden foods) and concerns around pollution in their home countries. Some longer responses included,

*Some foods are forbidden at home (beef for Buddhists, pork for Muslims) — when we come to New Zealand we get to try these ingredients.*

*I used to eat rice and stew, but now I eat noodles and hamburgers.*

These observations mirror the findings of Cavagnaro et al. (2018), who found that millennials are concerned about their environment and what the right thing to do is. It is perhaps not surprising that this is reflected in their food choices.

#### Still do not eat?

This question showed more than just an attitude of "I tried it and did not like it". For the first time, specific food cultures are identified and described in strong words (disgusting, too strong, too sweet). This raises the question of whether food is being used to differentiate themselves from "the other". Other comments included eating habits which they disagreed with (eating food with their fingers, hygiene in the cooking process). This may be a reflection of Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen's (2014) finding that the overall satisfaction with strange food is not just down to the food, but also to the service, the setting and the environment.

#### Strange but not now

Given the rather negative comments that surfaced in the previous question, these contributions (Figure 9) are once again surprisingly positive, and identify New Zealand but also Indian, Chinese/Korean and Central American food discoveries. There certainly seems to be a shift to eating local food as the above are now eaten "regularly" according to the respondents. There were also a number of "surprises" identified by respondents such as *"Fast food restaurants here do not serve rice"*, and *"The fish here does not smell good"*.



FIGURE 5: Food from home

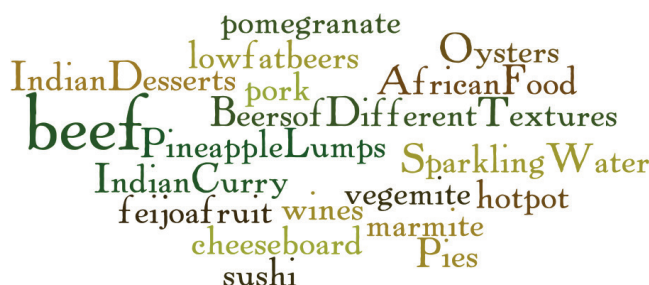


FIGURE 6: What new foods that you were not familiar with have you eaten?



FIGURE 7: Changed food choices



FIGURE 8: Still do not eat



FIGURE 9: Strange but not now?

From these outputs the researchers identified five core themes in the data:

- Universal foods — certain foods appear to be universal and although they are not from their home culture, they are recognisable and perhaps “go-to comfort food”.
- Great discoveries — some participants have clearly come to a foreign country with the intention of trying things with an open mind and have been pleasantly surprised. Some have also taken the opportunity to eat things which are forbidden back home.
- Things they will never like — there are things they have tried but will never like. This is useful to know for hospitality professionals.
- Benchmarking — taking the best from other cultures. It is clear that these participants were searching for new food experiences that would become very important to them and would be something that connect them to New Zealand for the rest of their lives.
- Home food — managing the supply chain and seeking behaviour. Many respondents still managed to eat food from home, and returned to the familiar if they were unwell or dieting. Using informal networks to discover food from home is an important coping strategy when in a strange place for an extended period of time.

### Limitations and further research opportunities

As Stake (1995, p. 8) notes “the real business of a case study is particularization, not generalization [...] there is emphasis on uniqueness”. This is one research project in one educational establishment with a large number of students from India and China. This is clearly reflected in the responses, although the researchers did attempt to have a mix of nationalities and ethnicities in the groups. However, it is clear from the responses that these two groups dominated and other ethnicities may have had other experiences. A follow-up study using quota sampling should yield further insights.

Some of the respondents had been in New Zealand for some time, whereas others had recently arrived. While this enabled the researchers to capture “first impressions” as well as the views of those who had “acclimatised” more, it would have been interesting to do this research as a longitudinal study to map the changes in perceptions and eating habits over time. This is something that could be done in further research.

Had this been done as an individual exercise, then it would have been possible to identify the frequency and therefore importance of issues. As the focus in this study was on experiencing research and discussing issues, no usable quantitative data was gathered. A questionnaire would provide such data as well as demographic data, allowing further analysis.

This study was carried out in Auckland which is New Zealand’s largest city with a wide range of ethnicities and ethnic restaurants. Other cities may not provide such a varied culinary landscape. As this was a group exercise there was some evidence of self-censorship. Perhaps an individual online survey might show more strongly held views.

### Conclusion

The results of this study are important when considering the future of food tourism. Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie (2018, p. 166) point out that considering the future “encourages students to search, define and negotiate their own understanding of the problem”. Thinking about the future of local foods may help students who will become future hospitality managers to identify what is valuable (and therefore is worth protecting and researching) about their own or others’ culinary capital. However, in Haddouche and Salomone’s (2018) study of Generation Z, there is no mention whatsoever of food — so perhaps it is not a priority for this group?

This research also reminds one of the importance of food for place identity and as a valuable marketing and promotional vehicle for countries and cultures. However, it also appears to show that being an international student exposes you to new food experiences which can lead to a greater shared understanding of the “other” (Coelen & Nairn, 2017; Leigh, 2017) — but at the same time it can also reinforce cultural differences and highlight core preconceptions, values and beliefs that they are not willing to give up. As one participant said simply, “*If you do not try it, you will never know*”.

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