



Original Research Article

Ecological food practices and identity performance on Cape Breton Island

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Abstract

Globalization often has a disruptive effect on traditional industries and economies. This article investigates localized responses to economic challenges in Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. Traditionally, the island's economy was resource based and centred on fishing and coal mining. Agriculture has always contributed to the island's economy, although concentrated in particular regions; but more recently, promotion of local and ecological food practices has revitalized food production. Using a critical ethnographic approach, I examine Cape Breton's ecological food movement as a cultural practice through which participants—producers, farmers' market vendors, and consumers—articulate local distinction and perform their identities. This study builds on my earlier investigations (2016) into how divergent discourses shape emergent local-ecological food practices in Cape Breton, and attends more closely to farmers' accounts of their experiences. Ecological food initiatives raise critical questions of access, labour, cultural identification, and power relations; however, I argue that they also present cultural, economic, economic, and social opportunities.

Keywords: ecological food; food practices; identity performance; place; Cape Breton

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Introduction

This study explores the emergence of an ecological food movement on Cape Breton Island during the twenty-first century. In recent decades, a number of farm start-ups have occurred on the island and most of these are small-scale farms practicing organic techniques (MacLeod, 2016). Artisanal methods of food production in Cape Breton can be seen, in part, as a response to economic challenges in a region that has experienced ongoing unemployment and outmigration resulting from declining resource-based industries such as fishing, coal mining, and steel making (MacLeod, 2016). Government representatives and business leaders have identified tourism and agriculture as sectors for potential expansion. Ecological food initiatives contribute to developments in both sectors through farmers' markets, food festivals, and restaurant offerings that are promoted to tourists and local residents. Alternative food practices—such as growing heritage seed varieties, using artisanal methods to produce honey and cheese, and raising free-range chicken, pork, and beef—also reflect broader local and ecological interests in the twenty-first century. As a lifelong resident of Cape Breton, a consumer of local-organic food, and a cultural critic, my goal is to understand this movement and its significance for food producers and local communities in this region.

Farmers in Cape Breton come from a range of backgrounds, including lifelong inhabitants as well as residents who have relocated from other regions. All farms on Cape Breton Island are relatively small-scale and incorporate some traditional methods such as pasturing livestock. Commodity producers, however, use conventional agricultural products such as chemical fertilizers and commercial feed that ecological producers reject as harmful to livestock, natural environments, and human health. My study focuses on the specific subgroup of farmers who use traditional techniques and provide natural diets—through free-range conditions—for their livestock. What does the ecological food movement look like in this region? How do people self-identify with this movement and how do they create a distinctive culture (Beagan, Power, & Chapman, 2015; Johnston, Szabo, & Rodney, 2011)?

Ecological food practices tend to uphold discourses that critique the industrial food system and promote local, organic, and fair trade foods as tastier, healthier, more environmentally sustainable, and more socially equitable than mass-produced foods sold in commercial grocery outlets (Lynch & Giles, 2013; Pilgeram, 2012; Shugart, 2014). *Local-ecological* food discourses deepen this discourse by illuminating the mutually dependent relationships between producers and consumers, and among people, animals, and natural environments (Aucoin & Fry, 2015; Feagan, 2007; Glowacki-Dudka, Murray & Isaacs, 2012; Sumner & Wever, 2015). These intricate associations give rise to overlapping identifications that intermingle and transform one another as people engage with notions of health, community, and political activism. For example, interest in healthy eating encourages advocacy for local autonomy, animal welfare, and environmental protection. Public and commercial engagement with these issues, in turn, enhances communal bonds and advances alternative economies. In this manner, local acts—intentionally or unintentionally—contribute to larger movements for social

and economic change. I am interested in exploring how these developments unfold and how people describe the significance of their activities.

All food discourses embody moral and ethical dimensions that shape perceptions of people and their food habits (deSolier, 2013). Associations with food are central to the construction of individual and collective identities: distinctive tastes and foodways serve as indications of character, collective belonging, and social status. Existing research demonstrates that ecological food initiatives raise critical questions of access, labour, cultural identification, and power relations (Pilgeram, 2011; Slocum, 2007). My study attends to the moral aspects of identity performance and to ethical issues of status and class positioning that underlie ecological food practices. In other words, I examine how local-organic food practices shape notions of selfhood, and delineate boundaries of cultural difference that embody judgments of respectability, responsibility, and discernment.

Yet, importantly, ecological food practices also present opportunities. Sustainable farming and fishing activities contribute to local economies and support offshoot industries such as restaurants and culinary tourism—developments that are crucially important in Cape Breton to offset unemployment and outmigration. Involvement in ecological food practices also offers personal and social benefits, contributing to individual wellbeing, communal bonds, and cultural resilience. The collaborative efforts of multiple stakeholders can foster relationships and enrich cultural autonomy within rural communities. Taken together, these economic and social benefits offer ways to sustain localities, protect natural environments, and enact meaningful individual and collective identities (Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2012; Sims, 2009; Tiemann, 2008).

Methodology

I used a *critical ethnographic* approach to understand the meanings of ecological food practices in processes of identity construction among local organic food producers. Critical ethnography involves detailed analysis of cultural practices to deconstruct ideology and value transparency, revealing power relations and injustices while arguing for more equitable social and economic arrangements (Madison, 2005). I engaged in interviews and participant observation to understand the ways in which ecological farmers negotiate their identities and advance an alternative food politics through their involvement in Cape Breton’s local-organic food movement. I chose these methods of data collection because they align with my objectives of accessing food producers’ accounts of their experiences and exploring the significance—personal and political—of ecological food practices in this particular region at this particular time (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). A critical ethnographic lens enabled me to link expressed and observed “facts” in light of values and to reflect on my cultural positioning and its role in this analysis (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Madison, 2005; VanMaanen, 1988).

To examine alternative food practices in Cape Breton, I conducted in-depth, unstructured interviews with 14 farmers who practice a range of ecological food production methods such as

using organic fertilizers and pesticides (compost, manure, companion planting, crop rotation, etc.), planting heritage seed varieties, minimizing mechanization, and raising free-range chickens, beef, lamb, and pork. Four participants had direct familial connections to the island while others had relocated from other regions. One respondent was a hobby gardener who shares her produce with neighbours and friends; another participant was a local food advocate and farmers' market manager; all others were market farmers who sold their products farm-gate, at farmers' market venues, or through the Cape Breton Food Hub. Four respondents had spouses who worked off-farm or collected a pension that supplemented their household incomes. All of my respondents were conscientious consumers who avoid processed foods and source local-organic ingredients for their households. During interviews, I asked my respondents to describe their involvements in ecological food, their reasons for engaging in alternative food practice, and the rewards and challenges of their efforts. I also asked them about their clientele and their food consumption habits. I invited all respondents to provide any pertinent information or insights that I had not requested. In closing, I asked interviewees to suggest additional participants for my research. I transcribed each interview and coded participants' responses to identify important themes, shared experiences and opinions, individual standpoints, unusual occurrences, and discrepancies.

My initial contact was a local food advocate who manages a farmers' market and worked as the principal organizer for the Pan-Cape Breton Food Hub Co-op, which distributes locally produced foods to consumers across the island. This individual provided me with a list of potential informants and subsequent interviews proceeded through snowball sampling. Close relationships among ecological farmers—and my acquaintance with some of these individuals through my ecological food consumption—made this method highly effective for my purposes and many respondents encouraged their friends and associates to participate in my study. Although some ecological farmers in Cape Breton are lifelong island inhabitants, local-organic food producers have wide-ranging backgrounds. Some had lived briefly in Cape Breton or had extended family in the region and returned to raise their children after attending university or working elsewhere. Others had no familial attachments but moved to the island as young parents or retirees to live close to the land. My study focuses on this diverse group of farmers who chose to farm ecologically in Cape Breton. These interviews are ongoing as I further develop my investigations to enhance my understanding of place-making and explore the possibilities and limitations of culinary tourism in this region.

In addition to conducting interviews, I engaged in participant observation, visiting workshops, farmers' markets, food festivals, and other spaces where local-ecological foods are promoted and celebrated. In these spaces, I observed interactions between food vendors and consumers; purchased organically grown foods; conversed with farmers about their work and the significance of ecological food practices; listened to public talks about food issues and alternative food movements; and learned how to ferment vegetables, plant container gardens, identify and forage for native food plants, and chop a whole chicken into various pieces including boneless chicken breast.

Throughout my analysis, I use the terms “local-organic” and “ecological” to refer to foods produced on small-scale farms using traditional methods, and marketed in venues such as farmers’ markets, farm-gate sales, and CSAs (community supported agriculture). My goal is to understand how ecological food practices shape identities for these cultural participants and how their activities enhance notions of place, enrich rural communities, and contribute to local economies. Many of my respondents began farming for personal reasons such as concerns for their family’s health or a desire to work independently and out-of-doors. Over time, they became more politically aware and critical of the industrial food system and its destructive consequences for humanity, animals, and natural environments. My investigations thus centre on how the personal and political overlap and how local practices can have greater significance.

Findings

During encounters with ecological food participants in Cape Breton, I learned that local-organic producers come from a range of cultural and regional backgrounds and have varied reasons for engaging in local-organic food practices. Most of my respondents stated their preferences for rural living and for independent, outdoor work. Many also identified personal health concerns as a main reason for their initial involvement in ecological food. A significant number of participants stated that health concerns became increasingly important when they began planning their families, and many respondents emphasized the importance of healthy, safe environments for raising their children.

Personal reasons for engaging in ecological food practices often extended to wider concerns about environmental protection, animal welfare, and local autonomy. I discovered that local-organic food producers in Cape Breton are knowledgeable and engaged community members who participate in food workshops, organize community garden projects, and support initiatives such as farmers’ markets and the Pan Cape Breton Food Hub—activities that link producers and consumers and enhance collective affiliations. These ecological food practices serve as sources of identity and offer particular ways of demonstrating that one is a good person and an engaged community member. Commitment to local-organic food can also serve as a marker of discriminating taste that distinguishes those who recognize and appreciate wholesome, delicious food from those whose diets contain mostly processed ingredients.

Cape Breton’s alternative food movement is an emergent practice; however, this development is expanding through the efforts of its participants. Limited availability and comparatively higher prices for ecological food invite a clientele of relatively affluent and well educated consumers, but my respondents were acutely aware of this inequity and expressed a sincere desire to make their products affordable while ensuring adequate compensation for farmers. They emphasized the contributions—actual and potential—of alternative food practices to the island’s economy. Ultimately, this study revealed that marginal practices have broad

significance: local-organic food initiatives can enrich communities and illuminate possibilities for building local economies.

The following sections offer my account of unfolding events in Cape Breton, as I learned from my research. I explore how people embraced alternative food discourses to connect food to their identities. I also reflect on the various ways that ecological food practices shaped people's understandings of place through associations with economy, geography, culture, and traditionalism. My significant findings included evidence of “moral selfhood” and of links between personal concerns and political acts. Importantly, these developments brought to light the class dimensions of food practices and the ways in which alternative food movements reinforce and challenge prevailing class differences.

Connecting food to identity

Theoretical context: Foucault and Bourdieu

I frame my discussion of identity within existing research on this topic. Questions of selfhood are ancient in origin and fundamental to humanity but become predominant concerns for cultural participants in late capitalist, postindustrial societies characterized by neoliberalism, consumerism, and individualism (deSolier, 2013, p. 164). Michel Foucault (1998) describes *technologies of the self* as the various practices through which individuals perform identities that express culturally established understandings of qualities such as integrity, productivity, achievement, and happiness. Attending to performance reveals identities as self-constituted and self-constituting—constructed through social interactions and influenced by prevailing arrangements.

Because food is intimately embodied and fundamentally social, food practices operate as important technologies of the self that offer ways to perform identities, sustain relationships, and define cultural boundaries (Beagan & Chapman, 2015; deSolier, 2013; Pilgeram, 2012; Slocum, 2007). Shared food practices delineate ethnic, regional, and national affiliations while divergent tastes and culinary traditions are fundamental indicators of cultural difference (Bourdieu, 1984; Fischer, 1988). Food traditions contribute to the formation of *habitus*, the deeply ingrained and enduring affinities, abilities, and patterns of behaviour that differentiate cultural groups within a society.

Development of habitus is an unconscious social process shaped by experiences and structural arrangements but adapted over time as individuals act within changing circumstances. Food practices are thus power laden: taste, etiquette, and culinary knowledge are forms of cultural capital that demarcate class distinctions and sustain social hierarchies (Beagan, Power, & Chapman, 2015; Bourdieu, 1984).

Our associations with food, then, are complex cultural productions that are not necessarily empowering but that nonetheless offer possibilities for negotiating meaningful forms

of identity and community. Food practices take on ethical and political dimensions when people engage in alternative practices to resist the industrial food system and promote values of environmental protection, animal welfare, and social justice. In this study I explored these complexities to understand how participants in ecological food practices on Cape Breton Island create moral selves and perform regional and class identities through such activities as gardening, free-range farming, direct selling in community markets, and consuming local, organic foods.

Discourses of the alternative food movement in Cape Breton

The expansion of ecological food practices in Cape Breton is observable in the emergence of numerous, small-scale farms that follow traditional and organic techniques (MacLeod, 2016). Most of these farms are not “certified organic” and many actively resist certification for various reasons, including the cost and inconvenience of regulations and the corporatization of “organic” foods. Martin Aucoin and Matthew Fry (2015) argue that alternative food movements have undergone a shift from political activism to resist the industrial food system to a “quality-driven movement that focuses on values, relationships and methods surrounding production, distribution, and consumption of food” (p. 63). Cape Breton Island’s ecological food movement reflects this transition, embodying political dimensions but advancing its politics through appeals to the social and economic benefits of participating in local food systems. For ecological producers, the distinction between organic and conventional practices is of central concern even when conventional foods are locally grown.

Participants in Cape Breton’s alternative food movement invoked discourses of consumer autonomy, health, and community development in describing their relationship to food and reasons for engaging in local-organic practices. These discourses intersected and overlapped with varying emphases as individuals envisioned and enacted their identities. The discourse of consumer autonomy emphasizes individual accountability for making responsible and ethical food choices (Smithers, Lamarche & Joseph, 2008), although this discourse does not typically address corporate power and economic disparities that limit consumers’ ability to choose responsibly (Guthman, 2008; Lynch & Giles, 2013).

The discourse of health similarly shapes notions of *moral selfhood*, encouraging individuals to engage in ecological food practices to safeguard physical and emotional wellbeing (Beagan & Chapman, 2015; Biltekoff, 2013; Shugart, 2014). Moral selfhood refers to dimensions of the self that are judged—by oneself and others—as principled and praiseworthy. This health discourse frequently becomes an ethical one when participants describe their commitment to ecological food as a demonstration of caring for others—family members, local food producers, the broader community—and acting to ensure animal welfare and environmental sustainability (Smithers, Lamarche & Joseph, 2008). Yet definitions of health, too, are culturally constructed and discourses of healthful eating acutely embody class connotations. Health is a

“moral discourse” that articulates and affirms established understandings of what constitutes a good person or an upstanding citizen (Biltekoff, 2013)

Discourses of community development were particularly prominent in discussions of ecological food in Cape Breton, a factor that may reflect the island’s history of economic instability and unemployment. Ecological food practices offer participants ways to perform their identities through productive and ethical forms of activity. In performing their identities through associations with food, ecological food producers in Cape Breton engage in place-making, defining Cape Breton as a particular type of locality and affirming their attachment to it (Schnell, 2013). My respondents described their connection to the land, along with the possibilities and challenges they face in adapting to local weather patterns and natural environments. Their materially productive work corresponds with traditional sources of identification on the island such as employment in the fishery and coal-mining, and with less economically important pursuits—such as sport fishing, hunting, and berry-picking—that remain popular pastimes in the region. These pursuits are not central to local economies but have commercial value when promoted as tourist attractions or marketed through farm-gate sales, restaurants, and other venues. My respondents’ descriptions exemplify how ecological food practices sustain enduring identifications with rural places and nurture connections to local environments, economies, and communities.

Connections to place

Economy, geography, and place

My conversations with ecological food participants highlight the significance of local-organic food movements for authenticating locality in response to social and economic change. The importance of place and “the local” intensifies when regions lose their sense of identity (Feagan, 2007), a collective experience in Cape Breton following the disappearance of cod-fishing and coal-mining industries and the commodification of local culture through increasing tourism promotion. Economic upheaval destabilizes traditional identities but local food systems—including local food tourism initiatives—can become powerful symbols of regional identities and cultural distinction (Feagan, 2007). On the other hand, ecological food practices bring people together and provide intimate knowledge of local climates and environments that contributes to understandings of and identification with geographic locales. Kathy and Craig described Cape Breton as a safe, wholesome place for raising children with its slow pace of life, traditional values, and extended social networks. Yet their comments also depicted the island as an unlikely place for farming that demands physical and mental strength to cope with an inhospitable climate and infertile soils:

Kathy: we got to raise our kids here in Cape Breton, which was a wonderful thing... I enjoy the work; it’s forever challenging you,

physically, mentally. You never have all the answers, you're always learning, you're always trying to figure out what you did wrong and doing it better next year... It's really, really hard work but the seasons all bring something new and even winter when things are much, much slower, it gives you a chance to recharge and do some reading and do some research and plan and that's what I find satisfying about it I guess...

Craig: [T]here is no soil or virtually none. We had to build our gardens with manure and sheep composting and stuff like that. This place is all clay with about that much sod on top and so it grows grass like crazy. When I first came here it was trees as high as this ceiling here—hawthorns and wild apples and spruce trees—so I mowed those down and then once we put animals onto it the grass started coming back and with chickens out there fertilizing things it got a good *whoomf* and off it went. As far as grass goes it's good but for the rest of it we have to pretty well build gardens with compost.

Other respondents offered similar descriptions and remarked that Cape Breton's varied and abundant grasses provide an excellent environment for grass-fed cattle and other grazing animals, but ruefully acknowledged that conditions are less favourable for other types of agriculture (Farmer 1, June 25, 2015; Farmer 4, April 28, 2015).

Cultural dimensions of place

Geographic attributes intermingle with cultural qualities to define places. A significant percentage of Cape Breton's ecological food participants relocated to the island from areas with vibrant local organic food cultures. For these individuals, involvement in Cape Breton's local food movement provided a way to sustain a coherent sense of self while relocating to an unfamiliar geographic space. Shelly, a hobby gardener and committed ecological food consumer, demonstrated this desire to maintain established food practices after moving to Cape Breton from British Columbia. She described her relocation as a significant contributing factor in her interests in gardening and ecological food. In comparison to the variety of local and organic foods in British Columbia, Shelly discovered that the availability of fresh foods in Cape Breton was quite limited. Her dissatisfaction with Cape Breton's food choices is common among Canadians who relocate to Nova Scotia from urban centres and are disappointed to discover the high cost of food and inadequate selection in the region (Beagan & Chapman, 2015, pp. 179-185).

Cape Breton's reduced range of food choices results from many factors, including poor soil, remote location, and a short growing season. Rural localities such as the Annapolis Valley on mainland Nova Scotia have abundant fresh fruits and vegetables for much of the year but even these areas lack access to cosmopolitan cuisines. Halifax offers more food choices than

those found in rural communities—particularly for dining out— but available options are few in comparison to cities such as Toronto and Vancouver (Beagan & Chapman, 2015, p. 172). Newcomers’ dissatisfaction suggests different tastes and expectations among urban and rural residents that give rise to differing perceptions of urban and rural places. Urban areas are typically defined as cultured and cosmopolitan while rural areas, in comparison, are picturesque and homogeneous (Beagan & Chapman, 2015; Beagan, Power & Chapman, 2015; Thorpe, 2012; Everett, 2009).

Yet Shelly, like other participants in this study, did not express this view; to the contrary, my respondents emphasized the advantages of open fields, natural pollinators, and a moderate climate for expanding local-organic food production in Cape Breton (Farmer 1, June 25 2015; Farmers 5 & 6, July 21, 2016; Farmer 7, August 15, 2016; Farmer 8 August 16, 2016). In contrast to studies of foodie cultures and culinary tourism that suggest urban dwellers appreciate the pristine landscapes and traditional values of rural localities but disdain the unsophisticated tastes and limited experiences of rural inhabitants, my respondents’ views may reflect their identification as producers as well as consumers of ecological food.

Place and rural traditionalism

Helen, in particular, has embraced the island’s rural traditionalism and stated that experiencing Cape Breton’s folkloric culture shaped and enriched her subsequent outlook and activities. Reflecting on this experience thirty-three years later, she presented a vivid depiction of place:

I first came to Cape Breton to study Gaelic so when I was 22, I came out here as just a summer student... And I was so engaged not only with the language and traditions, which were significant then, they were still living, there was still a living tradition... but I also got to live in Cape Breton when the vast majority of people were practicing that sort of rural self-sufficiency style of farming. There were some commercial farms but the normal way of living was to be self-sufficient and it was not a largely cash economy...even in 1982 there was a lot of either barter or well you cut your own wood, all that kind of thing. And there was still a lot of men that farmed with horses, there were women that made their own cheese and did their own weaving, that knew about plants for doing dying, you know all that stuff. That was still not a kind of romantic conceit for a hippy-back-to-the-lander. That was part of an unbroken, living, traditional culture. So I got to see that at a time when it was still part of Cape Breton... And I was really captivated by the intersection of folk culture if you like and the scientific understanding of agriculture and things like that (April 28, 2015).

After several years as a market gardener in Ontario, Helen moved back to Cape Breton to farm but discovered that hybrid varieties fared poorly in the island's environmental conditions. Her efforts to produce viable crops in Cape Breton led to experiments with heritage seed varieties and participation in organizations that oppose genetically modified foods and advocate for local control and farmer sovereignty. Thus attachment to and practice in a remote, rural place has encouraged forms of activism with more wide-spread significance.

Moral selfhood

In describing their activities and identifications, my respondents revealed food as a medium through which they expressed autonomy, resourcefulness, diligence, and taste, along with concern for animals and natural environments. Preference for locally, ecologically produced food was often instilled in childhood through family values and habits. In adulthood, these individuals transmitted these attitudes and behaviours to their own children. Local food advocate and farmers' market manager, Naomi, explained how her family background shapes her participation in Cape Breton's ecological food movement:

So I guess to start at the beginning, my parents were homesteaders that moved here from the US so I was kind of raised on subsistence farming, off the grid sort of bizarre family (laughs). So in that way, food and food production and organic practices have always just been part of life. And I've always gardened through my whole adult life... (August 21, 2013).

An appreciation for the rewards and challenges facing ecological producers and a desire to make local-organic food more mainstream has encouraged Naomi's advocacy and involvement in such developments as the Pan Cape Breton Food Hub.

Childhood experience—including family values and growing up in a region where local farm produce is available and affordable—contributed significantly to many respondents' tastes, practices, and attitudes toward food (Farmer 1, June 25, 2015; Farmer 6, July 21, 2016; Farmer 7, August 15, 2016; Farmers 8 & 9, August 16, 2016). Shelly's desire for more and healthier food choices encouraged her to experiment with a small backyard vegetable garden, an undertaking that has become her passion. Through trial and error, she developed significant skills and proudly shares the bounty of her garden with neighbours and friends. She described the benefits of participating in ecological food production as profoundly personal:

I just have so much joy when I grow my own food; I want to share that, it just gives me so much pleasure... what I have now is a kitchen garden so the number one reward for me is how I feel when I'm gardening. Like it's the same as if I have a great yoga

class or something like that. It's that feeling of just relaxation, some kind of accomplishment (June 5, 2014).

Her emphasis on pleasure as central to her experience with ecological food practices is not trivial; on the contrary, the pleasurable experience of producing and consuming local-organic food is fundamental to its political potency. Amory Starr (2010) maintains that alternative food movements are unique in their use of pleasure to encourage participation. The emotional and material rewards of growing and eating fresh, wholesome food and of building social relationships encourages people to voluntarily assume the work of producing and consuming ecologically. Like Shelly, many of my respondents spoke about the gratifications of outdoor work, tasty food, and newfound friendships. Their comments evoke the fundamental sociality of food practices, illuminating how associations with ecological food overlap with related histories of conviviality through such activities as home-cooking (whether or not those activities are ecological).

Shelly's comments also defined gardening and sharing the bounties of harvest as a moral undertaking through which she affirms her connections to family and community members. She suggested that meaningful assessments of economic stability must include non-economic factors such as quality of life that enrich individual and collective experience:

I think that the economic value [of growing your own food] is definitely not as quantifiable as producing food to sell at a market but what I'm interested in maybe is quality of life, what value does that have in a community? Longevity and overall physical and mental health, what kind of economic value does that have?... So by growing all my greens this spring...I managed to connect with ten or fifteen people in my community that I didn't know before who are growers which led me to being a part of the [Cape Breton University] garden, so making these connections has a huge benefit, not direct economic benefit but I think that is the future of our culture. I mean we can't sustain this growth forever, there's no way, so we have to use these other markers as our markers of success I guess, like health markers and that kind of stuff (June 5, 2014).

Shelly did not see health, longevity, and community participation in quantifiable terms although economists routinely calculate the value of these life experiences. Through gardening, she has enhanced personal wellbeing, built social relationships, and nurtured the ecosystem of her local community. Gardening offered a form of productive activity that subtly resisted consumerist values. She expressed awareness of environmental issues but emphasized that personal and social rewards—including economic savings—were more important to her than political issues:

I know that what we're paying for is the cost of [food] shipping.... and that just kind of makes me angry. So it's more a cost issue and it's impractical for our food to be coming across the continent when we can just make it here or grow it here. I don't know that I have any huge wider environmental—I don't know; I feel a little guilty saying that—but that's less important to me than the local benefits and the personal benefits of gardening....

The moral dimensions of food practices thus can be distinct from larger concerns invoked in ethical food discourses such as those of animal welfare and environmental stewardship (Beagan & Chapman, 2015). Yet Shelly's comments illustrated that moral and ethical positions overlap in complex ways:

I'm pretty proud of myself that I didn't have to buy any of my greens at Sobeys. I know Sobeys is a Maritime business and everything but...I'm happy when I can grow my greens that maybe are grown in the States, like collards and stuff like that, we get from the States. Well I don't have to do that because I can grow them in my garden so it's one little way that I can do my part or whatever.... I know that one person growing kale in their backyard isn't going to make a difference but I think it is spreading awareness little by little. I'm definitely, in case you haven't noticed, more interested in the very grassroots level.

Political acts

Shelly's focus on growing fresh food to provide for her own household differed from other respondents' efforts to earn a living and intervene in the industrial food system. Yet her appreciation for the personal and social benefits of gardening was shared among ecological producers, as was her recognition of intersecting personal and political concerns. In fact, most ecological producers cited personal concerns as the initial motivation for experimenting with ecological techniques, but emphasized that their views had become more politicized over time (Farmers 2 & 3, October 25, 2014; Farmer 5, July 21, 2016; Farmer 7, August 15, 2016; Farmers 8 & 9, August 16, 2016). Craig and Kathy began raising free-range chicken when Kathy became pregnant with their first child:

His background is in geology and I'm an elementary school teacher so we kind of fell into it, learned as we went...[Our daughter] is turning 23 and we were expecting her when we got started. And that was one of the reasons we got started was, you know, granola mom gotta be eating just the right foods while I'm pregnant and so we started raising a few chickens on our own and

then the neighbours asked us to raise a few and family and it just it kept growing and growing from there (October 25, 2014).

Kathy's self-identification as a "granola mom" suggested an understanding of selfhood—as environmentally and socially aware and committed to eating natural foods—sustained and performed through free-range, organic farming. Her concerns about food quality and personal health aroused interest in others' welfare that engendered her political awareness and community involvement:

I guess that's our primary reason is we want to be eating good food; we want to be supplying good food and it kind of grew out of that. I've gotten more involved in some of the community gardens, the politics of growing local, and getting people back to eating real food, cooking real food since then. Certainly our primary reason was for the food we were eating ourselves and it's kind of become a bit of a mission since then (laughs).

Personal and social concerns in turn led to enhanced awareness of animal welfare and environmental issues. As Craig explained, "That's when—especially for the chickens and the pigs—the way they're raised is just horrible. So that's one of the reasons we started raising our own and we've become more militant about that (laughs)" (October 25, 2014). Kathy echoed this view, stating that interest in healthy eating, which motivated her family's free-range, organic farming techniques, extended to concerns about inhumane animal treatment and destruction of natural environments. This activist stance shapes their involvement in food production and their household consumption habits:

[A]nd it's the same thing, sourcing the stuff that we don't grow ourselves. I will buy beef from other producers that I know how they're raising their animals, how they're treating the animals and that that animal had a good life but eating out, I don't order any of the dishes that, you know, I pretty much go vegetarian when we're eating out. I don't buy any of our meats in a conventional grocery store.

Thus identification with overlapping discourses of health, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability has encouraged forms of identity performance that express a lifestyle committed to ecological food. Both Craig and Kathy stated that raising their children in rural Cape Breton, adapting to cycles of nature, and engaging in physically and mentally challenging work were substantial rewards of farming. They also emphasized the significance of ecological food practices for building relationships that enhance communities:

Kathy: We've got a really loyal customer base; we lose a few people you know each year from people moving away or downsizing their family or for a variety of reasons but ... our customers bring us more customers every year too and we kind of like having that wide base...it's nice to have a lot of different customers (Oct 25, 2014)

Craig: I felt satisfied when that guy came up the other day and said I had some of your lamb last night and it's the best lamb I've ever tasted in my life. Now that makes you feel good. And we've met an incredible number of really good people

Kathy: Really wonderful people

Craig: Close friends and stuff like that so I guess the rewards aren't monetary but still we made a living...

Bonds of community established through ecological food practices offset—and even outweighed—the modest income rewards of this endeavor.

For Kathy, university education and professional employment as a teacher provided a secure pension that eased the financial uncertainty of acting in accordance with her ethical and political values. This cultural and economic positioning was not unusual among the ecological food producers that I interviewed. Nine of my respondents held university degrees and four practiced farming as a supplementary source of income offset by one partner's higher paying professional salary or pension. They acknowledged that their involvement in farming would be difficult or impossible without their additional financial resources, but their commitment was nonetheless evident in their willingness to perform challenging labour and incur expenses that constrained rather than enhanced their economic circumstances.

The political stakes for ecological food producers were particularly demonstrated in their comments regarding organic certification. Farmers criticized unnecessary fees, restrictive regulation, and corporatization of the term “organic” as serious impediments for small-scale farmers with slim profit margins. Costs for certification are reflected in high prices for foods labelled “organic” that make these products unavailable to consumers with limited incomes. Most respondents emphasized the importance of challenging the industrial food system and making ecological food more mainstream; however, one farmer suggested that conventional and ecological farming are complementary rather than oppositional practices. In his view, the uniqueness and authenticity of artisan products justifies their high price and promoting these foods to affluent consumers creates a market niche for small-scale producers practicing traditional methods:

I've found a good kind of middle ground, like, I don't go to farmer's markets anymore just because I'm too busy making cheese... So last summer I think I was doing five farmers' markets and my cheese was suffering because all I was doing was driving. So I'm not against farmers' markets; I think they're great. I think

what people should be looking at, they should be looking at their pricing and not out-pricing themselves.... They should actually be looking at the value of their product, the time that they put in, and what they should be selling it for. If you can explain to your customer ‘this is what it cost me to do this’ they don’t mind paying.... [So] I would go ‘I’m in this category; I’m going to concentrate in the fine cheese category and making the best product that I possibly can and whatever the market can bear, that’s what I’m going to be charging (Farmer 1, June 25, 2015).

This respondent described himself as a professional chef, a business owner/manager, and an artisan farmer producing a unique, high quality product. He emphasized the importance of enhancing farmers’ incomes and distanced himself from the political objectives of many alternative food movements:

Costs are all over the place and because small farms have small purchasing power... you know how should these guys be making more money off their farms is more interesting to me than doing some of the other stuff because it gets very political and it becomes about issues not related to making money, of surviving doing this.

He acknowledged that his views differ from those of most ecological producers and attributed this difference to his background as a business owner and his family’s cultural capital and financial stability. In particular, his educational and professional experiences, combined with his wife’s professional occupation, were advantageous for navigating bureaucratic policies and managing the family’s farming and cheese-making operations. This farmer defended regulations as safeguards against unethical and potentially dangerous farming practices. Working within the system rather than attempting to change it was an unusual perspective among my respondents, but all ecological producers emphasized the importance of traditionally produced, high-quality foods and of adequately compensating small-scale farmers for their labour. Several respondents also discussed the need for consumer education to ensure safe food handling of organically produced foods (Local Food Advocate, August 21, 2013; Farmers 2 & 3, October 25, 2014; Farmers 5 & 6, July 21, 2016).

When I explicitly asked if marketing artisan cheese was an ethical undertaking, this farmer downplayed ethics but offered a thoughtful explanation that highlights the entanglement of personal and ethical viewpoints:

No, for me it’s the quality of the product first; that was always our goal. The ethical and the ecological to me are more important to myself so that just kind of comes through anyway about how we farm and how the ones that we support farm. I am never going to go for organic status because if I have an animal that’s ill and I’m

not allowed to treat it because I may lose my certification? That certification didn't mean anything to me because that animal is not going to die if I can do anything about it. And then all of a sudden Walmart has organic; I'm like this doesn't mean the paper it's written on.

Importantly, this perspective is not unethical but articulates a “complementary” medical position that balances practices to ensure animal welfare. Like many respondents in my study, this farmer criticized overuse of antibiotics but argued that allowing animals to suffer in order to comply with organic policies is equally unethical. The compromise he described arises in many life situations, including when people eat nutritiously, exercise, and rely on medical treatment for illnesses and injuries that require such expertise. The complexity of such situations will always raise ethical questions and require individuals to act according to their values and principles.

In addition, his disapproval of organic products sold in Walmart justifiably criticized corporate appropriation of the term “organic” to mislead consumers about the origins of mass-produced foods. This respondent's disdain also may have reflected his desire to distinguish artisan cheese as fine food. From this perspective, ecological producers who market their products in big box stores are selling out to the industrial food system and undermining the integrity of alternative food practices. Yet many ecological producers, including the owner of Stonyfield Organic Yogurt, reject this claim and argue that making organic food mainstream advances their goals of protecting the environment and making ecological food more widely available.¹

The stakes surrounding organic certification were particularly high for some farmers in my study who stated that the expense and bureaucratic process of maintaining organic status impeded their ability to differentiate their products in order to recover the significant costs of their labour. Canadian regulations prohibit non-certified farmers from using the word “organic” to promote their products, so farmers with varying allegiances to ecological practices often use terms such as “local” and “natural” in order to appeal to customers concerned about taste, personal health, environmental protection, and animal welfare. One farmer stated that ambiguity surrounding farming practices creates misconceptions among consumers that disadvantage farmers with deep ecological commitments:

[W]e are organic... And we won't pay for the fees...it's a little bit ridiculous ...to actually pay all of that money for certification...[so] everyone else we know charges the same thing we do or just slightly under to undercut us actually (laughs)...but they're not organic and it's provable because if people look at the rules... So when you're just trying to be a small farmer and an

¹ In 2001, Danone Incorporated purchased 40% of Stonyfield shares and by December 2003 owned 85% of the company. CEO, Gary Hirshberg, maintains control of Stonyfield but expresses ambivalence about the long-term implications of “selling out” to the global-capitalist food system (Bloomberg 2006, Goodman 2003).

ethical farmer...the biggest thing is you can't compete—you absolutely just can't compete with those industrial farms. You just can't. You've got your licensing for all the different things to pay for, if you were certified, you've got your certification. Everything that you do is much harder... (Farmer 5, July 21, 2016).

Her comments revealed tensions not only between farmers practicing conventional and alternative methods but also among ecological producers competing for a small market segment. Challenging circumstances for small farmers were compounded by tax regulations and government programs designed to meet the needs of large-scale, conventional food producers:

Their programs are very difficult; they're very challenging [for a small farm]. The application process requires so much input and you actually have to—their programs are limited in that they'll pay 50%, so you still have to come up with say \$1000 to get \$1000. So their programs are difficult; I've only been able to successfully use one of them, which worked out okay, I was in favour of it (Farmer 6, July 21, 2016).

Ecological food participants acknowledged government's responsibility to ensure an adequate and safe food supply for their constituents and understood that changing the food system is a complicated and long-term undertaking. Yet they questioned the short-sightedness of supporting mass-produced, genetically modified foods and criticized government policies that privilege corporate interests, particularly when corporate practices endanger public health and natural ecosystems. Farmers also criticized corporations for deceptively marketing cheap, industrially produced foods as “healthy,” “natural,” and “organic.” Most ecological food participants envisioned meaningful change as an incremental process that would ultimately impact global-industrial food practices.

One farmer summed up his hopes for the ecological food movement: “I believe in the slow revolt. You want to change things at a pace that it stays changed. Sudden catastrophic changes don't work but if you get enough people...” (Farmer 6, July 21, 2015). Like other participants in my study, he emphasized the significance of consumer demand in enlarging ecological food production and revolutionizing the prevailing food system, but acknowledged limits to the transformative power of consumer culture such as misleading advertising that obscures the production practices of global capitalist food systems, and high prices for ecologically produced foods that position them as an extravagance for erudite, affluent consumers.

It's all about class

Food producers' depictions of their clientele reflected the fundamental significance of class relations within all food practices. My respondents stated that consumers of local and organic

foods were predominantly—although not exclusively—financially well-off and relatively well educated. Some suggested that quality was often as important—or in some cases more important—to consumers than ecological practices. One farmer stated that consumers are ethically committed but emphasized that quality is the most important factor for most of his clientele. He described his typical customer as:

Thirty-five to fifty-five, predominantly professionals, mean average income sixty grand plus (laughs). Yeah that's my customer... my second biggest is the under twenty-five kind of hipster kind of crowd. Now those two groups really are where my money is made because it's a high priced item. So 60-some dollars a kilogram so you're not gonna get a lot [of cheese]. But it's goood... (Farmer 1, June 25, 2015).

Young “hipster” consumers may have not attained the affluence of older professionals but many are white university students whose oppositional perspectives and expectations of social mobility shape their consumption habits and distinguish them from those less aspiring and discerning. For this farmer, the precarious nature of operating a small business and the distinctive qualities of fine cheese justified its premium price, which in turn determined the clientele for such products and enabled these consumers to exhibit status by demonstrating their financial security and refined tastes. In his view, hierarchies of taste that sustain class distinctions are unavoidable and perhaps even acceptable given the uncertain financial circumstances of small farms and the labour-intensive process of producing artisanal foods.

Other respondents offered similar characterizations of their clientele as predominantly white and well educated with relatively high incomes and sophisticated tastes. Their customers were teachers, university professors, healthcare workers, and other professionals. Shelly aligned herself with this demographic as she described participants in local-organic food practices: “I would say, I mean, they're all university educated; it just happens to be my circle of friends. Lots of them are teachers, maybe they're not making a middle-class income but they're squarely middle class in terms of education, their ideas, political ideas, everything like that, absolutely” (June 5, 2014). Her comments evoked the significance of habitus in shaping food preferences and practices. Research suggests that, to a large extent, consumers of ecological food have forms of cultural capital that encourage their distaste for industrially produced foods and economic resources that enable them to purchase local-organic products (Johnston, Szabo, & Rodney, 2011; Pilgeram, 2012). Consumption of ecological food thus offers a way to express membership in a particular group and differentiate oneself from those who do not share its tastes and values.

Gender was a less predictable factor but most respondents agreed that local-organic food appealed more to women than to men, who seemed to follow women's decisions involving food (Farmers 3 & 4, October 25 2014; Local Food Advocate, August 21, 2013). As one farmer laughingly stated, “The vast majority of our customers are women. The husbands sort of get drug (sic) along” (Farmer 3, October 25 2014). Respondents attributed this gender imbalance to

women's roles as caregivers and cooks within the family, responsibilities that make healthy eating a primary concern for many women.

In contrast to consumers' privileged economic standing, the ecological food producers in Cape Breton whom I interviewed were, for the most part, not affluent although, as noted earlier, a significant number of farmers had occupations or pensions to supplement their farm incomes. Those who earned their living by farming became resourceful in adapting to significant economic constraints, yet even these farmers had ecological knowledge and political awareness that conferred cultural capital and complicated their class positioning. Helen took pride in her self-sufficiency and frugality and, during our interview, questioned prevailing notions of "need" and "quality of life":

Homesteading you're feeding yourself at best; farming you're earning your living from it and there is a distinction there, so you know, we might have all started as homesteaders at one point but sooner or later you give up your day job and you start earning your living from it. There's a large retirement sort of community too but you know, if you've got a great government pension and you want to play at farming, good for you but most of us can't afford that. It's not to say that they're not doing a great job but when you want to offer it as a viable livelihood for a young person you've got to prove that you don't need to go get a government pension before you get to do it; you need to be able to earn a living at it. Yeah, sure, can you make a living at it; I think you can. I think it depends on how you want to do it and I think it depends on the amount of effort you're willing to put in to it... I mean I do earn my living on the farm. I'm not saying I'm rich but I pay my bills and I guess for a farmer that is kind of rich, you know, and I don't live high. We do an awful lot ourselves, we built our own house for example, but like anything you have to do a cost-benefit analysis between do you have to call the plumber or do you figure out how to do it yourself right (laughs)? But you also have to be very creative... (April 28, 2015).

She maintained that the political and ethical importance of ecological food practices warrants reconsideration of materialistic values, a perspective that was shared among many of my respondents. Importantly, one young farmer in my study had recently resigned from his job to work full-time on the farm with his wife (Farmer 7, August 15, 2016), and another young couple stated that—although one partner was casually employed—they expected in the near future to achieve their goal of earning their income solely by farming (Farmers 8 & 9, August 16, 2016). Cape Breton ecological food participants in this study were acutely aware of the class dimensions of alternative food practices and expressed a desire to make ecological food more affordable and widely available while ensuring adequate incomes for farmers. They emphasized the importance of consumer awareness and collective resistance for critiquing the prevailing food

system and establishing more equitable economic and cultural relations. Studies in other regions have demonstrated similar class contradictions within alternative food movements. These contradictions do not negate the importance of such initiatives but they do underscore the importance of confronting issues of access and inclusion that limit the social and economic benefits of local-organic food practices (Pilgeram, 2011).

Concluding reflections

In the twenty-first century, ecological food movements have increasingly focused on local food initiatives. Many critics have denounced such initiatives as reactionary and exclusionary, but this study builds on scholarship demonstrating that local-ecological food movements can expand possibilities for building meaningful identities and revitalizing communities. My conversations with ecological food participants in Cape Breton revealed how local-organic food practices operate as sources for identity performance and community building in a geographically remote region of Canada that has experienced declining traditional industries and outmigration from rural localities.

Ecological food discourses define local-organic food as healthful, flavorful, environmentally responsible, and beneficial to local economies. Individuals in my study draw on these discourses to perform their identities in ways that validate their sense of being a good person, community member, and citizen, while also positioning them within overlapping and nuanced class affiliations. Embracing ecological food can be a way to distinguish oneself from those less culturally refined or economically advantaged. Yet, for many local-organic food participants, concern for taste, quality, and personal health encourages political and ethical awareness of issues surrounding animal welfare, ecological relations, community autonomy, and social justice.

Local food discourses authenticate attachments to place, an awareness and validation that is particularly important in rural regions—such as Cape Breton—facing social and economic challenges. Through their involvement in alternative food practices, my respondents defined Cape Breton as a rewarding place to live and work, and demonstrated that alternatives to the industrial food system can enhance individual and collective experience. Steven Schnell (2013) argues that place based activism is essential for envisioning and enacting meaningful, lasting change in a globalized world. Thus local food initiatives are not necessarily defensive and exclusionary; to the contrary, they foreground the importance of participatory practices and present alternatives to the industrial food system. Developments such as local food movements are forms of place-making through which people reconnect with their communities and natural environments. Identifying with and caring about “this place” and “this locality” encourages caring about places in general that enhances possibilities for establishing more equitable social and economic relations (Schnell, 2013, p. 82).

In Cape Breton, I have argued, involvement in ecological food is a strategy for validating rural identifications, building autonomous communities, advancing alternative economies, and nurturing responsible relationships with the natural world. My respondents' activities illuminate the ways in which personal concerns relate to political issues and affirm that local actions can contribute to broader efforts for meaningful social and economic change.

This study foregrounds the significance of Cape Breton's local-organic food movement by focusing on farmers' own accounts of their experiences and identifications. Nevertheless, my investigations are limited by their particularity, and my findings do not represent the experiences and perspectives of all ecological food participants in Cape Breton or in other regions. In addition, local-organic food practices include a range of activities that are beyond the scope of this study and, importantly, a more comprehensive analysis of Cape Breton's alternative food movement would examine efforts to establish environmentally responsible fishing methods. Investigations into policy changes and culinary tourism also would create a more complete picture of the opportunities and challenges facing ecological food participants in Cape Breton. Consequently, building on existing research to reveal the complexities of local developments brings the potential to assist ecological food initiatives in other locales.

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Personal Interviews

To respect participants' privacy, all interviewees are identified by pseudonyms in this study.

Farmer 1. Interview with author. June 25, 2015.

Farmer 2. Interview with author. October 25, 2014.

Farmer 3. Interview with author. October 25, 2014.

Farmer 4. Interview with author. April 28, 2015.

Farmer 5. Interview with author. July 21, 2016.

Farmer 6. Interview with author. July 21, 2016.

Farmer 7. Interview with Author. August 15, 2016.

Farmer 8. Interview with Author. August 16, 2016.

Farmer 9. Interview with Author. August 16, 2016.

Hobby Gardener & Ecological Food Consumer. Interview with author. June 5, 2014.

Local Food Advocate. Interview with Author. August 21, 2013.