Farm shops
– trading with heart or business as usual?
An assessment of farm shops as an alternative to conventional food retail outlets

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1. INTRODUCTION

What influences a person’s buying decisions when it comes to food? Is it convenience, price, healthiness or other, more hard to define reasons such as perceived quality of the products or their place of origin? This is one of the questions this paper tries to find the answer. Food sector has been through major changes in the 20th century. Industrialisation, which has been possible due to advances within chemical, transport and agricultural technologies, has lead to a move from localised food production systems to mass production and distribution of food. This type of conventional agriculture, which is heavily dependent on chemical inputs, can be damaging to the human health and the environment alike.1 Another striking feature in the post war food sector in the United Kingdom is the rise of influence of the larger supermarkets in the retailing of foods. This ‘retail revolution’ has lead to supermarkets taking control of approximately 80% of the food consumed in the UK.

It has been claimed, however, that due to a series of events in the past decades, changes are on the way in the agro-food sector, one of which is the quest for more sustainability.2 This is due to various factors including health scares triggered by outbreaks of Listeria, Salmonella, E Coli, BSE and most recently Foot and Mouth disease which have left the consumers lacking confidence in the conventional food system.3 These events have led to an emerge of what has been termed as ‘reflexive’ and ‘discerning’ consumer.4 It has likewise been claimed that these concerns have lead to a so called ‘quality’ turn in food consumption indicating a situation where consumers are increasingly demanding quality over quantity in food they consume.5

In order to calm down the concerned consumers, a number of new kind of food initiatives such as organic food production, fair trade and local food initiatives, have been offered as an alternative to the conventional food sector. Local food covers a number of activities such as direct selling of food from farm outlets, box schemes, typical regional products and Farmer’s Markets.6,7 These direct agricultural markets come in different shapes and sizes but they all encompass a ‘promise of human connection at the place where production and consumption of food converge.’8 According to Claire Hinrichs, this can be contrasted to spaces created by

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1 La Trobe (2001), p. 182
2 Sustainable development incorporates, according to its infamous definition, environmental, social and economic aspects. In the context of food chains it can be thought to refer to the incorporation of environmentally sound practices in production and distribution of food as well as considering the socio-economic implications of the particular food chain.
4 Morris and Buller (2003), p. 560
5 Watts et al. (2005), p.24
6 In the UK, a range of local food initiatives were supported on a political level in the so called Curry report which was published just after the Foot and Mouth outbreak and included series of recommendations relating to ‘relocalisation’ of food production. See Morris and Buller, 2003 for more details.
7 Farm shops are usually classified as one of the direct selling alternatives that the farmers have along with farmer’s markets and box schemes. Unlike Farmers Markets which are regulated through a national organisation FARMA, farm shops lack a commonly agreed official definition.
8 Hinrichs (2000), p.295
operations in the conventional food chains such as ‘hypermarkets’ or ‘superstores.’⁹ Local foods are argued to offer a closer ‘connection’ with the place of their production as well as supporting the local economy.¹⁰ It has been claimed that the emergence of these new consumption spaces have led to a change in the nature of economic transactions that take place in these settings. In order to conceptualise this phenomena, concepts such as ‘embeddedness’, ‘exchange of regard’ and the rival concepts of ‘marketness’ and ‘instrumentalism’, which will all form a part of theoretical framework of this study, have been developed in order to highlight the importance of other aspects rather than the pure economic considerations in the course of a market transaction.

Another issue that has featured prominently in the discussions about local food is the fact that it is often assumed to be of higher quality than industrial food. This is mainly due to the traceability of local food compared to highly industrialised food without clearly traceable origins.¹¹ Quality, however, as will be explored later on in this paper, is a highly fluid concept. The question of quality is of special interest in the context of local food sector where many claims have been made about the higher quality of local products without clear definitions as what that might entail. One of the biggest tensions in the local food sector is indeed the lack of an overall definition of ‘local food’ which leads to a situation where many claims for something being ‘local’ can be made. This has consequences, as will become clear during the course of this study as local is also associated with other aspects, for instance quality which in turn allows for commanding of higher prices in the market place.¹²

1.1 Aims of the study

The purpose of this study is to look at farm shop outlets in order to assess the nature of these outlets as a response to conventional food chains. Farm shops were selected as representative actors in the local food sector through which contradictions and constrain that characterise the research questions can be described. These types of retail outlets have often been claimed to offer a human connection which differs to the mechanised atmosphere at more conventional food retail outlets. The more precise research questions are as follows.

What characterises the relations between the farm retailers and their customers?

In which ways are the notions of ‘local’ and ‘quality’ being constructed in the display, marketing and social interaction between producers and the consumers in a farm shop setting?

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⁹ Hinrichs (2000), p.295
¹⁰ Guptill and Wilkins (2002), p.40
¹¹ Nygår and Storstad, (1998)
¹² Ibid.
1.2 Methodology and material

Farm shop outlets have been chosen as representatives of alternative food movements through which the research questions can be investigated empirically. In order to do this a range of theoretical concepts will be introduced. These concepts have been used in the field of agro-food studies in order to capture the recent trends in the food sector. These concepts will be used as a theoretical framework against which empirical findings of this study can be analysed.

This study utilises case study as a research strategy. Case study can be used for studies where interest is directed towards studying a phenomenon in its real-life settings and it offers a possibility for particular issue to be studied in depth and from variety of perspectives. In this study the case studies are used to describe the phenomenon of local farm outlets as alternatives for conventional food chains. Questions that this study aims to answer relate to the social aspects of the economic transactions that take place in these consumption spaces, to the nature of the relationships between the consumers and farm shop staff and the social construction of local and quality in a farm shop setting.

The research was conducted in two parts. First, a literature review was carried out in order to assess the need for the findings of the study and to establish a theoretical framework. Information about local food networks, theoretical concepts and previous studies was collected via a literature study of academic papers and the Internet. In the second part of the study two farm shops, Kingfisher farm shop and Garsons farm shop were chosen in order to investigate the theoretical concepts in a real life setting. These two shops differ in size and scope of their activities but they both have policies in place relating to purchasing and selling of local food. This made the farm shops interesting case study objects as they potentially are places where ‘alternative’ transactions can take place. Kingfisher farm shop was visited on Saturday the 12th of August 2006 while a trip to Garsons farm shop was made a few weeks later on Sunday the 3rd of September 2006.

Interviews were chosen as a main method of collecting primary data from the case study farm shops. Eyles has described interviews as ‘conversations with purpose.’ In this study the purpose of the conversations with the relevant actors in the selected farms shops was to gain a greater appreciation of the situation from the point of view of a small scale, independent entrepreneur in the food sector. Interviews have been generally described as sensitive and people oriented research method where ‘Interviewees construct their own accounts of their experiences by explaining their lives in their own words including the complexities and

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The strengths of interview method include the gaining of rich and detailed knowledge as well as providing a deeper understanding than a questionnaire. Interviews can be divided into different categories depending on the level of freedom that the interviewees are given to construct their replies. Interview format should be chosen depending on the type of information that the researcher wants to gather during an interview. During the field study visits a long in depth interviews were conducted with Barrie Arminson, the owner of the Kingfisher farm shop and Trevor Coote, Assistant Manager of Garsons farm shop. The purpose of the interviews was to gather basic information about the farm shops in question and to find out about the relationships between the farm shop staff and their customers along with the ways they understood terms ‘quality’ and ‘local’. These interviews followed an interview guide format. This format is said to be a flexible model which includes collating the issues that will be covered during an interview into an interview guide. The benefits of this approach include the possibility to pose additional and follow-up questions during the interview relating to the topics raised by the interviewee during the interview. These interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

In addition to this, sixteen customers in each of the farm shops were interviewed at the day of the visit to the farm shop. Customers were asked standardised open ended questions about their reasons for shopping at the particular outlet, about the frequency of their visits and their perceptions of ‘local’. These were used to gain a greater appreciation of the customer-retailer relations in the farm shops in question. Standardised open ended interview format was chosen for the interviews with the consumers as it was deemed to be the most appropriate for the circumstances. At Kingfishers 16 standard open ended interviews were conducted as the customers exited the shop on the day of the visit. 11 of the respondents were alone and five of them were couples that both contributed to the answers given during the interview. Total of 21 customers, 11 women and 10 men were spoken to. Length of the interviews varied from couple of minutes to up to ten minutes. Average age was around 45. At Garsons 16 standard open ended interviews were conducted with the customers after they had been shopping at the farm shop. 10 of the respondents were alone and six of them were couples that gave joint answers to the questions that were asked. Total of 22 people were spoken to, 9 of the respondents were men and 13 women. Length of each interview varied between couple of minutes to up to five minutes. Average age of the respondents was around 47.

In addition to the interviews, observations regarding how the food was displayed and labelled as well as interaction between the farm shop staff and their customers were made while visiting the farm shops. The observations took place in the farm shop prior to meeting the farm shop managers for an interview. Similarly some time was spent browsing the shop after the interviews. Observations at the farm shops took approximately half an hour at each shop. At Garsons an opportunity arose to take part in the introduction of new employees which

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16 Patton (1990), pp. 288-298
17 In both outlets some of the interviewees preferred not to disclose their age.
included tour around the farm which gave an interesting insight into the business practices at Garsons.

1.3 Scope of the study

Limitations of the study include the relatively small scope of the study both in terms of number of case studies selected and a number of interviews conducted. This means that it is not possible to make valid claims of representation on the basis of the empirical study. This was a conscious choice as it was decided that in depth interviews with selected few would offer a greater understanding of the issues under scrutiny as opposed to a greater number of shorter interviews. Another limitation relates to the theoretical framework that was built in order to analyse the findings. By doing this a certain number of concepts were selected while others were left out which can be interpreted as a limitation of this study. The selection was made, however, because the aim of this paper is to take a deeper look into a few aspects of selected alternative food movements as opposed to offering an all encompassing overview of the entire sector which would cover all the issues of interest.

1.4 Disposition

In the next section the theoretical framework for the study will be introduced. This consists of a set of concepts that aim to explain the nature of economic transactions in settings that are characterised by face to face contacts and personal relationships. Two competing ways of explaining this phenomenon are presented in order to reveal the tensions that have been dominating this field of thought in the past years. Second part of the theory chapter will be used to explain the theoretical understanding of a social construction of the terms ‘quality’ and ‘local’.

After this the empirical material of the study is presented including a background to the chosen case study farm shops followed by a description of their customer relations, ways they present quality and customer feedback. The presentation of the empirical material is followed by a chapter that discusses the findings of this study in which the theoretical concepts and the material from the empirical study are brought together. Finally, the main findings are summarised in a concluding chapter.

2.0 THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this chapter the main theoretical concepts that will be deployed during the course of this study will be introduced. First set of concepts have been designed to explore the nature of economic transactions that take place in different types of retail spaces. These concepts include the ’social embeddedness’, ‘re-embeddedness’ and ‘exchange of regard’ followed by notions of ‘marketness’ and ‘instrumentalism’. Notions of embeddedness and exchange of regard have been developed in order to highlight the importance of the social nature of the economic transaction. The authors criticising this idea point out that individual buyers are
often motivated by a number of aspects, some of which have little to do with the social nature of the economic transaction. These concepts are of interest for the purposes of this study because they offer different and somewhat contradictory explanations for the nature of relationships between the seller and the buyer in an exchange situation which is of special interest in this study. Second idea that will be presented is the idea of a social construction of quality. This idea depicts quality as a highly fluid concept that can be manipulated for the purposes of the seller in several different ways. This poses both threats and possibilities for those dependent on how the customer perceive their products, such as the farm shops in question. These concepts will be used when analysing the ways in which local and quality are presented in the farm shop setting.

2.1‘Embeddedness’ and ‘exchange of regard’- the social aspects of economic transaction

As opposed to processes of globalization, industrialization and standardization, there is a growing consensus that an ‘alternative geography of food’ is emerging in the food sector. This phenomenon is increasingly capturing the imagination of many social scientists. Globalization of the agro-food system has been a topical issue within agro-food studies since the 1970s. The early explanations of the phenomena relied on political-economic meta-narratives which were based on neoclassical economic thinking and an idea of ‘market’ logic. The main motivation behind the agro-food studies was the development of production technology which would help to overcome the biological constrains, such as crop disease, geographical distance and productivity, which are inevitable traits of food production and distribution. While this way of conceptualizing the issue has helped the understanding of the general direction of change, a number of authors have pointed out the lack of understanding of the ‘human-level contingency’ within supply chains. This means the role of human agency in various stages of the supply chains has been ignored while searching for grand explanation for the changes that have been shaping food supply chains in recent decades. In addition to this, it has been claimed that due to the changing relationships between production and consumption within the supply chains there is a ‘growing local level complexity of the construction and mediation of value’. One example of the outcomes of the changing relationships between production and consumption is the emerging of a number of alternative food movements such as various local food movements. These are often claimed to offer close spatial and metal connection between the place of production of food and the consumers where human level contingency plays, if possible, a greater role than in conventional food supply chains.

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18 Whatmore and Thorne (1997)
19 Murdoch, Marsden and Banks (2000)
20 Kirwan (2004), p. 397
21 Arce and Marsden (1993), p.296
22 Kirwan (2004), p. 397
A concept which is relevant in studying the alternative agro-food movements is the notion of ‘regard’ which was developed by Avner Offer. According to him where personal relationships and face-to-face interaction between individuals appear, exchange reaches beyond mere economic transaction, and instead becomes a good in its own right. This means that while the economic gains from the trade play a certain role, ‘satisfaction of regard’ is equally important. This quest for regard can be fulfilled in many different ways such as demonstrating acknowledgement, acceptance, respect, reputation, status, love, friendship or sociability. These types of exchanges are common in particular ‘when trade involves a personal interaction, and when goods or services are unique, expensive, or have many dimensions of quality.’

There is a danger, however, that this regard can be abused if commercial interests are the primary motivations behind pursuing of personal relationships. This ‘pseudo-regard’ is often perceived amongst the consumers if they get a feeling they are not treated as an individual.

In his study on small-scale horticultural nurseries Lee extended the notion of regard to impersonal relationships and noticed the differentiated creation of value via the process of ‘mutually recognized reciprocity.’ In these situations ‘The buyer discounts...uncertainties and the possibly high prices associated with undercapitalized small firms heavily reliant on the mental and material labour of their owners’ while the seller ‘Offers time, information, labour and expertise as well as the value embodied in commodities.’ He discovered that in the case of small horticultural nurseries an exchange of ‘free’ knowledge could be used as a justification for high prices but could also be seen as means to facilitate future transactions.

Another related concept is ‘social embeddedness’. It has a long tradition within economic geography and it has been found to contribute to the greater understanding in agro-food studies with the onset of recent concerns of food safety and ecological conditions under which food is produced. The concept was first introduced by Karl Polanyi (1886-1968) and subsequently reappraised by Mark Granovetter in his seminal paper. In this paper Granovetter argued that particularly in situations of direct and ongoing interaction between individuals, social relations play an important part in shaping economic transactions.

Granovetter argues against both under and over-socialized conceptions of the degree onto which society influences individual behaviour. According to him individuals are not merely rational and independent beings who always follow their personal self-interest. Equally Granovetter does not support the idea that individuals are completely socialized beings to the point where socialization becomes mechanic and individual behaviour can be predicted based

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23 Offer (1997)  
24 Ibid., p.450  
25 Ibid., p.454  
26 Lee (2000), p. 139  
27 Ibid.  
28 Lee (2000), p. 139  
29 Murdoch, Marsden and Banks (2000), p. 115  
30 Granovetter (1985)
on the knowledge of their social class or position in a labour market sector.\textsuperscript{31} Instead, he argues ‘Their [individual’s] attempts at purposive action are instead embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations.’\textsuperscript{32} He argues that the role of these concrete personal relationships is vital in a process of ‘generating trust and discouraging malfeasance’ during an economic transaction.\textsuperscript{33}

In another account, Thorne has pointed out that the social relations that shape economic exchange relations are increasingly beyond control of actors at local level. She has thus introduced a concept of ‘re-embedding’ in order to ‘describe the purposive action by which individuals or communities seek to create accessible structures that can allow them to regain some control within exchange processes.’\textsuperscript{34} This presents the setting up of an alternative food network as a political act.\textsuperscript{35}

2.2 ‘Marketness’ and ‘instrumentalism’

The concepts of embeddedness and exchange of regard have been popular among the agro-food scholars but they have also attracted some criticism due to their simplistic view on the issue. One of the most prominent criticisers has been C. Clare Hinrichs who has been critical of the way embeddedness has been often used as a mere ‘friendly antithesis of the market’ without consideration of the realities in the market place.\textsuperscript{36} She advocates for a cautious use of the concept embeddedness and claims that in her study on direct agricultural markets in the US, an incorporation of terms ‘marketness’ and ‘instrumentalism’,\textsuperscript{37} in addition to embeddedness was helpful in understanding the phenomena of direct agricultural markets. Marketness has been described as continuum along which all the economic transactions take place. Different types of transactions fall on different places on that continuum. As explained by Block:

‘High marketness means that there is nothing to interfere with the dominance of price considerations, but as one moves down the continuum to lower levels of marketness, non-price considerations take on greater importance.’

He clarifies this further by stating that

‘It is not as though prices are irrelevant under conditions of low marketness; it is just that they compete with other variables, so that one would expect [price] differences to be much larger before the actors respond.’\textsuperscript{38}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Granovetter, p. 487
  \item Ibid.
  \item Ibid., p. 490
  \item Kirwan, (2004), p. 397
  \item Hinrichs (2000), p. 296
  \item Hinrichs borrowed the concepts of marketness, instrumentalism and how they relate to embeddedness from Fred Block (1990)
  \item Block, F (1990), p. 51, cited by Hinrichs (2000) p. 297
\end{itemize}
Block has also argued embeddedness will play a greater role in economic transactions that are characterised by low marketness.

The related concept of instrumentalism relates to the nature of individual motivation. High instrumentalism translates to a situation where actors value economic goals over and above everything else and are willing to opportunististic behaviour in order to achieve those goals. As opposed to this, low instrumentalism leads to prioritisation of other, non-economic goals such as different types of social ties. These related concepts, embeddedness, marketness and instrumentalism are argued to be present in some level at all markets but the share of each of them is dependent on the nature of the market in question. Following these arguments, Hinrichs states, that the combination of marketness, instrumentalism and embeddedness are important in understanding direct agricultural markets such as farmers markets or community supported agriculture, which are not merely social places but also places where price considerations and other intentions play a significant role in peoples buying decisions. She has noted, however, that this insight has not penetrated in all the local food study analyses and goes as far as stating that

‘There has been tendency to celebrate social embeddedness- particularly in the guise of social familiarity, trust, civic engagement and the like- and to minimize any evidence of marketness or instrumentalism on the part of actors in the local food system.’

Another scholar who has expressed similar critique to Hinrichs is Michael Winter. His critique focused on the way embeddedness has been automatically equated with alternativeness by some of the scholars as if other types of markets would not show signs of the social aspects of the economic. He points out that ‘all market relations are socially embedded, in a range of contrasting ways’ regardless of whether or not they are based on close social connections and loyalty.

The quest for studies that would reveal the human level contingency of the agro-food sector has led a number of agro-food scholars to search economic theories that deal with social dimensions of the economic. Notions of exchange of regard and embeddedness, re-embeddedness all highlight the importance of the social in the economic and have thus been used widely, especially in reference to studies on so called alternative movements including a number of studies on local food movements. Other contributions to this field include marketness and instrumentalisms that have been offered as a counter argument for those attaching too much value on the social aspects to the point where other considerations such as price considerations and economic self interest are forgotten. This raises several interesting aspects that can be developed further through studying the phenomena in real life settings. This raises several interesting aspects that can be developed further through studying the phenomena in real life settings. In which ways are the social relations on one hand and the

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40 Ibid.
41 Winter, (2003) , p. 25
economic considerations weight by customers when making real life purchasing decisions? Is this something consumers actively think about or are their actions unconscious, something they do not give much thought to? Are these aspects thought about in the farm shops, do they realise the potential/value in building personalised social relationships in order to distinct themselves from other food retail outlets? How do they justify the higher prices in a way that keeps the customers satisfied so that they keep coming back to the store? Is knowledge of the products and sharing of this knowledge appreciated by the customers and/or used by the sellers as one point of adding value to the products? These are some of the questions that will be relevant when analysing the findings of the empirical study. The next chapter aims to describe the principles behind the social construction of quality and the problems with defining local foods. Next chapter aims to describe the principles behind the social construction of quality and the problems with defining local foods.

2.3 Social construction of 'local' and 'quality' in the local food retail sector

Alternative food networks, such as small scale independent food retailers, are often equated with attributes of ‘quality’. Quality however, as pointed out by many authors, is a problematic term as it is socially constructed and the meaning of the word is open for interpretation. Ilbery and Kneafsey mention that in order to be classified as a quality product it needs to satisfy consumer needs as well as to have a consistent level of performance and taste. Quality products need to rise above minimum standards. To be classified as a quality product can also offer an asset when competing against rival products as quality often implies to the ability to command higher prices in the market place.

When translated to local food supply chains, Harvey et al. point out that the term ‘quality’ ‘plays mostly on a contrast with the orientations of the mainstream industrialised food system towards low cost, convenience, consistency, reliability and predictability’. This means that actors in local food sector intentionally want to present their products as an opposite to the foods that have been produced through conventional, industrialised food chains. This could mean that low prices of the conventional products will be matched by attaching higher price tag for local products with the intention of sending a signal of high quality product to the consumers.

In order to analyse the ways in which quality is constructed, it is important to consider the ways it becomes attached to certain products. Callon has introduced a term ‘qualification’ in order to explain the process through which quality is attached to different products. He calls describes this qualification process in a following way; ‘All quality is obtained at the end of a

42 Renting, Marsden and Banks (2003)
45 Harvey, McMeekin, and Warde (2004), p.3
46 See Guptill and Wilkins (2002) for an example of this in the US where local foods were conceptualised as ‘premium’ and ‘special’ in order to highlight the higher quality of local products and distinct them from mainstream food retailing.
process of qualification, and all qualification aims to establish a constellation of characteristics, stabilized at least for a while, which are attached to the product and transform it temporarily into a tradable good in the market. As pointed out by Murdoch and Miele, this makes all the goods as ‘variables’ which are open for manipulation by different actors which are involved in its production and retailing. Manipulation in this context is the process of establishing a set of positive characteristics that the customers associate with products that go beyond the characteristics that are clearly visible. In the context of local foods this might mean that producers and retailers should have the power to try to manipulate the products. The aim of this exercise should be that the customers would associate products that are labelled ‘local’ with range of other attributes, such as fresh, healthy and environmentally friendly. This can be done for instance by directing customers attention to the fact that a product has travelled less food miles.

Quality is a fluid and subjective concept which is negotiated through a process of qualification. Thus, quality only has a meaning in relation to the specific context it is being produced or consumed. As quality is a contested concept, who has in the food production and distribution chain has the authority to define quality? This is an issue that demands attention. As pointed out by Sonnino and Marsden, the process is likely to reflect the location of economic power in a particular food chain. It is clear that the process is also a matter of competition between different actors in the food supply chain, including the actors in the conventional food system. These actors often have different agendas and intentions, and as claimed by Ilbery and Kneafsey, it is often possible for powerful actors to manipulate this process by appropriating images and identities from small producers, which in turn hinders small producers in their attempts to differentiate their products.

### 2.3.1 Problems with defining ‘local’

One of the most important and problematic features of the local food sector is the lack of clear definition of the term ‘local food’. These problems have been highlighted in three studies into the retail of local foods. Morris and Buller, in their study into local food sector in Gloucestershire, identify three ways that the nature and meaning of ‘local’ was understood, they are parochial, flexible and competitive. Parochial localism refers to the level of support to local farmers as well as the maintenance of tradition and protection of the environmental qualities. Flexible localism means that the participants of the survey gave varying definitions of what they considered as ‘local.’ Some of the participants only labelled products that they sourced within a 25 mile radius as local while others understood a product as local if it was sourced from within the United Kingdom. The third type that was identified was ‘Competitive’ localism which means that different types of retail outlets where competing against each other over dominance in the local food sector. Findings of the study by Ilbery

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47 Callon, Meadel, and Rabeharisoa (2002), p.199
48 Murdoch and Miele (2004), p. 159
50 Sonnino and Marsden (2006)
and Maye 52, into retailing in an UK region near English-Scottish border, coincide with those of Morris and Buller in that they found traces of both flexible and competitive localism. The authors found that flexibility in defining local food ranged from county level to descriptions such as ‘Scottish’ or ‘British’. Apart from competition between supermarkets and independent retailers, competition between different types of retail outlets such as farm shops, local shops and butchers was prominent finding in their study.53

The contested nature of quality which is associated with alternative food networks offers both opportunities and threats to small scale local producers and independent retailers involved with selling local food. Opportunities come in the form of being able to command higher prices in a market place while threats relate to the process through which quality is defined. Qualification is a complicated and contested process where there is a danger that the most powerful actors such as the supermarkets achieve the upper hand by manipulating standards of quality for their own purposes. Another question that has featured prominently in studies into local food sector is the lack of commonly agreed definition of local food which can lead to confusion in the market place. These issues will be looked upon when analysing how notions of quality and local are constructed in a farm shop setting.

3.0 CASE STUDIES

Two farm shops were selected in order to further investigate the research questions. Both of the case study farm shops are situated in Surrey which is a county in southern England and part of South East England region. The county has a population of around 1 million and forms a part of Home Counties, so called due to their proximity to London where many people living in Surrey commute to work daily. Due to its proximity to London, the county’s population density is high (644/km² compared to UK average of 243/km²) and it is more affluent than most of the counties in the UK. Only 1 % of UK population is occupied in the agriculture and fisheries sector, in Surrey this proportion is even smaller. Many parts of Surrey belong to Green Belt, which has been designated to protect the capital from urban sprawl. This means that new development is strongly restricted in many parts of the county.54

Although Surrey has relatively few primary producers, a number direct marketing schemes are operating in the county including farm shops, farmers markets and home delivery box schemes. The case study farm shops; Kingfisher farm shop and Garsons farm were chosen due to their different profiles in the local food sector in Surrey. Kingfisher is a substantially smaller enterprise than Garsons. While Kingfishers focus almost entirely on the farm shop activities, Garsons has many different activities under the same roof including a garden centre and sizeable pick-your-own (PYO) fields. Despite these differences they can both be seen as actors in the local food sector in Surrey as they both have internal policies relating to sourcing and promoting of local produce. In this section the main results from the field study visit are

52 Ilbery and Maye, (2006)
53 Morris and Buller, (2003), p. 564
presented. During the interviews an attempt was made to understand the types of relationships that each of the farm shops have with their customers as well as finding out in which ways quality and local are constructed in a farm shop setting. Parts of the interviews were used in order to find out the basic facts about the two farm shops. Questions were asked about their past, present and future in order to gain a fuller picture of the case study farm shops and the context in which the transactions and interaction between the staff and the customers take place.

3.1 Kingfisher farm shop

Kingfisher farm shop is situated in Abinger Hammer, a small village near Dorking, Surrey. The shop is run by Barrie and Margaret Arminson along with their daughter Marion. The farm has been in the Barrie’s mother’s side of the family for five generations since two Coe brothers started to grow watercress in the area in 1854. They started off with half an acre which expanded up to 15 acres at its heyday at which point they were renting land from five landlords in the surrounding villages.

Over the years things changed and the expansion of the supermarkets in the area gradually lead to closing down of most of the green grocers and butchers in the county. This development meant that Kingfisher started to experience difficulties in getting their watercress into the market. In 1971 Barrie saw a market opportunity after a local butcher, who had been selling fruit and vegetables on the side of his meat business, closed down. Barrie started buying fruits and vegetables on his weekly trips to London and they started selling fruit and vegetables on a bench outside their back door. Initially the shop was open during the weekends only but later on they were able to expand the operations and start to keep open throughout the week. Their next step was to start selling from a shed by their house and about 20 years later they were able to move into their current premises, a house that was previously used by the staff that was working with the watercress.

As the years went by they kept developing the retail side of the business, gradually cutting down the amount of watercress they produced. The reason for this was the flow of French watercress into the market and according to Barrie ‘Theirs always looked better than the English in the winter so I said: ‘Right that’s it, we stop before they start and the shop just slowly grew and grew and it has grown and we haven’t look back.’ At present they only have a few beds of watercress at the edge of their property.

Currently they run the farm shop which is open 7 days a week selling fruit and vegetables, local wines and ciders, meat, berries, olives, chutneys, eggs and other products. In addition to this, they have been running a flower shop since 2003 which is a responsibility of their daughter.
Strict or flexible localism? - defining the extend of the ‘local’

In terms of sourcing local food, Barrie is struggling with the loyalty he feels with the producers they have done business with for years if new, more local producers start production. One example he mentions is their ice cream supplier.

‘Our ice cream is made on a farm in Sussex or it might at the edge of Kent, somewhere down there, farmer makes it. The trouble is, there is one in Surrey now but we’ve been dealing with them for so long that we feel that we couldn’t possibly [change the supplier]..’

But on the other hand, if the producer does not live up to the expectations or somehow changes or breaks the original contract, they will be traded for someone else. This is the case with their other ice cream supplier, which was originally manufactured in Guildford which is one of the closest population centre to Kingfisher farm shop, but the production has now changed to an ice cream factory in Northern Wales where ‘they are making ice cream for goodness knows who.’ Also the yoghurts and cream that they get from the same supplier have failed to keep the promise of a ‘local produce’ that originally led Barrie and others to source from them. ‘We used to have Losely cream and yoghurts but that’s made of somewhere in Timbuktu so we now have all ours from a Yorkshire farm.’ It is interesting to note that the Yorkshire farm that supplies the dairy products has experienced growth recently to a point where they have to buy in milk from other farms. However it seems clear that they have managed to stay within the original contract of supplying food with clearly traceable origins. Another important factor is that the customers are satisfied with the products from the Yorkshire farm so Kingfisher will continue to source from them despite the change of scale in their operations.

On the other hand, Barrie is a realist stating that they have to be price conscious in their decisions as to which goods to sell in order to get the best deal that is available to them. As Barrie explains:

‘I mean we had people supplying us, they walked in and said we have this that and that and we started buying off them, and then we find, another firm comes in and they are more competitive, selling the same thing and you swap, you switch you know, you have to be a bit ruthless like that cause we got to be competitive on price.’

The farm shop is trying to support local as far as possible but according to him, this is becoming increasingly challenging. He says things like ‘The English growers have had it’ and ‘We try to buy as much local as we can but its pretty pathetic, we’ve only got one grower in Surrey of any size and that’s Secretts in Milford’ and later, when asked about his vision for the future for the farm shop he observes that the wholesale market in London is getting smaller and admits that he sometimes wonders where the products are going to come from in the future. But he is also critical of how some of the English producers present their products to the customers. He states that some small producers do not put enough effort into presenting
their produce in good quality packaging, although it is clear that customers expect good quality packaging and well presented products.

In terms of the other farm shops in Surrey, Barrie describes the relations with these as more co-operative than competitive. According to him, the farm shops in Surrey are all far enough a part from each other so there is room for friendly co-operation. An example of this is that the other farm shops sometimes tip them off of a new product and they return this favour if they come across an interesting product.

This co-operative attitude does not mean that Barrie has not thought about their market position of the other similar shops and compared it with their own. He has, over the years become to accept that they too are fortunate due to their location in the midst of a rather affluent area. As he explains:

‘We are very lucky, we are in a reasonably, we are living in Surrey which is a pretty affluent county so. I used to look at the other farm shops and think, oh they are lucky like Garsons in West End Esher they’ve got people with lot of money or like Secrets in Milford thinking oh, they’ve got people with a lot of money around there and I didn’t think we had it around here but we have.’

He also counts their location on the main road as a blessing as they are aware of the fact that they sometimes get new customers out of the passing traffic flow.

Customer relations

With regards to customer relations Barrie talks about caring for all the customers regardless of how much they spent in the store. He says it is important to make every customer to feel like they are welcome to the store. He also thinks people value the good mornings and afternoons as opposed to supermarkets where he has sometimes wondered whether the staff is told to concentrate on what they are doing and keep the interaction with customers to a minimum. He thinks it is important to help customers who have enquiries, a fact that he highlights when training his staff by telling them to always find help if they themselves do not know the answer to customers’ enquiries. He knows that many of his customers are local living in the nearby villages but also that people do travel from considerable distances in order to visit his shop. Barrie says that sometimes people who travel further away are disappointed if the particular item they wanted to buy has been sold out. This is a factor that Barrie regrets and says he tells people to ring up before hand in order to make sure the item is in stock before they start driving and they can reserve the item for the customers if they so desire.

He also speaks of reciprocal relationship with their local community and expects the favours they give to the local community to come back to them.

‘We want the community to support us and we want to support them, schools come to us for a prize for a raffle, the local schools, we will support them so we feel its a two way thing. The
people, you know, they’ll probably say, they are always supporting us... we ought to support them’

Kingfisher’s marketing is mostly done by word of mouth. The shop does not currently have their own website but they are on the internet due to a few online articles that have been written and published by online magazines. In addition to this they advertise in local church magazine which is distributed to every home in the nearby villages and they sometimes participate in Surrey wide marketing initiatives which are relatively irregular occurrence. Barrie Arminson is however cautious towards investing too much money on marketing as he thinks it is easy to loose money this way without getting expected returns in increased sales.

Quality and freshness

Quality is the most important aspect of the food that is sold at the farm shop. Barrie Arminson repeatedly talks about maintaining high quality standards in all parts of the business from keeping the shop tidy to offering products that meet customer’s expectations. Barrie also recognises that while price does play a role in customer’s purchasing decisions, he does not think that farm shops should try to match supermarket prices when pricing the goods. He thinks that many entrepreneurs in past have made a mistake of trying compete with supermarket prices because this has meant that they have also had to compromise on the quality of the products, which has driven the customers away. Kingfisher tries to support family businesses as far as possible ‘if they are good’. One example of a good quality family business that Barrie speaks highly of is a pie maker who has, despite considerable expansion to his business managed to ensure good quality throughout the production line.

Barrie is aware of the fact that most of the customers come to the shop to find fresh products, often assuming that the goods are delivered to the shop on a daily basis. He says that while this is not strictly true, the goods do not arrive fresh everyday, they do their best to maintain the image of freshness in their customer’s minds by keeping only small qualities on display and filling the shelves several times a day. Another case of creating an image of a quality is by paying attention to packaging and overall presentation of goods which is, as mentioned earlier, something that Barrie thinks some small producers fail to do properly.

Shop display

Kingfisher farm shop has an open plan layout with shelves circulating around the walls. Even the shelves that are located in the middle of the shop floor are low enough in order to see what is going on in the shop at one glance. Barrie has a clear idea of people’s expectations when they come to his shop. He mentions that they try to keep the place tidy and clean, which is part of maintaining their high standards. Shops open plan layout is intentional as it is different from supermarkets’ wide aisles and tall shelves, where it is impossible to see across from one aisle to another. In Kingfisher farm shop the openness is both for security reasons and for distinguishing them from the supermarkets. Another feature of the shop includes a view
towards a nearby lake from the shop’s window which Barrie thinks adds to the character of the shop and makes them unique as ‘its the lake there, you don’t see that anywhere else when you go shopping.’

Customer feedback

21 customers that were interviewed in front of Kingfisher farm shop had varied backgrounds and motivations for shopping at Kingfisher’s. Four people said they were just passing and visit to the shop was more of an impulse than a considered choice. About half of the remaining seventeen were local people living in nearby villages, most of them paying a visit to Kingfishers on a weekly basis, some of them several times a week. The remaining half lived further away from the shop but said they return to the farm shop on a regular basis, mostly once or twice a month. During these brief interviews customers were asked about their reasons for coming to the farm shop, about the frequency of their visit, what items they bought and their attitudes towards local foods in general.

The aim of these questions was to find out whether the customers came to the shop motivated by other aspects, such as closer social ties with farm shop owners and staff, as opposed to coming merely to shop for food out of necessity. In addition to this, it was hoped that customers would shed a light on how they perceive the inter linkages between quality and local in a farm shop setting.

The human connection was mentioned as an important aspect about shopping at Kingfisher. Some of the customers contrasted the friendly atmosphere in the farm shop to that in the supermarkets. As one customer put it: ‘Supermarkets leave you cold, don’t they? There is a warm feeling here, that’s why we like to come and shop here.’ Many of the local people knew the owners on a personal level and though that it was nice to shop at an outlet where people knew each other. But not everyone seemed to reflect over the friendliness of the shop or relationships with the shop owners or the staff. Some of the respondents were merely passing by on their way to somewhere else. Those who visited Kingfisher’s shop for the first time said they were impressed by the shop and the high quality of the products, but they did not mention the friendliness of the staff as a factor that contributed to their shopping experience.

It was interesting to notice that for the majority of the respondents the main reasons for shopping at Kingfisher was that the produce was fresh. In the course of the interviews it became clear that the customers made assumptions about the freshness of the products merely because they purchased them at a farm shop which was known to source local produce. This was illustrated in responses such as ‘I know it’s fresh because it’s local.’ In some cases it was enough that respondent had visited other similar outlets in order to value goods sold at Kingfisher farm shop as fresher and better quality than at supermarkets. As one lady commented ‘I know it’s fresh because I have been to other farm shops before and found that their produce is of better quality than that of the supermarkets.’ One of the respondents was an exception to this rule, he explicitly stated that he did not think that freshness of the produce
had anything to do with it being local, food he purchased at Kingfisher’s simply tasted better, which was the only reason he preferred Kingfisher farm shop over the supermarkets.

Some customers valued the knowledge of the farm shop owners and the staff of the food they were selling. One lady mentioned an example when she was disappointed in another specialist retailer’s knowledge of olives she wanted to purchase and she has since decided not to go back to that shop due to the owner’s lack of knowledge of the products he is selling. According to her the lack of knowledge of the products is not a problem at Kingfishers.

About third of the respondent did reflect over the importance of buying local in order to support small farmers and local economies, while some others thought local food was more environmentally friendly. Some even thought that food that was local could also be classified as organic. Only one of the respondents was more specific about the reasons behind the environmentally friendliness of the products and mentioned that local food resulted in fewer food miles which reduced their impact on the environment.

Price considerations did not seem to rank highest on respondent’s list when talking about shopping at Kingfisher. One respondent mentioned that prices at Kingfishers were generally more expensive than at the supermarkets but cheaper than at Farmers Markets. One gentleman did not reflect over the price of his shopping basket because he was very satisfied with the high quality of the products sold at Kingfishers. A general feeling that arose from the respondents was that while the price plays a certain role, people are willing to pay extra for good quality products. Value for money was a phrase that many of the customers used when describing their role that price plays in their purchasing decisions.

3.2 Garsons farm shop

Second case study farm shop, Garsons farm is located in a West End village which is nearby Esher in Surrey, England. The farm shop is a part of a bigger business complex which includes two garden centres (the other one of which is situated in Titchfield, near Portsmouth in the South Coast of England) and sizeable pick-your-own fields. It is run by Thompson family which started farming in a nearby village of Hersham and moved to current location at West End Esher in 1871. The business has been owned by the same family throughout its history and current owners are direct descendents of the original Thompson family.

For decades Garsons was a traditional market garden producing vegetables for the wholesale markets in London until a decline in green grocers in the area, which was due to the expansion of supermarkets, forced them to diversify the ways of selling their products. They opened their first farm shop in the early seventies. In the beginning they were only selling their own produce at their farm shop while continuing to produce for the wholesale markets. Later they diversified their product range by introducing pick-your-own strawberries followed by other PYO crops. Increased sales from the PYO activity and the farm shop enabled them to discontinue producing vegetables for the wholesale market in 1991. PYO
currently yields over 30 crops and it is one of the largest of its kind in the UK. Products at the farm shop are sourced partly from a Covent Garden wholesale market in London and partly directly through the producers or small scale regional distributors. In addition to these surplus from the PYO fields is sold in the farm shop. Farm shop is open 7 days a week. They sell fresh fruit, vegetables, different types of cheeses and fish along with soups and pies. In addition to these they sell baked goods such as bread, cakes and biscuits.

**Strict or flexible localism? - defining the extend of the ‘local’**

Garsons have relatively stable trade relations with their suppliers and they change approximately one or two producers every year. They try to source locally as far as possible but they are experiencing difficulties in finding local producers. Trevor Coote who is the Assistant Farm Shop Manager at Garsons, estimates that during a year the proportion of local food in the farm shop varies between 10 to 50 percent, depending on the season. They expect certain standards from their suppliers, a steady supply of goods, good quality and the ability to transport the products to the shop are the most important criteria that are used to judge products while making decisions about procurement. As Trevor puts it:

‘Yeah, I mean if we can get things local we will but they’ve got to have good supply and its got to be good quality product and they’ve got to be able to get it here and if they fulfil those three criteria we will do local stuff but obviously you can’t have something which comes one week and then it isn’t there the following week... So you’ve got to have continuity.’

The criterion for procurement is the same in terms of organic produce which is not something Garsons specialises in. As Trevor expressed it:

‘We do sell organic when it’s in the market but we don’t go out looking for organic green grocers but if its there we’ll buy it as long as it is right conditions, right price, right quality.’

Trevor says classification of local products is difficult due to the lack of a generally accepted definition. In order to clarify their stand in the issue, Garsons has developed its own classification of local produce according to which a product is classified as local if it has been produced within 75 miles from the shop. This does not include the raw materials and their journey to the place of production but they have agreed upon using this definition after a careful consideration. The 75 food miles scheme is enforced in the shop with labels that highlight both the issue of food miles and the value of local foods by indicating which products have been produced within 75 miles of the shop.

He says that sourcing local or even British produce is a struggle and claims that this is due to a structure of a retail industry in the UK which is dominated by large supermarkets. This means that the independent retailers can only buy products that the large supermarket chains do not want at the wholesale markets which makes it a challenge to find good quality products. He gives a following example.
‘Its like Sainsbury is saying: we have got this melon cheaper than anywhere else because it’s the only melon on the markets and they just bought it. They are really naughty so it’s not good.’

He would advocate for a French system where all the products have to go through centralised markets. He thinks that this would increase the number of markets which would benefit the independent retailers. In addition to this, he thinks this system would enable everyone to get a fair access to the products on the markets and this type of system would probably likewise increase the farm gate prices.

Relations between other farm shops and Garsons are friendly for similar reasons as given by Barrie Arminson. Due to the relatively long distances between each of the farm shops operating in the county, they are in no direct competition with each other. Farm Shop Manager is a member of a regional association that offers regulatory and business advice to struggling or new farm shops. Garsons is likewise happy to give advice to other farm shops if they come to them asking for help. But representatives from supermarket chains that sometimes come to check the shop display are seen as less desirable visitors. In general Trevor feels that supermarkets do not pose a great immediate threat in their desire to get in the local food retailing. This is because he thinks that the farm shops have a sound expertise brought by a long tradition of operating in the local food sector. At the same time he remarks that the supermarkets are such a powerful player in food retailing sector that their movements are something to be worried about in the long term.

Trevor points out to their location in the vicinity to the M25 motorway which circles London and says that Garsons is probably one of the few farms that is located so close to the motorway. He thinks the closeness to the motorway and the capital city is a major factor behind the lack of local products from Surrey. Many of their customers are local people who are living in the nearby streets and come to shop at Garsons several times week, while a portion of the customers comes further a field to regularly shop at Garsons. In addition to these they have customers who visit irregularly, perhaps only few times a year. They are also aware that they get new customers continuously due to high number of telephone enquiries regarding the location of the shop.

**Customer relations**

When asked about customer relations Trevor talks about the loyalty of their customers.

‘Yeah, people are usually very happy when they come here and they come back, obviously you can’t please everybody but yes most people come back… once we get the customers we generally keep them they will become very loyal which is really good.’
He likewise thinks that customers appreciate the atmosphere in the farm shop over the atmosphere in the supermarkets and thinks that customers come to the shop because ‘they obviously like it’. He regrets that they can not sell everyday necessity items such as washing powder because this means that people have to go to supermarket for those items. He also thinks that people prefer farm shops over supermarkets when they are shopping for special occasions ‘cause they can get different stuff, local stuff, quality stuff’ from the farm shop.

Another interesting point that Trevor mentions is seasonality and how the customers seem to have lost the idea of seasons and expect steady supply of fruit and vegetables in their shop all throughout the year. One example is strawberries.

‘Well we can sell strawberries all year round and cause they are in the supermarkets the supermarket are sort of dictating sort of what we buy and so because they have strawberries all year round people expect strawberries all year round and if we don’t sell them then they buy them from the supermarkets and we like people to buy stuff here.’

He is confident that there is a slight but clear trend towards farm shops away from the supermarkets.

‘Lot of people are changing over to buying things from local shop, its a definite trend if you look at the figures, between farm shops and supermarkets I mean we are very small compared to the supermarkets but there is definite, very small shift from supermarkets to farm shops but it is noticeable.’

Garsons has their own website and they send a monthly newsletter to their registered customers. They also advertise in local papers and participate in some Surrey wide initiatives. Over the years Garsons has received a few awards such as BBC Radio 4 Farming today award in 2003, Surrey farm diversification award in 2003 and best garden centre Christmas display in 2005, to name just the most recent ones. These awards have boosted their reputation as a good quality farm shop and brought in free publicity.

Quality and freshness

Quality is the foremost aspect that Garsons is looking for in products they procure. In the words of Trevor: ‘quality, you’ve got to have good quality, if its not, it won’t sell so it’s not doing them a favour, its not doing us a favour.’ They are thus aware that customers expect good quality products when they come to the shop. Customers also expect fresh products and Trevor has noticed that due to the loss of seasonality mentioned earlier, people have also lost the feeling of when they can expect to get fresh English products from their shop. People for instance expect to get fresh English potatoes in the middle of the winter and although they do not deliberately lie about the freshness of the products, it is easy to imagine that people do assume certain things about the freshness and the quality of the products based on the fact that they are shopping at a farm shop. This is confirmed in the interviews with customers when a
number of people mention they come to the farm shop to buy fresh products and that they think that the produce sold at farm shop is fresher than that found in the supermarkets. The words local and fresh seem to be intertwined in customers’ minds which will be discussed further later on in this paper.

One example of adding value to the products they are selling is to take a closer look on the ingredients of the products they are selling ‘making sure its all good stuff’ although they do acknowledge that this is a challenging task due to a range of products on offer in the shop. One particular aspect they are looking at are the types of fats their baked products. They are doing this in cooperation with their suppliers who according to Trevor:

‘Are very happy to jump on board on that ... a lot of it is going to do them good, a bit of publicity and something different to what the supermarkets are doing.’

**Shop display**

The shop was recently refurbished and many aspects of the shop display were revised during this process. They had for instance noticed that people did not shop from the bottom shelves because the items were not visible to the customers. In the new shop display they lifted as many items as possible to upper shelves so that they would catch the attention of the shoppers. The shop has got an open plan layout with low shelves and clear visibility throughout the shop.

**Customer feedback**

22 people were spoken to in front of Garsons farm shop at the day of the visit. The motivations for people’s visits varied greatly but could roughly be divided into three categories. For some of the respondents a visit to Garsons farm was part of a Sunday outing and they came for a visit because they happened to be in the area. Some lived in the streets close by and came because it simply was a closest store to their home while the third group consisted of people who came to the shop once, twice or three times a month tempted by the range of products on offer and/or other activities such as PYO. The degree of awareness of local foods amongst the customers varied greatly. Some customers had not even noticed that local food items were on offer in the shop nor did they think it added any value to their shopping experience. Others clearly valued the range of local produce on offer and were more reflective about their reasons for coming to shop at Garsons. During these brief interviews customers were asked about their reasons for coming to the farm shop, about the frequency of their visit, what items they bought and their attitudes towards local foods in general. The aim of these questions was the same as at Kingfishers; to find out what had prompted them to visit Garsons farm shop as well as finding out how the customers perceived concepts of local and quality.
The customers that did not seem to reflect over the proportion of local foods in the shop came to Garsons primarily for the unusual experience and for the better quality of the products, although they were not able to pinpoint what about the products made them of good quality.

The more reflective customers gave a variety of reasons for shopping at the farm shop such as that they trusted the food and where it was coming from and they thought the products were fresher than those offered at supermarkets. Furthermore a greater range of foods and speciality foods such as cheeses were mentioned as reasons behind their decision to shop at Garsons.

Another point a few of the customers mentioned was the friendly atmosphere in the shop. In addition to this they also felt the staff was friendly and willing to help if they had questions about the products in the shop. For some it reminded them of food shopping in the old times. But it should also be mentioned that over half of the respondents did not reflect over the atmosphere or the relations with the staff in the farm shop.

Couple of respondents mention the relatively high prices at Garsons as a hinder for shopping there more often but the majority of the respondents did not seem to think that price mattered a great deal. They thought that quality of the products justified the higher prices.

An interesting notion was that quite a few people mentioned that they thought Garsons offers more organic food compared to the supermarkets. This is interesting because it became clear during the interview with the farm shop manager Trevor that Garsons does not particularly stock organic food and only buys it from the wholesale markets if it is available and fulfils their quality and price criteria. It is therefore unlikely that the proportion of organic products at Garsons would be greater than in the supermarkets in general.

When asked about the meaning of local foods many people said they thought it was important to support local farmers and economies but there were others who reflected more on the intrinsic benefits for themselves and associated local foods with attributes such as healthy, fresh, organic and good quality.

**4.0 FARM SHOPS – TRADING WITH HEART OR BUSINESS AS USUAL?**

Similarities and differences can be found when comparing the farm shops. They are different sizes and differ also in the scope of their activities. For the Kingfisher farm, the nature of the family business has changed from being predominately primary producer growing watercress for the wholesale markets into being predominately involved in the food retailing sector with tiny watercress plantations in order to keep the name and the tradition alive. Garsons on the other hand is occupied with a significantly wider range of activities such as the garden centre and pick your own holdings. They both have a potential of being places where transactions are characterised by closer social relationships than at conventional retail outlets.
4.1 Exchange of regard and embeddedness versus marketness and instrumentalism

According to Offer in situations that are characterised by face to face interaction and personal relationships the exchange reaches beyond mere economic transaction and what he calls satisfaction of regard becomes equally important as economic considerations. This quest for regard could, according to Offer, be satisfied by showing acknowledgement, friendliness, sociability or loyalty. He claims that his ideas should work especially if products have many dimensions of quality. These conditions are true in the case of the farm shops that were studied. They do not simply sell food; they sell quality food which seemed to have many different meanings to different people. Quality in this sense seemed to incorporate at least aspects such as fresh, local, less travelled and even organic.

It can be noted that traces of regard can be found in both Garsons and Kingfisher farm shops. From the farm shop owner’s point of view the customers show acknowledgement towards their hard work by showing loyalty and becoming regular customers to their shops. From the customers point of view their request for regard is satisfied by farm shop staff being friendly and helpful towards them and acknowledging their existence by wishing them good morning or afternoon. From what could be gathered from the interviews with both the farm shops and their customers, these feelings seemed genuine. This type of genuine interest towards each other is important as Offer has warned about the dangers of ‘pseudo regard’ if the customers feel like they are not treated like an individual or feel like the sellers acts are motivated solemnly by financial goals. Some of the customers seemed to have this kind of feelings towards supermarkets with some customers expressing strong feelings of dislike towards shopping at supermarkets and one describing them as ‘places that leave one cold.’ But there were others who did not mention the difference between the atmosphere in the farm shop and supermarkets.

Lee’s extension of the term ‘exchange of regard’ included the idea of mutually recognised reciprocity which he found to contribute to the differentiated creation of value in horticultural industry. A notion of reciprocity is found when Barrie Arminson talks about their relationships with their local community by stating that they always support local school initiatives and similar events as they hope that local community would return this favour by shopping at their shop. It should be noted that unlike in Lee’s case, these shops are not undercapitalised and do not solely depend upon the hard work of their owners. Instead they have sound economic operating principles which include switching suppliers if needed in order to get the best possible deal. What these shops can not offer, however, are the benefits of economies of scale that the large supermarket chains can use to press down prices, which reflects on relatively higher prices at farm shops. It seems that the customers are willing to disregard the higher prices at farm shops because they feel that what they are getting from the farm shops, be it ‘free’ advice, human connection or fresh and tasty food, is worth the money.
they are spending. The retailers can add value to their products by skilfully utilising these images in order to justify higher prices and to facilitate future transactions.

The concept of embeddedness highlights the importance of social aspects in the economic. According to Granovetter individuals actions are embedded in concrete, ongoing social relationships and these relationships are vital in generating trust and discouraging malfeasance during an economic transaction. In terms of finding signs of social relations that would lead to creation of trust and discouraging of evil in the case study farm shops, it was clear that some respondents valued highly the social relationship that they had with the farm shop staff. Both farm shops show an appreciation of their customer relations. Barrie Arminson at Kingfisher farm is more explicit in his analysis of customer relations and it is clear that he has realised that the customers value more personal shopping experience. He contrasts this to his own experiences at supermarkets where the transaction according to him is just a matter of monetary transaction. Garsons have many loyal customers and Trevor says that once people come for a visit they normally return. In this case it was not possible to conclude whether this loyalty is necessarily anything to do with the social relationships between the customers and the farm shop staff. It might as well be a demonstration of other attributes such as the range and quality of the products on offer that make people come back regularly.

Customer interviews at Garsons give a mixed results relating to the nature of the relationships between the customers and the staff at Garsons. While some of the respondents mentioned helpfulness of the staff and friendly, comfortable atmosphere in the shop, others did not mention the helpfulness as a factor. Instead, they named the quality of the products, curiosity or convenience as their main reason for shopping at Garsons. Many customers at Kingfisher did mention friendly owners and atmosphere as a factor that they appreciate in Kingfisher shop. One customer described shopping at Kingfisher as an experience that leaves one warm as opposed to shopping at supermarkets which leaves one cold. But it should be noted that also at Kingfisher some customers did not mention the friendliness and human contact as a factor that added to their shopping experience. Differences in customer responses might have something to do with the slightly different motivations of the respondents in each of the stores. At Kingfisher’s the majority of the respondents had come to the farm shop in order to purchase products at the farm shop, while at Garsons approximately third was attracted to the store primarily by other activities such as the garden centre or pick your own fields.

When analysing whether signs of re-embeddedness could be found at the shops, the possibility of taking back the control over the economic exchange process from more powerful actors is a central idea. Both farm shops owners and customers refer supermarkets as being powerful actors in the food retailing sector. During the interviews some customers clearly expressed their dislike of supermarkets, while the farm shop owners were more explicit when they talked about what they perceived as ill treatment of small producers by the supermarkets. In some of the comments made by Trevor and Barrie one could sense their willingness to support small scale, local producers in their struggle against supermarkets. The results of this study show, however, that a large proportion of the customers did not seem to
be interested in engaging themselves in political struggles over their food. The conclusion must be that while there were people who expressed their desire to move away from supermarkets, it was not possible to depict a clear pattern of politically informed customers who would primarily come to the farm shops in order to support structures through which they could re-gain control over their grocery shopping process.

Those criticising of the too liberal use of embeddedness by many agro-food scholars have claimed that bringing in concepts of marketness and instrumentalism might help in analysing alternative food movements. Marketness and instrumentalism which refer to the importance of price considerations and to the nature of individual motivations have been described as a continuum and it has been claimed that these are found in every economic transaction in some form or another. In the case of the farm shops it can be said that the levels of marketness and instrumentalism are relatively low as price considerations are not the most important thing in people’s minds when shopping at farm shops. This is not to say, however, that price considerations and opportunistic behaviour are completely forgotten in the farm shop environment. Instead, price considerations are merely balanced out against other considerations such as quality, support for local farmers and communities or the feeling that the products ‘are good for you.’ Another reason for the fact that price did not seem to be an issue for the majority of the customers that were interviewed could have been that for many trip to the farm shops was something special compared to their ordinary shopping habits. It is possible therefore that they did not think in price terms as much as they would during their ordinary shopping trips.

4.2 Construction of ‘quality’ and ‘local’ in a farm shop setting

Quality is a fluid concept. According to Callon quality is secured through a process called qualification, which aims to establish stabilised constellation of characteristics which are then attached to a product in order to make it tradable. This process likewise makes goods as variables that are open for manipulation by actors involved in production and selling of the goods. It has been claimed that alternative food movements are built upon different and competing definitions of quality. Local food movement is trying to present the attribute local as an internal part of good quality food and judging by the results of this study, they have a good change at succeeding in this. There is a tendency from the customer’s side to associate local food with qualities such as tasty, fresh, and healthy. This is rather automatic assumption, it did not seem like customers had given the issue much thought earlier. The overarching impression from the interviews with the customers was that many people were unsure of their motivations for coming to the farm shop and their relations to local food. Most of them were referring to a feeling that food at farm shop ‘is good for you’ without clearly stating why they believed this was the case. The images are strong in people’s heads and farm shops use these skilfully and enforce them by using labelling, display of items or decorations in the shop to create a desired feeling of quality in customer’s minds.
Consumers that come to the farm shops are consuming quality products which are distinctively different from the goods they can purchase elsewhere. As mentioned earlier, customers felt like the goods bought from the farm shops were healthier, fresher and contained less pesticides than conventional foods. There is a clear divide between the supermarkets and the farm shops which both customers and the farm shop owners are aware of. This divide is of social kind more than anything else. The farm shop owners are aware of this and skilfully construct the image that they know will enforce customer’s image of the products. On one hand this divide seems to be working for the favour of the farm shops in that customers feel like they can come to the shops and find speciality foods if they need them. On the other hand these perceptions can hinder customers from buying everyday items from the shop if they are perceived as special and more expensive than the products purchased from conventional food outlets.

Freshness of the produce in the farm shop was an aspect that was referred to by majority of the customers. Many customers seemed to think that the products arrived to the shops fresh every day. While this is not completely true, the shops do not get fresh deliveries every day, these associations that people make are clearly an advantage for the independent retailers as they can enforce this image further for instance by displaying only small number of items at the same time. On the basis of the results from the interviews it would also seem that independent retailers are indeed actors who have the power to manipulate what is associated with the word ‘quality’ at least in their own shops. In this sense there does not seem to be immediate danger of more powerful actors such as the supermarkets claiming or manipulating quality according to their own needs.

Another notable thing is that lack of common definition of what is local food has led both retailers to invent their own way of determining they mean by local food. Kingfisher is relatively flexible in their definition referring both products from the UK and products from neighbouring counties as ‘local’. This coincide with earlier studies by Morris and Buller and Ilbery and Maye as they too found traces of flexible localism amongst their interviewees. This degree of flexibility, however, does not apply to Garsons farm shop. They have agreed upon a clear definition for local products which includes all the producers that has been produced within 75 miles from the shop. A clear definition of local food saves Garsons the trouble that Barrie Arminson at Kingfisher is experiencing to some degree when he is ranking the producers in terms of their closeness to the farm shop. He then struggles because he feels like he needs to swap to a closer supplier and abolish previous business relations with their existing supplier.

Signs of competitive localism as found in the previous studies by Ilbery and Maye and Morris and Buller could not be found in this study. Instead, both representatives of the farm shops described their relationships with other farm shops in the area as co-operative as opposed to being characterised by tough competition.
4.3 Main conclusions

A range of theoretical concepts have been developed in order to conceptualise new trends in the field of food consumption. Concepts that were utilised in this study, embeddedness, re-embeddedness and exchange of regard highlight the social aspects in the economic and the importance of social relations in the purchasing decisions of consumers. Other concepts deployed in this study included marketness and instrumentalism which, as argued by some scholars, should not be forgotten in studying alternative food movements.

In the empirical part of this study it was established that it is indeed possible to find traces of embeddedness in the relations between the seller and the customers in a farm shop setting. It could likewise be concluded that exchange of regard took place in form of showing acceptance and sociability from both the customers and the farm shops’ sides. At the same time, however, it was noticed that price considerations do play a role in these retail spaces and influence peoples buying decisions but they are not the only aspects that customers base their decision to shop at these outlets. Instead aspects such as atmosphere, quality of the products, freshness as well as socio-economic factors such as support for the local economy and farmers are considered and the final decisions are made while balances these factors against each other. Following these points, it is clear that both marketness which relates to the importance of price considerations and instrumentalism which translates to the nature of individual intention, can both be found in farm shops but there is a reason to believe that the levels of marketness and instrumentalism are lower in a farm shop setting than at supermarkets. Clear signs of re-embeddedness, customer’s willingness to re-gain a control over their grocery shopping process could not be identified.

Another point of interest in terms of local food chains is the fact that they are often associated with attributes of quality. Quality is a socially constructed concept and it was clear that in the farm shops that quality was being formulated based on notions of freshness, healthiness and absence of pesticides. Farm shop owners and staff were aware of the customer demands and aided the imagination of their customers by setting up labels about the localness of the products and stocking up as needed in order to create an image of a fresh product.

It was found that the farm shops had different solutions to the problem of absence of clear, commonly agreed definition of local food. Garsons has created a definition of their own that they can use systematically while labelling the products and communicating with their customers while Kingfisher used the term local in a more flexible manner.
Globalisation and industrialisation of food chains have led to emerge of alternatives which offer a promise of a closer connection between the places of production and consumption and the shortening of food chains. Health scandals that have shaken the consumer confidence for the food they are eating and the outlets they are buying it from have embedded the way for the alternative food movements to offer different kind of solutions to food shopping. These movements come in different shapes and sizes and claim to be the solution to different aspects of the malfunctioning food chain. They emphasise close connection between the production and the consumption of food as well as various moral aspects ranging from use of pesticides to guaranteeing a fair price to the farmers for their products.

The purpose of this study was to look into the relations between the farm shops and their customers as well as to the social construction of different variables of quality in a farm shop setting. This was done with help of number of theoretical concepts which were utilised in efforts to understand the complexity of the desires and motivations that shape people’s purchasing decisions. These purchasing decisions at the case study farm shops seemed to materialise in an exchange of money in return of a good that clearly had other functions than mere filling up the customers’ stomachs. In this case the functions seem to be feeling good about one’s purchase because of the perceived support for the farmers and local economy. More personally, it was about supporting the farm shop owner, by purchasing items at higher prices than at supermarkets they show their appreciation for the farmer for the services he is providing by keeping village shop alive and by striving to purchase best quality foods for his customers.

Whether farm shops can offer a solution for the problems in the agro-food sector in general is doubtful. These shops can be a first step towards right direction but they are certainly not accessible to everyone due to their location out of town centres and their higher prices that parts of the population could not afford. The farm shop concept is likely to work particularly well in an affluent county such as Surrey, but in order to achieve a real change towards a society with more sustainable and fair food chains, wide ranging policy action at all levels of governance is required.
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