SUMMARY

Eating ‘off the grid’: Understanding consumer motivation in the alternative food sector

Making dinner is more complicated than it used to be. While consumers have always balanced competing pressures of taste, economy, and health, they are increasingly charged with making food decisions that promote sustainability and support local farmers. More and more consumers choose to eat ‘off the grid’ of the conventional industrial food system by frequenting farmers’ markets, buying organic and local produce, appreciating artisanal cheeses, and avoiding fast-food. The conventional food system is increasingly under scrutiny owing to sustainability concerns – such as fossil fuel consumption and pesticide use – as well as concerns about health risk such as E coli, obesity, and listeria. The imperative to ‘eat off the grid’ is not simply ethical and political, but is also influenced by personal health concerns, taste preferences, and economic resources. This research will untangle the web of motivations that guide consumer food choices in the alternative food system, seeking to identify who seeks out (and does not seek) out locally produced foods and for what reasons, and explore the political significance of consumers ‘voting’ with their food dollars. While scholars recognize the growing significance of food in daily life along with a dramatic expansion for local and organic food, little is known about the motivations, and disincentives to participation in the alternative food sector. As such, the project has three primary goals:

1. To investigate who is participating in the alternative food economy;
2. To explore the multiple motivations underlying this consumption trend;
3. To identify barriers to further participation in alternative agriculture.

To address the first goal, I will conduct a survey to document the demographic profile of consumers engaging with the alternative food sector in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The second and third goals will be addressed using qualitative data collection with consumers at various points in the alternative food sector. Focus groups of consumers will explore the political significance of their shopping practices, and provide a better understanding of how consumers balance concerns about politics, ethics and the environment with personal concerns about health and food pleasure, and how alternative consumption practices may overlap with the conventional food system (e.g., organic produce at a discount grocery store). Interviews conducted through home visits will gather data about consumer practices (as opposed to ideals or principles), and identify factors that enable or discourage participation in the alternative food sector (e.g., cooking practices, gender division of household labour, time constraints on cooking).