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Food tourism policy: Deconstructing boundaries of taste and class

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Scotland's food tourism landscape is assessed using a post-structuralist approach.
- We reveal policy privileges middle class symbols, marginalising working class.
- Food tourism policy is shown to overlook complexity of touristic desire.
- A case is made for further deconstruction of food tourism policy.

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ABSTRACT

Recent discussions from the journal of tourism management call for more critical deconstructions of the political and economic structures that shape policy and planning. The present paper takes up this call, using a post-structuralist framework to examine Scotland's food tourism landscape. Utilising Foucauldian discourse analysis to deconstruct 2,312 media sources collected through a Factiva database search, we illustrate how policy discourses privilege middle class cultural symbols through official food tourism promotion, marginalising particular foods positioned as working class. We find that this is particularly evident through the example of the deep fried mars bar; where, despite touristic desires, classed media discourses constructed it as global, bad and disgusting, and therefore an embarrassment to official tourism bodies. We conclude by discussing the broader importance of attending to the marginalising and silencing effects tourism policy exerts when the power values and interests involved in its formation are not critically appraised.

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1. Introduction

Tourist studies is lacking in critical deconstructions of the political and economic structures that shape policy and planning. Greater engagement is required to understand the structures, values and interests that underpin such policy and planning (Dredge & Jamal, 2015). Through examination of the deep fried Mars bar, this paper examines the ways Scotland's food tourism policy privileges the cultural symbols of particular groups, leading to the marginalisation of particular foods constructed as 'working class', whilst simultaneously failing to recognise the complexity of tourist encounters in constructing Scotland's culinary heritage. In interrogating the absence, distinction and governance directed towards Scotland's 'other' national dish – the deep fried Mars bar –

we unpack the moral judgements drawn on that position this dish as 'bad' 'disgusting' and 'global' – in distinction to Scotland's 'good', 'local' larder. In unpacking complex characterisations of the deep fried Mars bar, we suggest that tourists seek much more complicated notions of Scottish food – which both trouble and reinscribe facile dualisms prevalent within policy media circulated discourses between good, local and desired food and bad, global and disgusting food. To that end, we argue that national food tourism policy often ignores the ways travellers' diverse gastronomic desires play an active role in making and remaking Scotland's rich and messy culinary heritage. As we will show, this active role is of importance because it offers opportunity for new corporeal connections that work beyond normative, fixed classed constructions.

Rather than taking an objectionist approach which seeks to name, map and define what class is, we understand class to be in a constant process of becoming, where subjective experience, performance and discourse work to make and remake understandings of class in particular ways. We do not seek to suggest the deep fried Mars bar is predominately eaten by working class identifying

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individuals. Comparatively, we hope to illustrate the ways through which the deep fried Mars bar has become culturally associated as belonging to particular classed constructions derived through the entanglement of food, class and place. It is the deep fried Mars bar's cultural association with the 'unhealthy' diets of Scottish working classes, for example, rather than its ontological consumption by particular individuals, which we hope to illustrate has led to its absence, distinction and governance through Scotland's food tourism policy discourses. This is not the first scholarship to explore intersections of class, the deep fried Mars bar and Scotland. Rather we here build on the work of Knight (2016a, 2016b), in her examination of the ways the deep fried Mars bar is used as a public symbol to negotiate relations between Scottish national identity and the broader United Kingdom.

In examining the various ways through which the deep fried Mars bar is positioned within tourism policy discourses, and tourism discourses more broadly, this paper asks: what are the structures, values and interests influencing the positioning of this dish, and what are the effects and limitations of such positioning? In asking these questions, we work to problematize the social factors and power processes influencing the ways through which food tourism has developed in Scotland. The paper begins by positioning Scotland's foodscape and policy approaches within broader Western trends towards local food systems. We here question the potentials of local food through exploring the ways alternative food systems are reliant on classed moral understandings in their construction. A second section outlines our use of Bourdieu's and *Trans Nice* (1984) notions of cultural capital and distinction, before turning to an overview of methods in section three, as a process through which to understand the ways food, tourism and class intersect within the Scottish landscape. Turning to the discussion, the first two empirical sections illustrate how moral distinctions are drawn on to position Scotland's 'good', 'high-quality' produce as separate from Scotland's 'bad' deep fried food, and explore the ways forms of governance control touristic promotion of the deep fried Mars bar. The third empirical section works to complicate these characterisations through an examination of how tourists' abject desire for the deep fried Mars bar troubles hierarchical social constructions, presenting moments of normative transgression and cultural openness – whilst simultaneously reinforcing associations between deep fried Mars bars and working class bodies, in distinction to middle class ideals. Finally, we turn to reflect on the consequences for Scotland tourism policy and planning, and tourism management more broadly, in questioning these constructions.

2. Contextualising food & tourism policy

In examining the construction of food tourism policy, it is crucial to recognise the processes through which local food advocacy has become mainstream in Scotland over the last few years. This has taken place through a number of specific actors and organisations, including but in no way limited to, the work of Nourish Scotland, Scotland Food & Drink, Soil Association Scotland and newspaper journalists such as Cate Devine. Motivated by a variety of environmental, social, cultural and economic discourses – local food is thought to reduce food miles and greenhouse gas emissions, improve food safety and quality (resulting in greater health benefits), heighten social capital and bolster local economies (Campbell & MacRae, 2012; Seyfang, 2006; Sherriff, 2009; Spence, Cutumisu, Edwards, Raine, & Smoyer-Tomic, 2009). Politically, support for small, local food producers is claimed as essential in resisting corporate power (Alkon, 2013). The entanglement of these multiple discourses are united through their distinction from globalised food systems. Understanding 'local as best' represents a desire to retain

imagined pasts of idyllic, rural, non-capitalist systems (Halfacree, 2007). Through the construction of 'local as best', the global becomes framed as local's dichotomous Other. Globalisation serves as a threat to local gastronomic identities, as global signifiers are seen to infiltrate local landscapes (Mak, Lumbers, & Eves, 2012). Here, the local becomes viewed as radical, subversive, sustainable; the global oppressive, hegemonic and unsustainable (Born & Purcell, 2009; Feagan, 2007). Forces of globalisation are thus viewed as threats to local cuisines – creating the homogenised effect of a 'global palate', and 'global cuisine' (Ritzer, 1995).

The touristic consumption of the deep fried Mars bar serves as a provocative case because it transcends facile distinctions between the global and local – despite its positioning as a global food. While not marketed as such, Mars bars are British in origin, their inception taking place in Berkshire, south east England in 1932. The Slough Industrial Estate in Berkshire claims to still manufacture the Mars bar today, however it is difficult to obtain figures indicating exact numbers of the chocolate bar manufactured within the United Kingdom. Mars sells products globally and moves production in response to economic markets. The deep fried Mars bar is said to have originated in Aberdeenshire, Scotland in 1992 (Williams, 2015). While distinctly 'local', Mars is also a recognisable international brand. It is one of the largest privately owned businesses, reaching sales of \$US33 billion in 2015.

Local food advocacy has further exploded in response to highly publicised food scandals in recent years; generating discourses of trust, provenance and narratives of place as crucial. The 2013 horsemeat food adulteration scandal, in which processed beef products sold across Europe were found to be 'contaminated' with horsemeat, has perhaps been the most notable and affective (Dibb & Fitzpatrick, 2014). While horsemeat is consumable, the scandal called into question the limits of trust and provenance when food production takes place elsewhere and supply chains straddle the globe (Abbots & Coles, 2013). The scandal served as further fuel for local food advocacy, dramatically increasing consumer demand and trust in local food production (Staples & Klein, 2016). Shorter food chains, thought to be representative of local food, generate heightened levels of trust, through apparently transparent provenance. This aspect is ironic as, in many ways, mass production is often thought to create assurances of reliable quality, whereas the variability of small-batch production is celebrated for its unpredictability. Through these understandings, place, as a moral imperative, becomes activated, as producers draw on simple narratives that position food within the landscape – a virtuous circle in which good consumers are connected with good producers and good places. Global distribution systems, by contrast, become tacitly labelled as bad, through their rendering as complex, placeless and unknown. This is despite the necessity of all food production having to take place somewhere, and all food systems narrating a process of production that skips the more viscerally abject moments (such as the moment of slaughter) in the telling of food journeys (Abbots & Coles, 2013).

Class, likewise, plays a role in local food advocacy. Local food advocacy is often embedded within white, affluent and educated social privilege (Alkon, 2013). Local food strategies enacted by those of social privilege tend to be economic in focus – encouraging regional distribution models such as farmers' markets, local food festivals, and the more recent food assemblies, which effectively work to exclude those without the cultural capital, time or economic means to buy local (Alkon, 2013). Moreover, a crucial aspect of local food advocacy, as tied to middle class identity, relies on a perceived ability to 'taste place'. To distinguish place through taste relies on embodied knowledge, or embodied cultural capital, that enables individuals to distinguish 'good local food' from 'bad global food'; a process that works to enact a certain social positioning.

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