

## **THE BUSINESS AND POLITICS OF FARMERS' MARKETS: CONSUMER PERSPECTIVES FROM BYRON BAY, AUSTRALIA**

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**ABSTRACT:** Very few studies have examined the reasons consumers attend Australian Farmers' Markets. This empirical study uses four benefits, articulated in the Australian Farmer's Market Association Strategic Plan (2017-2019), to organise and identify consumer motivations at the Byron Bay Farmers' Market. Consumers are the focus of this paper, which draws on the concepts of alterity and embeddedness to reveal a range of motivations and consumer engagement. The findings reveal a surprising mix of reflexivity and re-embedding shaped by both regional culture and individual motivations. Common across all participants was a sincere commitment to the local community and their attachment to ethical consumption.

**KEY WORDS:** Regional farmers' markets; local; alterity; ethical consumption; Byron Bay.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Farmers' markets (FMs) have a long history in the United Kingdom, Europe, and North America, but their emergence in Australia follows a more recent wave of global resurgence in the 1990s. The renewed interest in FMs accompanied concerns about the unsustainability and negative impacts of the agrifood industry. There is now a rich body of literature on FMs in the northern hemisphere, revealing distinct regional variation in the

orientation of the literature, the FMs and consumer interest in them. DuPuis and Goodman (2005) contrast the significance of place, history and politics; suggesting that European FMs reflect concerns about maintaining heritage while US FMs reflect the “radical transformative idealism of US social movements” (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005, pp.359-60; cf. Allen *et al.*, 2003).

The growth in FMs is attributed to environmental issues in the US and to food safety scandals in Europe (Vecchio, 2011). Consumer interest in FMs is based on “the strength of an embeddedness in local norms” in the US (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, p.359) and in Canada (Smithers *et al.*, 2008) in contrast to price in Italy and quality of produce in the UK (Vecchio, 2011, pp. 393-94).

Much less is known about FMs in Australia and scant attention has been paid to consumers. The dearth of information on Australian FM consumers has been recognized in a Victorian parliamentary inquiry into FMs (OSISDC, 2010), in a Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation report (Woodburn, 2014), and by the Victorian Farmers' Market Association, which subsequently commissioned preliminary market research (VFMA, 2010). Consumers are the focus of this paper.

FMs in Australia are already known for their alterity and emphasis on ‘local’ embeddedness. They offer an environment in which concerned Australian consumers can exercise more reflexive food purchasing decisions. This paper explores that reflexivity and uses the Australian Farmers' Market Association (AFMA) Strategic Plan 2017-2019 to frame the examination.

The AFMA recognises that the success of FMs depends on their appeal to the public. To this end, the Strategic Plan outlines four specific benefits (economic, environmental, health and social) that constitute FMs' “sustainable competitive advantage and distinct identity” (AFMA, 2017). These benefits plainly represent the interests of FM managers and producers, but the degree to which these benefits align with consumer interests is less clear. This paper therefore scrutinizes the AFMA Strategic Plan's four benefits from consumer perspectives with the aim of providing some insights.

In this empirical pilot study, we examine a population of particularly reflexive FM consumers. Byron Bay was selected because of its alternative history and culture, reflected in the fact that the Byron Bay Farmers' Market (BBFM) was the first to be established in the region. The specific aims were to understand consumers': (1) values, beliefs and attitudes underlying motivations to shop at BBFM; (2) how those values and beliefs

align with the AFMA Strategic Plan; and (3) the extent to which motivations were informed by food safety and environmental concerns. The findings reveal a surprising mix of reflexivity and re-embedding shaped by both regional culture and individual motivations.

## 2. FRAMING THE STUDY

### *Farmers' Markets in the Australian Context*

The AFMA positions FMs as an alternative to mainstream produce retailers. The BBFM is a member of the AFMA, the national peak organisation that aims to promote authentic, best-practice and sustainable grower-centric farmers' markets. AFMA defines an FM as:

*“A predominantly fresh food market that operates regularly within a community, at a focal public location that provides a suitable environment for farmers and food producers to sell farm-origin and associated value-added speciality foods products directly to customers.”* (AFMA, 2014, p.3).

The AFMA constructs an 'authentic' FM which provides communities, consumers and farmers with a range of benefits not gained from mainstream food retailers (AFMA, 2014). The AFMA is a voluntary organisation that situates its branding on authenticity and integrity. However, other entrepreneurial, non-AFMA affiliated marketers use the FM brand. These are not held to AFMA best-practice principles and nor are they included in AFMA data.

The first FM was launched in Victoria in 1999 and there is now evidence of growth in numbers and market share of the food sector. By 2014 there were over 160 FMs accounting for an estimated seven per cent market share of national fresh food sales (DAFF, 2012).

To date, a number of government and industry-based studies have documented the growth and success of Australian FMs from the perspective of market managers and producers (Woodburn, 2014; DAFF, 2012; Coster and Kennon, 2005). There has been one large-scale consumer survey: this Victorian Farmers' Market Association (VFMA) quantitative study provides valuable data by profiling consumers from ten FMs and describing their visitation and buying patterns, yet it lacks detailed analysis. In addition, there are a handful of detailed case studies of FMs, (O'Kane and Wijaya, 2015; Andree *et al.*, 2010; Payet *et al.*, 2005). There has been very little examination of Australian consumer perspectives in

any depth, relying on structured surveys, assumptions, or evidence from overseas research.

The Australian studies concur with international findings that patron interest in attending FMs is to: acquire fresh produce, support local growers, and to a lesser degree social and then health aspects (excluding urban FMs surveyed). Contrary to some international findings (Giampietri *et al.*, 2016; Forssell and Lankoski, 2015) the VFMA (2010) found environmental and social responsibility were not factors for FM patronage. While these findings are commensurate with the literature on FMs, the values that inform the motivations of consumers remain unknown.

### **3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: ALTERITY AND EMBEDDEDNESS**

In this study, the analyses of consumer perspectives are organized under the AFMA Strategic Plan's four benefits to better understand how they align with consumer interests. At a conceptual level, underpinning the analysis are the notions of alterity and embeddedness. Both are established theoretical frameworks through which FMs have previously been explored and their application here allows this study to provide deeper insights and comparisons (for FMs and alterity, see Kirwan (2004); for FMs and embeddedness, see Feagan and Morris (2009)).

#### ***Alterity***

The concept of 'alterity' is central to understanding both FMs and the history and culture of Byron Bay. The term highlights the development of new institutional and philosophical frameworks juxtaposed against conventional wisdom and practices. As Goodman *et al.* (2012) note, the assumption is that the new ways are improved in some way (e.g. ethically, ecologically or socially) and therefore involve a form of resistance to the mainstream. Consumers engaged in alterity are thus necessarily "critical, self-aware [and] reflexive", drawing on "ethical...and political values in everyday routines of shopping...and social reproduction" (Goodman *et al.*, 2012, p.7). Specifically referencing FMs, Kirwan (2004, p. 398) explains that alterity is "the manner in which certain actors within the food chain are intent on creating an alternative system of food production and distribution that is not based exclusively on the commodity relationship and profit maximisation".

Face-to-face interaction between producers and consumers and the value of 'local' are key characteristics of FM alterity. Spiller (2010) makes an important contribution to our understanding of alterity, noting that just as cultures evolve, over time 'alternative' practices and modes of thinking become normalized, and in the process lose that very alternativeness. Spiller's insight encourages a more complex understanding of consumers, from the ardently political to the less-reflexive shopper, rather than a singular consumer profile.

### ***Embeddedness***

This paper draws on the understanding of embeddedness as proposed by Granovetter (1985) who challenged classical and neoclassical economic assumptions of an abstracted market and an atomized, self-interested individual, unaffected by social context. He argued that actors' "attempts at purposive action are instead embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations" (p. 487) and that these personal relations and social networks generate trust and discourage wrong doing—in a context of generalized morality and impersonal institutional arrangements.

The utility of Granovetter's argument for this article is best summed up by his statement: "What looks to the analyst like nonrational behaviour may be quite sensible when situational constraints, especially those of embeddedness, are fully appreciated" (Granovetter, 1985, p.506). Here, 'embeddedness' in economic life refers to the non-economic values, attributes and relationships that modify and influence market transactions.

Authors have found the concept of embeddedness useful in differentiating alternative food networks (AFN) (including FMs) from conventional retailers (Thorne 1996; Hinrichs, 2003; Murdoch *et al.*, 2000; Winter, 2003; Kirwan, 2004). But embeddedness occurs across multiple fronts. Sage (2003, p.47) focuses on social embeddedness to convey "principles of social connectivity, reciprocity and trust", and asserts that these features more fundamentally underpin AFNs, mediating self-interest with concern for the wider common good. A sense of morality thus characterizes Sage's understanding of AFN relationships in contrast to conventional retailing. Sage does take note of Hinrichs' argument that although FMs create a context for closer producer-consumer relations, a tension still exists because the FM remains "fundamentally rooted in commodity relations" (Hinrichs, 2003, p.295). Sage's vision is not therefore utopian. Nevertheless, Winter's (2003) caution against using embeddedness as a euphemism for market relations based on close social relations, and as a descriptor of AFN, is salient here: all market relations

are embedded, and therefore 'alternativeness' cannot necessarily be equated with embeddedness.

Feagan and Morris (2009), Chen and Scott (2014) and Penker (2006) have unpacked the idea of embeddedness to reveal three spheres (social, spatial, ecological) that capture specific sets of values in consumers. They aim to understand the extent to which values (in addition to price) motivate FM attendance. Social embeddedness is an umbrella term for engagement in activities that are a manifestation of human desires for social ties and community. It encompasses interactions with friends, vendors, strangers or family. The values that are associated with these interactions are: trust, connection, belonging, and knowledge. Spatial embeddedness focuses on the value 'local'. Local includes mention of fresh and healthy produce and support for local farmers and community. Local is also a means of responding to food safety and environmental concerns. Ecological embeddedness refers to values and concerns relating to the environment, animal welfare, pollutants and food safety. It may include mention of food miles, carbon footprint, bio-diversity, and agrochemicals, all of which are signals of environmental engagement and credentials. Use of the word 'local' can also signal ecological embeddedness.

This review of the established 'embeddedness' concepts highlights the complexity of its constituent parts. While there is considerable overlap between categories, they nevertheless enable a closer analysis of the values and motivations of BBFM patrons.

#### **4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

##### ***Setting***

Byron Bay has a permanent population of around 10 000 people, a higher than average unemployment rate (ABS, 2015), and is host to over two million visitors annually (MacKenzie, 2017). It is a vibrant 'alternative' community renowned for its historical 'hippie counter-culture', its environmental commitment, and development of the arts. Thus, 'alterity' has long been central to Byron Bay's identity and an important driver of the region's economic and social wellbeing, contributing to an alternative food culture that is part of the fabric of the region and attracting both affluent 'sea-changers' and the many tourists who visit (Ferguson and Evans, 2013).

The alternative food culture discussed in this paper finds local support with a local council recognised for its green credentials and innovative use

of town planning controls to cluster commercial activity. As a result, the alternative culture is supported by embedded commercial activities, such as bespoke 'surfie' fashion and equipment producers and suppliers, fashion designers, and a healthful café society; all of which imitate the beach image/lifestyle promoted by Byron Bay. Those producers and suppliers have been instrumental in promoting the alternative and healthy lifestyle associated with Byron Bay. While these commercial activities contribute to the alternative profile and image of Byron Bay, they do not directly impact on the goods for sale in the BBFM. This paper will restrict its focus on the BBFM and customer motivation for attendance.

The BBFM was initiated by Helena Norberg-Hodge, founder and director of Local Futures, author of *Bringing the Food Economy Home: Local Alternatives to Global Agribusiness* (2002) and founding member of the International Commission on the Future of Food and Agriculture. The markets opened in 2002, are a short walk from the town's main street, and operate Thursdays 7-11 am. Adhering to AFMA principles, produce must be grown or processed in Byron Shire or one of five other surrounding shires, with occasional one-off exceptions for 'visiting' farmers. For these reasons, BBFM locates this exploratory consumer-based study in a uniquely Australian setting.

### ***Data Gathering***

To better understand Australian FM consumers, we interviewed a sample of 23 participants: 16 individual interviews and a focus group of seven, all Byron Bay residents and BBFM patrons; an organic farmer/producer and vendor. Two sampling methods were employed: convenience sampling, the most common technique in selecting focus group participants particularly in pilot studies (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990) and purposeful sampling, widely used in qualitative research to select for particular knowledge and to capture major variations as well as common perspectives (Patton, 2002; Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Tourists were excluded from the study as they do not have long-term engagement in the 'local'; and their impact on the commercial success of the BBFM is negligible (Interviewee Dan, producer and former chair of the BBFM committee). Of the participating consumers, three were purposely selected for their broader engagement in the BBFM: a former producer, a former manager, and a current producer and former chair of the BBFM committee.

Interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, beginning with several key questions related to the AFMA's four stated FM benefits and later exploring participants' engagement with the concepts of alterity and

embeddedness. The questions were flexible enough to allow divergence and elaboration on areas not previously considered significant by the research team. In addition to demographic and practical questions (e.g. frequency of FM attendance and typical spend), participants were asked questions to elicit underlying attitudes and values relating to FMs (e.g. what makes a successful FM, why they shopped at the FM instead of a conventional food retailer, barriers that might impede FM attendance, food safety meaning and concerns, and thoughts on underlying philosophies of FMs).

There was considerable variation in demographic factors. Almost two thirds of participants were female. Ages ranged from 18 to over 65 with the majority being over 30. Gross annual household income sat predominantly in the AUD\$50 000-\$100 000 bracket, with five participants each in the AUD\$21 000-\$50 000 and AUD\$101 000-\$200 000 brackets (the median gross annual household income in Australia in 2015-16 was approximately AUD\$84 000 (ABS, 2017)). Thirteen of the 23 consumer participants were tertiary educated and 21 had lived in the area more than five years.

The two-hour focus group and 30-60-minute interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. A general inductive approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to capture any themes that may not have been previously considered by the researchers. Captured themes were then organised and analysed under AFMA benefits: economic, environmental, health, and social. An additional theme pertaining to the political motivations was added when it became apparent that this was key for many participants.

## **5. REAPING THE BENEFITS: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Economic Benefits***

The AFMA emphasises the potential of FMs to lower prices through direct selling. Vendors are provided a low-cost market place which maximizes profit margins (AFMA, 2017). The AFMA advocates for local farmer economic sustainability but the viability of FMs rests on balanced pricing. However, it was clear from the consumers' comments that this balance had not been achieved at the BBFM.



*“I call it the ‘elitist market’ because there are many people in the community who can’t afford to go there. They charge more than what you pay at a supermarket and they don’t have freight, they don’t have labelling, boxing, overheads, plastic bags—that’s why it’s fabulous—but they don’t price it accordingly...most people can’t afford it.” (Stephanie)*

*“When it started the prices were cheaper but now there is an element of the farmers gouging the locals.” (Peter)*

*“There are some suppliers there who sell their products at extremely inflated prices ... they think they’re special, they’re a boutique operation and they can ask whatever they like.” (Carmen)*

The tension between the economic interests of the BBFM farmers and consumers reflects the fundamental transactional nature of the market activity (Hinrichs, 2003), glossed over in much of the literature, highlighting the alterity or social embeddedness of the consumer-producer relationship. The general sentiment across all income groups was that FM goods were expensive. According to Carmen, “some locals won’t buy there because they’re over-priced ... there’s a lot of rich locals now and tourists willing to spend”. Interviewees’ resentment of ‘inflated’ prices reflects the impact of a shifting local demographic, driving up prices and driving out locals. For some, price comparisons were of less importance, not a reflection of income and affordability, but rather other values, intrinsic (freshness) or extrinsic (market ambience) outweighed the cost. This finding correlates with other studies that note “people generally do not shop at FMs for inexpensive food” (OSISDC, 2010, p. 34).

Stephanie’s labelling of the BBFM as elitist, developed into a focus group discussion on concerns about equity and social justice. Participants expected FMs to be accessible to the whole community. Food security is a strong theme in much of the North American FM literature, highlighting tensions between the rights-based principles of ‘food sovereignty’ and ‘food democracy’ and findings of exclusion by class, race and geography (Jarosz, 2008; Hassanein, 2008; Markowitz, 2010; Allen, 2010; Schupp, 2016).

In the Australian context, exclusivity was raised in a Victorian government report on FMs, recommending broad co-operation to ensure access for those on low incomes. Use of Centrelink concession cards at FMs was one proposed measure (OSISDC, 2010). The Byron Bay community has also sought home-grown solutions to the ‘elitist prices’, reflecting strong community embeddedness. Lyn explained that

'Liberation Larder' is organized by the community centre to redistribute unsold FM food to street people and the homeless. A similar operation is run by a local church, providing boxes of food to those with a Centrelink card for a gold coin. But these are reliant on individuals' good will and sustained volunteerism.

Another solution proposed by several interviewees was to expand the number of vendors to improve competitive pricing and increase choice. However, AFMA affiliation requires restrictions on locality of produce to ensure both the integrity of the 'FM brand' and sustainable incomes for vendors. According to the two producers interviewed, this requirement is interpreted rather narrowly at BBFM, and protected by the FM committee of eight farmers who decide which vendors are granted access. A more democratic committee at another nearby FM, comprising half consumers and half vendors was viewed as a preferable arrangement, preventing "farmers getting up to any political shenanigans... [and so] getting on with providing the service to customers" (Dan).

Farmers should reap economic benefits from FMs and studies show that FMs represent a more equitable system of retailing (O'Kane and Wijaya, 2015), while consumers receive value for money. Given the AFMA's overarching goal is to achieve longevity for all FMs in Australia, an understanding of the consumer tension in regard to cost would benefit the FM model of retailing farmers' produce. Accessibility to affordable produce will promote overall customer satisfaction and contribute to all four AFMA stated goals.

### ***Environmental Benefits***

The AFMA states that environmental benefits include "reduced packaging and 'food mile' transportation, and greater opportunities for farmer knowledge transfer and collaborative environmental on-farm activities" (AFMA, 2017). The AFMA goal of reduced packaging and food miles means, for the BBFM patrons 'I want local'.

While there is a rich body of AFN literature on the negative environmental impact of conventional agrifood systems, the FMs' promise of sustainability is also increasingly being contested. Forssell and Lankoski (2015) provide an excellent overview. This study does not seek to make an argument either way, but rather sought to understand the extent to which consumers were motivated by values related to sustainability, that is, their attachment to ecological embeddedness.

*“It’s mostly environmental for me...the future of a sustainable community should have less food miles, more local food systems. Ideally, I would grow my own veggies, but if someone else can grow it for me locally...that’s number one for me... ridiculous to think that we can sustain food production in in arid places.”* (Angela).

*“I still have my issues with the way [supermarkets] do things e.g. organic stuff wrapped in plastic because they spray—they have to because the supermarket sprays...I don’t want my veg all wrapped up in plastic.”* (Petra)

Our findings show that consumer values related to the environment were mixed. Over half the consumers expressed concern—significantly more than was found in the VFMA study. This proportion reflects the community’s history of alternative culture, activism and what Goodman refers to as “ethically reflexive lifestyles and concerned shopping choice” (Goodman, 2004, p.893).

*“Big food happens to be cheaper for most of the population. We’ve always survived on local food, until the last 100 years. Big food isn’t actually doing the job of feeding the world...30% is wasted-average. With the advent of monoculture, there is less nutrition per square metre... and they’ve wrecked the nutrient content of the soil, so there is less nutrition per square meter. 50% of climate change is from the whole system of big food. Local food is the way to go.”* (Lachlan)

Environmental concern linked to buying local also materialised as the desire to purchase in-season produce, with several interviewees confessing guilt at buying non-seasonal goods at a supermarket. In one way or another, most implied a commitment to reducing food miles by supporting local, which meant shopping at the FM and suggests that this sample is considerably invested in spatial and ecological embeddedness.

### ***Health Benefits***

The AFMA identifies three health benefits offered by FMs: (1) a guaranteed fresh food product; (2) community-based food security programs and consumer incentive to increase fruit and vegetable and other nutrient-dense food consumption; (3) public food and nutrition education.

Many supporters of AFNs regard fresh food, which has not travelled far or been stored for any length as more nutrient-dense and thereby a contributor to consumer health (Forssell and Lankoski, 2015).

Whether it was recognized as more healthy or simply more tasty, all participants' primary stated reason for shopping at the BBFM was unambiguously the purchase of fresh produce. This is a consistent finding across the FM literature and therefore unsurprising. What was surprising was the degree of their enthusiasm:

*"Coming home with a basket full of fresh produce, nothing can beat that!" (Isla)*

*"Everything is happier ... the eggs, when you crack them you can tell; it's happy food!" (Maia)*

*"So to go to the market to buy from the dude who just pulled it out of the ground in the morning, you know, that lettuce is awesome" (Petra)*

Interviewees became passionate and animated in describing how good the food was. Participants' delight supports marketing research by Darby *et al.* (2008) that found 'local' produce is experienced as a significant hedonic attribute of food, distinct from 'fresh'; as exemplified by Maia's excited description of the food as 'happy'. Maia also explained her perceived link between food and health: "what you put in your body can save you money in the long term, on doctors' bills and things later". She claimed that she "felt better" when she bought her food at the FM. Overall, BBFM offers fresh and superior tasting produce, which reinforced by the local environment is experienced by participants as a pleasure contributing to a sense of wellbeing and health.

The AFMA states that a FM has a role in alleviating food security issues to promote health in the community. For our interviewees, 'food security' was interpreted as 'food access and equity' (as discussed above). Some interviewees felt the BBFM paid insufficient attention to addressing the very visible problem of poverty in the region that contributed to food access inequity.

It was also clear that due to the culture of Byron Bay shire, there was little perceived need for the FM to promote 'nutrition', as recommended by the AFMA and the Payet *et al.* (2005) study of a small rural community in Western Australia. Rather, Byron Bay ethos has long encouraged healthy consumption of fruit and vegetables, thus Payet's finding that FMs promote public health and the intake of fresh foods does not adequately

capture customer engagement in BBFM. The discrepancy does, however, support our contention that the growth of FMs must reflect the local consumer landscape.

The AFMA's assertion of an educative role for FMs generated little enthusiasm among our sample. While an organic producer was keen to share his understanding of health, nutrition and food choices, he was also aware that the vast majority of FM consumers—and farmers—are not particularly interested:

*“For people in the city that know there is a problem with chemicals in food... what they're looking for is some sort of a guarantee that they're not going to poison their kids...that one's sprayed, that one's not... that's probably as far as the discussion goes. [A few are] happy to have a yak about [organic farming methods, 'ethics' and nutritional benefits] but for other people you can see their eyes glaze over, they're busy, they've got shopping to do, they don't want to listen to some mad farmer.”* (Dan)

In our sample, only Petra, Maia and Lachlan demonstrated interest in the 'alternative' knowledges outlined by Dan. Like all areas of science today, understanding requires an investment in time, generally beyond the lay persons' interest and commitment (Meyer *et al.*, 2012; Smith and Riethmuller, 1999). In contrast, there was general agreement that FMs offered a unique (re)learning opportunity regarding seasonality of produce, an awareness that has diminished with increasing reliance on supermarkets.

Our study revealed that from the Bryon Bay consumer perspective (also corresponding to findings in the OSISDC survey, 2010) the most readily identified health benefit associated with FMs is reduced use of toxic chemicals. Our sample assumed minimal to no use of agrochemicals, particularly those associated with long-term storage; though they also conceded that this was likely a 'convenient truth':

*“I like to think that it's organic...but I know it's not.”* (Jade).

*“I just assume that the produce I'm buying is organic or is produced with a minimum of chemicals.”* (Chris).

While confusion between minimal use of chemicals and meanings of organic were evident, for most participants the difference was of little importance. Among this generally well-educated and well-informed sample, sentiment was dominated by a trust that produce was fresh, good,

and safe for health. Participants' expression of high levels of trust in the local FM producers lies in stark contrast to their attitudes more generally.

Interviewees expressed strong and far-reaching distrust of the government, of supermarkets, of FMs elsewhere, the agrifood industry and its appropriation of large-scale organic produce. Diminishing trust of Australian consumers in food safety is widely reported (Buchler *et al.*, 2010; Coveney, 2008; Taylor *et al.*, 2012; FSANZ, 2008). A study by Meyer *et al.* (2012) sheds some light on this paradox. They found that rural consumers in Australia are more trusting than their urban counterparts because of the embedded nature of their relations with producers. This was confirmed in our study by Petra who explained her "connection" based on shared values with select farmers and thus, "I trust in the farmers that are there. I don't reckon all markets are the same; I'm just talking about Byron".

### ***Social Benefits***

The AFMA states that social benefits are achieved "through revitalisation of towns and public spaces, facilitation of interaction between consumers and producers and increasing consumer satisfaction knowing they can support 'local'" (AFMA, 2017). Our informants agreed with the latter in particular.

Consumer enthusiasm for supporting local producers was very high for all of the participants, with one claiming that she would go out of her way to purchase local products that she did not really need in order to show her support. Our finding aligns with Coster and Kennon (2005) and Payet (2005) who observed that the desire to support local growers was the second most important motivation for Australian customers of rural FMs. Urban consumers in a VFMA survey were significantly less motivated to support 'the farmer' (OSISDC, 2010). Taken together, these studies confirm that rural consumers are more embedded in their local economy than metropolitan consumers.

*"In an area that has the majority of people who are possibly farmers or some of their income comes from farming, I think it is a political decision to go and buy from the FM because obviously every other business will be dependent on these guys being able to still live and work on the farm. And all of these people have their kids going to schools, hospitals—you want [the farmers] to be*

*there if you want those services to exist. It's like catch 22; we all feed into each other"* (Helene).

Producer/consumer interaction is often framed as a key aspect of the alterity of FMs. While this may be the case, it is also a nostalgic return to the past, when face to face interactions between customers and providers were a daily event—not a once a week novelty.

Participants were divided almost equally in terms of the importance of the consumer-producer relationship with some consumers expressly disinterested and others who enjoyed the relationship or 'connection' and the sharing of knowledge. This was particularly important for one producer:

*"[Farming] is hard work, and it's lonely.... Going to the market and selling your food is an absolute joy. It gets you off the farm, it gets you into society again; it's a social day out where you make money"* (Dan).

For half the Byron Bay interviewees, the FM was an important place to meet friends and mingle with like-minded people. A number of participants commented on being 'seen' at the FM: "You're 'cool' if you go there" (Chris). All participants extolled the "vibe", the "hustle and bustle", and the music. Maia explained that, "it's a community event and you see so many people you know...it brings everyone together". Contrasts with the "sterile" and "zombie-like" atmosphere of a supermarket were common. We suggest this "warm glow" effect of the FM is an important feature, fostering well-being and a sense of identity in the community. Spiller (2010) suggests this warm glow may be short-lived. He argues that alterity is ephemeral; that alternative practices become habitual and mundane over time and that alternative products and practices become appropriated into conventional retailing.

However, the pleasure of attending FMs may not necessarily rest in the 'doing' of alterity, but rather pleasure is derived from human interaction. This paper suggests consumers may not recognize the significance of fleeting face-to-face interactions, yet these nevertheless make a substantial contribution to consumers' motivation to attend the BBFM.

### ***Considering the Political: Ethical Consumption***

*"We live in a world where we feel we have no control over anything and this [the FM] is the place where you feel like you have control over something and you believe it, and what you're*

*doing may help in some small way. It's a group of people, who are interested in doing what they're doing because they feel that they are changing the way things are"* (Silvie).

*"[reason for attending FM is] social responsibility. It's important to support environmentally positive activities of which farmers' markets are one. It's also better use of resources—less food miles, less packaging."* (Angus)

*"Space has been made for supermarkets. Space needs to be made for FMs, if we are going to make change. It needs to be a systemic change if we are going to make these types of alternative food systems prolific."* (Lachlan)

These interviewees draw our attention to a 'benefit' not fully considered in the AFMA Strategic Plan: the political motivation underlying interviewees' purchasing behaviours. All participants expressed an intention, varying in degree, to reclaim some control over their consumption, to improve their own well-being and to disrupt the power imbalance inherent in the market domination of supermarkets and multinational corporations.

Participants in this study and the BBFM exemplify the process of 're-embedding' (Thorne, 1996), understood here as, "the purposive action by which individuals or communities seek to create accessible structures that can allow them to regain some control within exchange processes" (Kirwan, 2004 p. 397).

Unsurprisingly, the level of political engagement and strength of commitment varied, but the majority indicated that ethical motivations informed their decision to shop at the FM. At one end of the spectrum, five participants linked their personal consumption and food purchase decision-making with broader movements aimed at transformational social change. This group notwithstanding, the majority of interviewees were uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the ascription of a 'political' label, but readily identifying with 'ethical consumer'. Isla sums up the initial reactions of others, stating laughingly that she "didn't go into that depth".

However, when prompted, all interviewees revealed deliberate ethical choices to resist conventional food retailers. Their concerns included, the supermarkets' appropriation of 'alternative' foods, the powerlessness of farmers against the supermarket duopoly, and industrialised production of organic produce for mass consumption. But these consumers are



pragmatic: they ‘dip in and out’ of conventional systems. Yet this does not detract from the value interviewees place on ethical consumption.

Consumption is an integral part of identity construction and lifestyle, providing a sense of status and belonging (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000). Ethical consumption is a fundamental element of the populist Byron Bay identity and so where and how one consumes is socially relevant. As Angus laughingly explains, “especially in Byron Bay—if you’re seen in [the supermarket] buying strawberries out of season, you’ll be shamed”.

The value of local in terms of support for farmers and economy are also intrinsic to the ethics of consumption and the associated construction of FM norms. Stephanie illustrates: “one time I bought a couple of organic leeks and they cost me \$15! I couldn’t afford them, but I was too embarrassed to say I didn’t want them, so I just bought them. But then I had to go and purchase the rest of my veggies at the supermarket”. Carmen similarly made the point that challenging producers, “would be very politically incorrect—because you’re at the FM, you know”.

While it was clear that ethical consumption enhanced interviewees’ sense of positive personal and social identity, the statements above also suggest frustrations. Here social norms reinforce ethical consumption by imposing a self-conscious disciplining of consumer practices. The Byron Bay environment both constrains and rewards consumers for their attachment to ethical consumption.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Understanding what motivates consumers to shop at FMs is important to the growth of the market. While this is recognized by the AFMA, it advocates primarily for vendors and therefore the ‘four benefits’ of its Strategic Plan, used as an organizational framework for this study, most clearly represent those interests. This study has shown that BBFM patrons mostly share ambitions with the AFMA: to ensure the longevity of regional FMs that offer a safe and sustainable alternative, celebrating local produce. In this, and as anticipated, our interviewees were found to be reflexive consumers, (for the most part) actively resisting mainstream food retailers and consequently being drawn to the alterity of the FM as an avenue for their concerns. What we did not find was a strong concern about food safety, in comparison to North Atlantic studies.

Australian consumers at Byron Bay were more concerned with supporting their local community, suggesting deep-rooted social and special embeddedness. Their statements also revealed a notable level of

ecological embeddedness and concerns for general environmental issues, importantly related to participants' identity of being an ethical consumer.

Most strikingly, interviewees were consciously practicing ethical consumption. Their commitment to ensure community access at the BBFM, through the mediation of food security and reasonable cost, remains a strident reminder of the enduring Byron Bay counter-culture influencing the ethical practices of the individual shire residents and FM patrons. While Byron Bay's history of unconventional principles and its current reputation as an 'alternative' enclave undoubtedly contribute to the distinctive consumer profile discussed in this study, it is pertinent to note that the notion of 'alternative' is fluid.

Practices commonly regarded as 'alternative' in the 1970s (e.g. ethical and sustainable consumption, resistance to the supermarket duopoly and purchasing local produce) are now considered mainstream by the interviewees, and by many in government, academia, and consumers beyond Byron Bay. These ideologies and related consumer practices have become normalized. Many interviewees thus did not immediately identify their actions as political (i.e. as a form of resistance to mainstream practice).

While unquestionably motivated by ethical consumption, engagement with the FM had become as much hedonic pleasure as political. Understanding the local ethical consumer, advances the knowledge of and potential benefits for all stakeholders and increases the likelihood of market longevity if incorporated into FM managers' and producers' strategic planning. Understanding the consumer motivations at other FMs will deepen our understanding of the Australian FM scene and facilitate further exploration of the Australian ethical consumer.

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