

The Local Consumers' Gaze Interpreted as Regional Food Brand Essence

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Purpose:

This paper argues for further entrenchment of place within the region, by recognising and analysing regional-consumers' perceptions of growing food in the landscape. It explores the hidden value of observed landscapes and lived 'lifescapes' as unformulated brand experiences, particularly those relevant to regional meat. These inform the identity, depth and breadth of place brand components for regional meats. It is therefore the local consumers' gaze which is of interest, as this lives and digests the place. As an often unconscious experience it must be recognised, articulated and formalised to enable authentic communications of place meaning to visitors.

Hill farming practices are impacted by current environmental concerns, including carbon storage, and the quality of water feeding into reservoirs, as a consequence payments of hill farming subsidies are being linked to reducing stock numbers. However the hefting ability of the stock requires a given number of sheep to maintain the knowledge of the fells (Fraser, 2014). There is a balance to be sought between retaining a cultural heritage, retaining a viable economic output and investing in environmental protection.

If successful regional food brands can contribute towards a sustained future for hill farming practices, then authenticity of communications are important. The economic reality of hill farming in Cumbria is bleak. The contribution of sheep farming to regional food in Cumbria is hidden within more generic stock output statistics. Hill farming includes herdwick production but also swaledales and other breeds. Hill farming is given considerable attention in the press as 'a sector under threat', as a sector it is estimated to reduce by 20% over the next twenty years (Fraser, 2014). The sheep flock in Cumbria declined by 30% from 2001 to 2010 (Harvey et al., 2013). With the average age of a hill-farmer at 58, it is the future of this industry which needs to be seen as viable from the inside, whilst offering consumers a stake in its future. By revealing consumers perceptions and values resulting from a shared landscape, this paper will offer inputs to the brand development process for regional meats.

Method:

Means-end chain analysis was selected to gather customer values relating to this broader product concept. Twenty ladder maps and a hierarchical value maps identified the most frequent connections made for the Cumbrian fells. The empirical data was collected from consumers with a minimum of five years residence in the local of herdwick lamb production. Means-end chain (MEC) analysis was selected because identity of the respondents and products with the region needed closer examination. Credence variables are significant in the communication of gastronomic, ‘*terroir*’ and heritage attributes. MEC analysis involves linking lower level concrete or abstract product characteristics, with functional or psychosocial consequences, arising from consumption, which then contribute towards achievement of instrumental or terminal life values (Gutman, 1982b; 1991). The cognitions and rationalisations used by consumers in considering their lamb choices are revealed using this method, and understanding of these linkages feed into development of product communications. Gengler et al (1995) offers a guide on MEC data analysis which was followed in processing the data.

Findings

The traditional product construct of core, augmented and total product attracted minimum comment from respondents as did meat colour, smell, or the presence of marbling, neither did they dwell on packaging or claims made by supporting promotions (Darby and Karni, 1973; Steenkamp, 1989; Andersen, 1994; Grunert et al., 1996). Results suggested people do not think about embedded meat with reference to classical ‘product’ considerations (Dibb et al., 2001:254).

MEC findings showed that people experience place populated with flocks of sheep/local meat in production and perceive its qualities and characteristics influenced by *terroir* influences, by season and their own relationship with the landscape and local community. In essence they experience the brand of these ‘products’ before they become products (Kapferer, 2008; Jacobsen, 2012).

Practical implications

Effective regional food brands may be characterised by branding actions which do not have the food product details at their core. The development of relationships, events and brand communities in a shared place may sustain producers who have their volume output limited by what the land will bear.

Originality and value

An opportunity for appreciation of a new category of attribute, relating to experience of ‘pre-products’ in the landscape is discussed.

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