

Farmers' Markets: commoditising New Zealand rural identity myths¹

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Abstract

In New Zealand notions of the rural are revisited by urban consumers seeking enactment of traditional rural way of life. Within both country and urban spaces the farmers' markets draw from mythologies about the idyllic rural community. The ionization of rural culture, identity and values is exploited for contemporary consumption.

Farmers' markets have become popular venues for selling and purchasing fresh produce. The goal is to serve the cosmopolitan culinary imagination. In New Zealand for the burgeoning neo-middle class, shopping at a farmers' market may, ironically, be a way of expressing one's self-ascribed cosmopolitanism.

Notions of rural are not spatially contiguous, but a media construct as well as a cultural construct, with nostalgia as the ruling paradigm. This includes nostalgia for a sense of belonging to a local community. In this new century, farmers' markets have become an active response to these requirements. The very sustainability of the images and myths about rural way of life has been central to the creation of farmers' markets.

Keywords: New Zealand, rural identity, consumers, myths, culture, nostalgia.

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1. Farmers' markets in New Zealand in the new century

'The farmers' market is one type of enterprise where the very rurality of the product is a major cache of the 'brand' (Cameron 2007: 368). The essentially dynamic nature of rural areas is illustrated by this case study about New Zealand farmers' markets. 'Rural' is not just about spaces and values that gratify basic psychological and spiritual needs, but also has scope for the performance a cultural idyll, a counterpoint to urban way of life. Space and culture intersect, as fantasies about the mythical rural idyll are reshaped into farmers' markets.

Farmer's Markets are a relatively new feature in the local New Zealand retail market. Usually held on a Saturday or Sunday morning, these markets have, in 2008, rapidly become very popular. The first started in Whangerei, in the north of the North Island, in 1998. It was very much a case of vendors simply paying a small amount of money to rent a space in a car park to sell their home-produced surplus produce on a Saturday morning. Sellers set up their own tents, tables, and umbrellas, or used the tray of a utility vehicle (small truck) as a display space.

Most items for sale were fresh produce and plants; there was a smaller proportion of 'added value' or processed items. This has remained a very popular place for people to shop. They can expect to pay less than at a supermarket, for fresher locally grown goods. Their *difference* from other forms of food shopping is their appeal: as Steve Baron et al. (2001: 110) explain, the 'essence of the experience is the people and the produce'. Barbara Santich (1996: 31-32) writes of the 'comfort of plenty' at farmers' markets, and that 'the market is a meeting place, a natural community centre where good will pervades.' She adds that making a direct purchase from the grower - of believing that we are - gives our purchase a 'seal of authenticity'. She rests her case for choosing farmers' markets on 'sociability, flavour and trust'. That striving for authenticity is also addressed by John Smithies and Alun Joseph (2010). Vanessa John (2012) explains the process of localising food economies can be readily tracked to the 'manifold destructive consequences of the commoditisation of food by the global free market'. The same sentiment drove two growers to start the Whangerei Farmers' Market as a 'growers' market, 'considering that they could get better prices by direct selling than by selling to supermarkets and

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wholesalers' (Cameron 2007: 372).

Isabelle Szmigin, Sarah Maddock, and Marylyn Carrigan (2003: 542–543) offer a range of influences that have propelled farmers' markets into popularity, including the growing consciousness of consumers regarding food ingredients and additive; the desire for organic foods, and the need for 'reconnection', including 'reconnecting consumers with their food and where it has come from'. The globalisation of food production, especially, has been increasingly promoted in the media across the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland also, with awareness of 'food miles', whereby the majority of supermarket produce is imported, and an apple can travel over 3000 miles prior to purchase, (La Trobe 2001: 182). Further to this, in New Zealand with its powerful traditional rural ethos, participation in farmers' markets is a way of enacting notions of rural identity.

Consumers are not only looking more thoroughly at 'place of origin' but also want to help local farmers, who are widely reported to be struggling to compete against cheaper and larger foreign exporters. 'Circulated as local wages or spent on local products, every 10 NZD (ca 6.21 EUR) spent on locally produced food is worth 24 NZD (ca 14.90 EUR) to the local area' (Guthrie et al. 2006: 567). Other prominent factors are driving the popularity of farmers' markets in the UK and Ireland, such as 'public health scares including Foot and Mouth Disease and Asian Bird Flu, which are often associated with intensive farming and the consumers' ignorance of the supply chain, leading to increasing suspicion of the food available to us' (Guthrie et al. 2006: 562). Environmental concerns and health factors are also behind the growing desire for GM free food, organic food and free range eggs, which have combined with a desire to 'buy locally', compelling the number of farmers' markets to expand exponentially.

By 2011 there are around 60 farmers' markets throughout New Zealand, from Kerikeri in the Northland down to Invercargill in Southland, in rural and beach locations, and in the larger cities. The rapid rise in their popularity reflects trends elsewhere. In Ireland, for examples, in one decade the move was from no farmers markets, to 129 in 2007. This number has now increased. In UK the first successful market was held at Bath in 1997. Today there are at least 600 markets held on a regular basis in cities, towns and villages throughout UK. In Canada there has also

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been a rapid development of numerous farmers' markets (Smither, Joseph, 2010). On a UK *The Apprentice* episode, contestants vying with one another to impress their potential future employer, Sir Alan Sugar, were given the task of creating a product from raw materials sourced in the countryside to sell at a North London city farmers' market. The market was described by the programme voice-over as a place 'where trendy residents are searching for the rural idyll'. The illusion of the market being truly rural (in that London street!) was enhanced by arranging the sale items on hay bales, freighted in specially.

2. Research design

The researcher and her postgraduate research assistant visited a total of twenty markets during the summer 2009 - 2010. Most were either in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city (population 1.2 million) or within one hour of the city.

Grounded theory methodology requires qualitative research, from which meaning is sought. The primary goal of this research project was to locate explanations for the rapid and extensive uptake of farmers' markets. This project sought explanation for this current 'fashion', through participant observation at each market, and interviews with vendors and market managers. Questions, however, arise of why had these markets suddenly become so very popular, who ran them, who shopped there, why would people drive some distance to participate, and what did the markets convey about their notions of country living.

Interviews from the semi structured questionnaire took about 20 minutes. Subjects were easily located at the markets, and seemed happy to talk. About half the respondents were male and half female, and all aged over 38. Three of the twenty vendors we interviewed were Maori, four were recent immigrants (from South Africa, China, and Vietnam), the rest Pākehā (white New Zealanders). The small number interviewed meant that their responses could not reasonably be analysed according to age, gender, ethnicity and location. Nor could the findings of this study be claimed to generalise to a wider population. The interviews were not taped; instead, notes were taken to record key issues. The goal was to produce a theoretical discussion, not an ethnographic account. The function of the interviews was to raise issues for the authors to use as a basis for academic analysis.

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A collection of images of farmers' markets as they appeared in magazines and newspapers was also compiled. Over that summer, these were very topical in the news media. Our own photographs were used later as mnemonic devices about the actual products sold, and the physical styling of each market.

3. Structure of farmers' markets in New Zealand

'A Farmers' Market is 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 processed food products directly to customers' (Australia Farmers' Market Association website 2012).

The definition above corresponds to those definitions summarized in a recent Canadian study (Hergesheimer, Kennedy, 2010). Farmers' market rules regulating stall-holders' attendance and produce sold originate from the farmers' market movement in the USA, which have since been utilized throughout New Zealand, Ireland, UK, and Australia. Various interested members of farmers' markets associations across the world visited other locations, bringing with them the ideals of farmers' markets; the emphasis on food, the localization of both sellers and produce, and the community atmosphere prevalent in overseas markets. Each market aims to achieve at least 80% local produce, with both farmers and producers of value-added commodities needing to reside within a set radius of the market location, generally around 50 km.

The produce also needs to come from within a specific area, with the idea that 'vendors may only sell what they grow, farm, pickle, preserve, bake, smoke or catch themselves from within a defined local area,' (New Zealand Farmers' Market Association website, 2012). However, to create a larger, more attractive market stocking a wider range of goods, produce from outside of the boundary are generally accepted, particularly if an item is not readily available within the specified area.

Farmers' markets originally evolved in New Zealand through the entrepreneurship of eager market participants themselves, seeking to take control over the sale of their produce, and thus accrue greater profits. These producers' participation in forming farmers' markets was primarily to create another avenue

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from which to sell their produce. The structure of the first markets was based around the concept of a community co-op, a sense of several local producers working together towards a common goal, with committees formed to guarantee desired developments and ensure the producers were following regulations. This sense of community was furthered by them being held on council owned land, much as village markets in the UK would have been held on the 'commons'.

However, as the first farmers' markets demonstrated their popularity, individuals with marketing and development expertise started to realise their own farmers' market visions through the establishment of custom-made sites on private land. Increasingly these purpose-built markets employ market managers and other staff, and are run as a business enterprise, with the developers able to actually on-sell their market should they decide to do so. For example, 'the Bay of Islands market was initiated by a food writer who had moved into a growing affluent town and felt it should have a farmers' market, having seen the benefits elsewhere' (Cameron 2007: 372). Many of the community co-op styled markets, in comparison, are run by volunteers, with profits going to local charities.

The Farmers' Market Association in New Zealand was formed in 2005 by three market managers from across the country, who sought to maintain the integrity of farmers' markets, or as their website states amongst it's goals, 'to protect the brand 'Farmers' Market', clearly distinguishing the concept of a Farmers' Market from other markets, both retail and wholesale' (Farmers, Markets, n.d.). Consumers are then able to visit various farmers' markets and be assured of the same high standards of produce regardless of different location. The concept of a governing body follows similar initiatives in Australia, Ireland, and the UK, in which the volunteers or paid managers of individual markets are able to meet during conferences, share ideas, and create frameworks for emerging sites, while maintaining an overall similarity amongst the stalls.

The recent experiences of these researchers at various North Island rural and city Farmers' Markets indicate that fresh produce at many markets is significantly more expensive than at everyday outlets. The food is not necessarily cheaper because it chops out the middle man. Little of the fresh produce is claimed to be organic. One reason may be that vendors perceive that this particular demographic of

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consumers can and will pay more for farmers' market goods. One concludes that the greater price is asked because vendors assume buyers will happily pay for the cache of making their purchases at a Farmers' Market.

The researchers also found that many markets were attended by the same vendors offering the same products. *Metro* magazine recently profiled a chocolate maker 'with stalls at Britomart, Albany, Coatesville, Onehunga, and Clevedon farmers' markets' (Morton 2007). It seems that since that first market in Whangerei, the concept has evolved and been taken advantage of by small business people trialling new products and using the market as an incubator experience. Similar practices have been observed at farmers' markets worldwide (Hergesheimer, Kennedy, 2010). Some vendors outgrow their local market, as the success of their products has them gradually supplying at first specialist food shops, then later supermarkets, finally not wishing to commit weekend time to sell at the local market (Bailey 2008, Cameron 2007). There are also existing food retailers (for example, bakeries and organic food businesses) using farmers' markets as additional outlets. One market stall holder claimed that some sellers had bought their goods at produce wholesalers Turners and Growers city markets, and were on-selling them at the farmers' markets.

4. The new rural gentry

In New Zealand many urban dwellers escape - even if only for weekends - to a county retreat. There are now around 140,000 lifestyle blocks in New Zealand (Paterson 2005). These are small land holdings of up to perhaps 10 hectares of land. They are not always intended to achieve self sufficiency, even in basic vegetable production. However, while some of the new rural dwellers occupying these blocks still commute to cities to work, others who do not necessarily have farming backgrounds are developing new 'boutique' crops and products. There have been large increases in population in some previously-rural regions less than an hour from large cities, for instance at Matakana, Tauranga environs, and Clevedon. The new rural dwellers do not present as a re-run of 1960s-70s back-to-the-land hippies; this is not a revisiting of the famous *Whole Earth Catalogue*, addressing frugal sustainability. Rather, this is a popular option for the affluent, middle-aged middle class. Jo Little

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and Patricia Austin (1966: 103) note that a key feature of the quest by the middle classes to locate and live the rural idyll, increasingly relies of the notion of exclusion and selectivity. Gentrification has been identified as a space in which people realise their consumption or lifestyle choices. Emphasis is on the construction of social identities and differentiations via refurbishment of rural properties (Phillips et al. 2001: 282). High levels of urban to rural migration and socio-economic changes in some districts have certainly re-shaped contemporary rural cultures, with renewed articulations of belonging, commonality, difference and place (Neal, Walters, 2006: 178).

As Katharine Tyler wonders, in her case referring to the similar phenomenon in the UK, 'how do white middle class residents imaginatively reproduce their idea of their place as a traditional 'village' in the face of suburbanisation?' She observes efforts to reproduce imaginative and nostalgic 'village' identity, which she sees as 'part of their middle class social status, lifestyles and sense of self'. Founding agendas for recent Farmers' Markets investigated in our New Zealand study appear to correspond to this ethos. Certainly the freshly re-invented village Matakana just over an hour from Auckland is a form of cultural capital in itself. As Katharine Tyler (2003: 393) explains, in relation to her own case study, 'the rural represents authentic white England, a place of history and tradition...' The whiteness of the new farmers' markets in New Zealand is achingly apparent. They are a total contrast to the large working class Pacifica markets that have thrived for years in Auckland suburbs such as Otara and Avondale.

It is also noticeable at markets such as Matakana and Clevedon that a particular demographic dominates: these places appear to have great appeal to people of about 50 plus, the mature age consumers. Empirical studies in UK have identified the dominance of farmers' market shoppers in the 51-65 age groups. This has been attributed to this demographic having more time to shop, being willing to treat produce shopping as recreation, and being comfortable with traditional methods of purchasing. They also identify nostalgia and the quest for community as motivations (Szmigin et al. 2003: 545).

Numerous resources are available to assist in creating new venture: a wide range of organisations support lifestyle block enterprises. Various magazines provide

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ideas, advice, encouragement, marketing and networking information. As Deborah Park and Phillip Coppack (1994: 163) explain, rurality 'has been commodified, marketed and sold to exurbanites by entrepreneurs in the form of rustic ambience. The iconisation of rural culture and values is exploited for contemporary consumption'. The original local community is not so much revitalised as hijacked, as a new local landed gentry takes charge. D. Park and P. Coppack (1994: 164) further observe that high levels of affluence, mobility and lifestyle opportunities 'facilitate the pursuit of the intangible and experiential commodity of rural sentiment'. It is within this context of demographic shift and re-vitalisation of some rural areas, that the new farmers' markets find an obvious niche.

Given their success, it is no surprise that in Auckland there is now a 'City Farmer's Market', and weekend produce markets at assorted other inner-city venues. If you cannot go to the country, the country comes to you, tucked between the high-rises, with no irony intended at all. Some of the purveyors of goods at the City Farmers' Market do the rounds. One vendor we spoke to said that he and his family 'did' ten markets each weekend, between Auckland City and home, six hours drive away. He presented, in fact, as running a small business with wide geographic spread, whose enterprise eliminated various overheads, by selling directly to the public. His story also showed that the flexibility of the concept 'localism'. Localism is claimed as criteria for stall holders at some markets, such as this one, in which the Charter states 'the market will give first priority to vendors whose point of production is within 50 km of Auckland; second priority will be given to vendors whose point of production is within 100 km of Auckland' (Wilson 2008).

5. Wicker-basket shopping

With the resettlement of some New Zealand rural areas with this non-traditional demographic, the countryside experienced a visual transformation, with the large designer houses, landscaped grounds, vineyards, cafes, and restaurants. Farmers' markets might be read as part of that process of rural 'makeover'. At these venues, entrepreneurs select a version of (fantasy of?) rural way of life: wicker basket-shopping driven by middleclass white urban consumer values, for people with a penchant for gourmet foods.

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Ian Carter (2004: 85) explains, 'the gourmet... lives to eat - consuming modest quantities of food with taste and discrimination, appreciating both the excellence of his meals' ingredients and... the superlative skills of the chef'. The enormous popularity of food programmes on television; television chefs as contemporary popular culture heroes (Jamie! Gordon! Nigella!); the vast industry of supporting recipe books; glossy food magazines: all persuade aficionados that they, too, can produce restaurant-standard meals at home. In his analysis of the New Zealand award-winning food magazine, *Cuisine* - 'gastro porn' - I. Carter notes that the magazine urges happiness through the purchase of expensive good quality raw materials for cooking. 'This presupposes an impressive double income... and cooking for dinner parties rather than for families.' I. Carter (2005: 98) concludes that food as a fashion-driven component of popular culture, the taste-makers (e.g. food writers) living 'comfortably circumstanced metropolitan lives'. He documents historic changes in New Zealand cuisine. The farmers' markets have become the next retail opportunity for consumers seeking food with cache.

And so the purveyors of goods at Farmers' Markets make a deliberate attempt to emphasize 'rustic' imagery for their products; to create an idealized and wholesome image' of a mythical countryside of the past (Bell 2007).

6. Post rural

John Urry famously wrote of the 'post tourist': someone reflexively aware of their own identity as a tourist, who has a 'playful' relationship with the tourist experience. Parallels can be drawn with this when we consider farmers markets and their customers. In this paper we draw from Jonathan Murdoch and Andy Pratt's (1993) notion of the 'post rural'. As Gianluca Brunori reiterates, post-rural theorists focus on the dynamics of social representations of rurality. G. Brunori (2003) observes new demands of the countryside, including for local and artisan products. This inevitably means new social actors such as organic farmers and their associations are taking initiatives in the rural sector. To market their products, they apply overt representation of rural values to their products. In this paper the attention is on the deliberate re-construction of the countryside, in this case the conscious re-enactment of an imaginary rurality at farmers' markets.

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This process demonstrates the distortion of tradition into mythology. At Matakana Market for instance, the marketing manager assured us that stall holders would certainly not define themselves as 'farmers'. And so a selective version of rural way of life is presented, a counterfeit form of ideological packaging to wrap around the goods on sale. To Dean MacCannell (1992: 155) 'true sights' e.g. in this case, real rural objects and experiences, are 'the source of spurious elements which are detached from and are mere copies or reminders of the genuine. The dividing line between the genuine and the spurious is the realm of the commercial'. The styling of farmers' markets accurately demonstrates this.

For most New Zealanders - 86% are urban dwellers - notions of the New Zealand countryside as a generic construct is largely mediated through television commercials in which the countryside is a recognizable aesthetic backdrop, implying wholesomeness in the product or service being promoted (Gibson 2007, New Zealand Herald website 2007). Local television programmes show the 'best' of country living. Images and promotion of national identity in this country still draw strongly and persistently from rural imagery, belying the actual experiences of most New Zealanders. Layered upon this viewing are the imported British television series set in pretty rural villages (*Herriot Country; Heartbeat Country*). These provide inviting models of charming rural living.

7. Performing rurality for cosmopolitan consumers

The Market Charter advises stall holders at Britomart City Farmers' Markets in Auckland City to use 'baskets and crates so presentation is appealing to customers', and are 'encouraged to present an attractive site in keeping with the theme of a farmers' market' (Farmers' Market, n.d.). Indeed, one can observe a 'performing' of rurality. Baron et al. (2001: 102) write of 'retail theatre... environments that provide opportunity for audience participation and interaction...'. Shoppers arrive at the market and walk towards colourful displays of bright, fresh vegetables and other products. The abundance and variety suggests to the cookery enthusiast every culinary possibility. The fragrance of fresh bread and smoked eel intermingle; verdant herbs invite a surreptitious taste; and everywhere vibrant reds yellows purples greens: glowing capsicums, tomatoes, aubergines, aromatic lush

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basil. There is every opportunity to both participate and to observe the market as a spectacle. Indeed, customers are invited to linger. Most markets provide seating to enjoy coffee, for instance under a wide spreading tree at the Clevedon market; or at barrel tables at Matakana market. As Jean Duruz observes, markets may be 'transformed by our collective gaze into evocative sites of visual/sensual culture, repositories of the romance of community and belonging, theatre for acts of consumerism of food' (Duruz 2004: 428). Many customers have enjoyed visiting exotic markets on their overseas travels, satisfying their tourist gaze, but were perhaps limited in their ability to purchase there through their lack of cooking facilities. Jamie Oliver in the *Jamie's Italy* television cookery series showed us grizzled vendors, local characters, in makeshift stalls in Sicily and mainland Italy. In the New Zealand middle class markets, the colourful local-yokel character is not present. The vendors are not for a moment read as peasants, but as canny, friendly business people, with good product knowledge, and prepared to work weekends for cash income. Their role is to serve the cosmopolitan culinary imagination. In New Zealand for the burgeoning neo-middle class, shopping at a farmers' market may, ironically, be a way of expressing one's self-ascribed cosmopolitanism.

Vendors invite participation through the tasting of food samples, and eliciting comment. The greatest affirmation, of course, is to taste, offer a warm compliment, then make a purchase. Every customer is a connoisseur; their subjective response is crucial. These customers are responding to 'the western cosmopolitan's search for 'novel' tastes - for consuming difference literally, alimentarily' (Duruz 2004: 428). The presentation of food does not convey the raw processes of actually farming animals and crops. The products at the markets show nothing of the labour or processes that went into creating the products (salami! pancetta!). This remains absent and mysterious. The food itself looks and smells beautiful.

The shoppers' senses respond to the colour, fragrances and taste. While we are part of a culture that understands that we must not touch - especially food for sale - there is great pleasure in tasting a morsel of fresh food: whole grain bread, home made pesto, smoked eel. The vendors' butchers' aprons and straw hats photographed in the book *Market Day, a taste of life at New Zealand farmers' markets* (Winn 2007) restate the sense of appropriate theatricality for the farmers' market event.

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Some markets extend the theatrical element and invite shoppers to extend their stay by offering live music as entertainment.

A crowd makes a market. A deserted market, like an empty theatre, has a sad, desolate look. The lack of atmosphere works against the success of a market. Our research visits to Britomart City Market and to Devonport Farmers' Market in January 2009, both in Auckland, were very disappointing. Even though this is the peak time for produce to ripen, many vendors had simply cancelled their stalls to go on holiday. Similarly, a visit to Clevedon in January found the market actually cancelled, despite its open days noted in the 'Guide to Farmers' Markets.' These experiences gave the markets a sadly amateur look. Britomart, far from bustling, was largely deserted. Another market open at the same time, in Parnell, Central Auckland, was extremely quiet. We knew that over the weekend there were also markets in Avondale, Takapuna, Pukekohe, Otara, Oratia, Silverdale, Browns Bay, Orewa, Aotea Square, Victoria Park, Alfriston, St Heliers, and Titirangi, all less than an hour from the heart of the city. Some operate for just one day per month. Perhaps markets have now reached saturation level. Maybe they are more successful in seasons when the holidays and beaches are not competition. Maybe 'seasonality' is re-interpreted for farmers' markets. One resident of Devonport told us about the excitement when the local wharf market opened, describing how very busy it was. 'But now the fashion is over' she suggested. 'Why go the farmers' market when you can buy the stuff cheaper, and any time that suits you, in the local shops?'

8. The rural idyll as nostalgia construct

The farmers' markets investigated for this paper demonstrate the commoditisation of notions of traditional rural spaces (physical and metaphorical) via a process of vernacular mobilization. Various geographers have addressed debates about a distinctive rural ideology (e.g. Little, Austin, 1996; Murdock, Pratt, 1993). As Jo Little and Patricia Austin (1996) explain, academic attempts to identify an underlying rural ideology dovetails with the political imperative of evaluating and negotiating the future of the countryside. Claudia Bell's research in New Zealand in the early 1990s located four extractable themes that underpinned rural way of life in this country. She identified and summarized these as distinction,

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mythology, belonging and nostalgia. These themes did not combine to create an 'ideal type; rather they helped explain the tenacity of the rural ideals from the past to the present (Bell 1993: 218). Bell found that the notions of rural were not spatially contiguous, but a media construct as well as a cultural construct, with nostalgia as the ruling paradigm. This included nostalgia for a sense of belonging to a local community. In this new century, farmers' markets have become an active response to these requirements. The very sustainability of the images and myths about rural way of life has been central to the creation of farmers' markets as a revised version of contemporary rural culture.

In the 1990s Claudia Bell and John Lyall (1997) investigated small towns' and rural district expressions of identity in New Zealand. The giant roadside markers usually referred to local agricultural or horticultural production (Big Things such as gigantic roadside cows, sheep, kiwifruit) or to locally-available seafood (trout, salmon, shellfish). They were constructed to explicitly denote place; to 'put the town on the map'. But they did nothing to further local incomes or community participation. The farmers' markets are far more effective in addressing these goals, creating a regular local event, generating income, incubating small businesses, and supplementing other local suppliers of fresh produce. A significant difference that this fieldwork has uncovered, though, is that where farmers' markets are springing up in New Zealand, they appear to be initiated by newcomers to districts. People moving into the countryside seem to have some notion of what country living *should* be like, or might include. They are taking an active role in creating local culture in rural spaces.

Interestingly, at none of the farmer markets visited for this research were there any written signs, pamphlets or verbal articulations of the market as part of a strategy to 'engage local communities in global resistance', as V. John puts it. She traces this as an agenda in the founding of the Byron Bay Market in Australia in 2002. At obviously affluent markets such as Clevedon and Matakana, the large four-wheel drive vehicles lining up to park, the huge new rural mansions, and the fact that so many Aucklanders visit as a weekend outing, indicates that food miles and fossil fuel consumption are not at the forefront of their concerns.

9. Generic country: past meets present

To develop the physical space of a farmers' market does not require daring or radical new concepts in design. In this genre of representation of the country, appropriate signifiers are readily available. The market customer is quickly immersed in interpretations of mythic 'country'. This is demonstrated in *Market Day, a taste of life at New Zealand farmers' markets* (Winn 2007), a book in which glossy photographs focus extensively on rustic elements: wicker baskets, gingham table cloths, vendors wearing pretty straw hats. Existing objects are re-invested with the desired abstract concept, 'rural'. There is no need to fabricate anything new. It is in the home kitchen, later, that the ingredients are dealt to by eager foodies using smart new high tech kitchen appliances. Hence for the consumer, two fantasies are realised: that escapist nostalgia present in the bustling 'country style' market; and equipment in the clinical kitchen that indicate that one is an extremely proficient restaurant-style cook. A romantic re-invention of the rural past been enjoyed at the market; the cosmopolitan skills of the present are exhibited in the designer home kitchen.

10. The symbolic countryside

We have long been subject to the use of 'country style' in supermarket items. Many grocery packages are decorated with images of the countryside, implying more than simply the place where their raw products are produced. Implicit messages are that the products are healthy, wholesome, and made only from natural ingredients via natural processes by clean healthy hard-working morally good country folk. Products available in New Zealand that try to make direct country associations include Country Bake biscuits, Country Fare bread, and Country Crock, a blend of margarine and butter. The latter combines the marvels of the new (low cholesterol, spreadable, scientifically formulated, urban produced, modern) with the 'goodness' of the old (pure, natural, from the country, part of New Zealand tradition). The 'country' groceries recall cosy country kitchens: safe, warm, good, and detached from present day perplexities.

If their role is to persuade potential consumers by image and packaging, then 'home down on the farm' both creates and reinforces current popular nostalgia. Nostalgia is exploited as the seductive component of consumer products, adding to

this a commodification opportunity. Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase (1989: 15) suggest that post-modernity is a time of macro-nostalgia; 'there is no space which we authentically occupy, and so popular culture fills the gap by manufacturing images of home and rootedness'.

For consumers, the process may be seen as an exercise in sentiment for the ways things were *not*, and a making of choices that eschew the contemporary, as current design is perceived as spare, geometric, and technological, and food heavily processed with an increasing range of chemical additives, and wearing far too much non-biodegradable packaging.

11. Conclusion

From research at farmers' markets in the north of the North Island, we conclude that, as Martin Phillips et al. claim, notions of the rural are social representations 'in that they are made by particular social groups and/or act to bolster the interests or fortunes of particular groups or social relations'. The term 'farmers' market' is probably not closely examined by most vendors and customers. They further observe that spatial metaphors and images of place 'can act to convey complex interpretations of social situations without people having to think deeply about them' (Phillips et al. 2001: 6).

Farmers' markets may be read as a potent symbol in the expression of the new middle class in New Zealand. This significant demographic includes affluent former city dwellers who restate their cultural capital by moving to a prosperous rural area, or by owning a second home in the country. The modest farm homes of rural dwellers in previous generations have been superseded by the enormous Tuscan style villas and 'grand homestead' architecture. These new rural dwellers are subscribing to both old and new myths about country living: to fictions about a gentle, wholesome life in the country and the new mores of rural based entrepreneurship. Extensive mobility through occupation, locality, and residence is redressed by the implied-fixedness of the local market, styled with material accoutrements to look as if it has always been there (barrels and cartwheels as casual outdoor decor!). The commoditisation of 'country style' at the burgeoning markets is another phase in New Zealand's on-going rural myth perpetuation process.

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