

Food cultures in Scotland

Report of a workshop held at the Food & Health Alliance
Conference 2009

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1. Introduction

This report summarises two workshops on food culture that took place at the Food & Health Alliance Conference 2009 (17th November). The workshops explored what we mean by food culture, what defines food cultures in Scotland, and the implications for efforts to promote sustainability and healthy eating.

Each hour-long workshop followed the same format. After discussing definitions of food culture and its importance to health and sustainability, participants mapped out aspects of Scottish food cultures in an interactive exercise.¹ The workshops then discussed the factors influencing these aspects of food culture, and which factors and influences should be seen as priorities when it comes to health and sustainability. The workshops ended by discussing how understanding these influences might help in promoting sustainability and public health.

This report sums up points to emerge from both workshops. Rather than giving a verbatim account it picks out the main points and joins the dots. As the insights emerging from the two workshops were complementary they are written up as one. We are very grateful to participants in the workshops for sharing their knowledge and experience, especially as this report does not attribute all their contributions. This report does not represent the views of the Food Ethics Council or its members.

2. Food culture in the National Food and Drink Policy

The background to the Food & Health Alliance Conference was the National Food and Drink Policy for Scotland – *Recipe for Success* – published in June 2009.²

Recipe for Success mentions culture only twice by name, both times in Richard Lochhead's Foreword to the report. First, he highlights the cultural importance of food production to Scotland – how the nation's identity at home and abroad is linked to iconic products such as beef, salmon and whisky.

Then Lochhead refers to “a strange Scottish paradox” that “despite producing fantastic food and drink we have one of the poorest diet-related health records in the developed world”. “Whatever the reasons for our dietary habits,” he says “our culture must change if we are to prosper as a nation”.

The remainder of the *Recipe for Success* report does not refer again specifically to culture. However, the cultural importance of food and a call for culture change are themes that run right at its heart. One of the report's next steps is particularly relevant, namely to “Improve consumer awareness and

¹ Around 20 people participated in each workshop. Most participants had a professional background in food and health, with a minority of participants regarding the environmental aspects of sustainability as their main interest.

² <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/06/25133322/11>

influence the reduction of excessive consumption of unhealthy, unsustainable foodstuffs. This includes developing suitable material targeting key moments in people's lives.”

3. Defining food culture

What is food culture? There is no single, snappy, widely-used definition of food culture. You might be able to sum it up as the **shared practices and meanings we attach to food**. These practices and meanings might be:

- Local, regional, national or global. Some aspects of food culture that are important in Scotland may also be important in some other countries, whereas others may be unique.
- Specific to a particular community or shared throughout many communities. Scotland has many food cultures, not one ‘Scottish food culture’.
- Public or private, open or hidden. For example, the fact that in dietary surveys people often under-report the amount that they eat suggests a degree of privacy around eating behaviour.
- About production or consumption. The focus of public health and sustainability debates is often on cultures of consumption. The National Food and Drink Policy considers the whole food chain, however, and different parts of the food sector – such as retail, catering and fishing – may have their own business cultures that affect sustainability and public health.
- Entrenched or short-lived. Cultures include elements of learned behaviour, not only from parent to child but across several generations. Youth cultures, on the other hand, are often regarded as transient. Arguably, they might be seen as consistently transient.
- Healthy or unhealthy, broad-minded or parochial, sustainable or unsustainable, and so on!

A key theme to emerge from the workshops is that understanding food culture is about understanding how real people eat and live. It is about getting to grips with the factors that make real life more complicated than behavioural models or policy papers. Furthermore, though food culture can be about any part of the food chain, it is important not to confuse Scotland's “reputation as a land of food and drink” – the picture on the shortbread box – for the reality of food consumption or production in this country.

4. Why does food culture matter?

When Richard Lochhead says in *Recipe for Success* that “our culture must change”, he is echoing a theme that is found in much of public health policy across the UK today. Our habits are an aspect of culture, and the aspiration to change public and consumer behaviour to become healthier and more sustainable is central to social marketing campaigns such as Scotland's Take Life On. It also

underpins the Sustainable Development Commission's work to promote sustainable consumption, including by encouraging retailers to 'choice edit' by taking unsustainable products off the shelves. Since food cultures are shaped by all kinds of factors such as income, housing, upbringing, working conditions and the local economy, a commitment to change culture implies much more than just tailoring messages about health or the environment to different audiences. Understanding how our attitudes and behaviours around food have changed can give us a sense of how to influence these factors and help us see where we might end up if our cultures don't change.

It is appropriate for government to try to make it easier for consumers to behave in ways that, as citizens, they would like themselves to be behave, even if that means changing culture. If some of our habits or attitudes are in effect anti-social, inasmuch as they contribute to wider social problems or block solutions, then understanding what drives or perpetuates those habits and attitudes is essential. However, policies that focus 'behaviour change' can come across as instrumental – changing people to fit the economic or political environment – or seem heavy-handed.

So the point of understanding food cultures isn't necessarily to change them. It might instead be to find better ways of working with food cultures. Food cultures can define and cement social relationships: as we face challenges around public health and sustainability are shared, those relationships are crucial to finding solutions.

Furthermore, the values and meanings people attach to food can matter in their own right, underpinning what people care about and even their identity, and deserve respect. Understanding and respecting cultural diversity – including in food cultures – is valuable whether or not directly supports healthy eating.

Culture often seems like the missing link – or the get-out clause – in debates about public health and sustainability. Explanations so often come back to 'culture'. But can't we unpack that? What features add up – perhaps more than the sum of their parts – to make Scotland's food cultures? What factors influence and underpin those features?

5. Scottish food cultures

To map the features that make up Scotland's food cultures and the influences on them, participants in the two workshops posted ideas on a large chart. The columns of the chart identified different parts of the food chain from primary production to waste disposal:

- Fishing and farming
- Manufacturing
- Catering
- Retailing
- Shopping
- Cooking

- Eating and drinking
- Disposing.

The rows expanded on the notions that culture is about meaning and practices by distinguishing the following aspects of food cultures:

- What we think: attitudes, beliefs, ideas
- What we do: practices, habits, behaviour
- When we do it: events, occasions, rituals, routines
- The stuff it involves: products, things.

Participants first discussed and identified features of Scottish food culture, posting labels naming each in the appropriate cell of the chart. Then they identified factors that influenced those features, clustering differently coloured labels around the relevant factors. Finally, using coloured stickers, they indicated which factors and features they felt were most important – positively or negatively – in influencing healthy eating and sustainability. The two wall charts this generated, with around 200 ideas between them, are shown on pp.7-8 for illustrative purposes (Figures 1-2: the detail is not legible at this scale).

The purpose of this process was to enable some structured reflection on Scottish food culture among participants. It was not designed to provide a rigorous analysis. That said, processing the ideas that were generated using tools designed visualising text can generate some helpful insights or, at least, allow others to share in that process of reflection.

Figure 3 on p.9 was generated from the workshop contributions using Wordle – a tool designed primarily to create attractive images, rather than to aid analysis. Wordle uses an algorithm to position and scale words and phrases. In creating this image from the ideas that participants posted on the chart, the following rules were followed:

- No distinction was drawn between the different rows of the chart (e.g. between attitudes and habits).
- The eight columns were amalgamated into three categories (production, retail and consumption).
- Production is green, retail is amber and consumption is red.
- Darker colours denote items that participants designated as features of food culture, whereas lighter colours designate the factors seen to influence them. Since some influences on food culture might also be seen as aspects of food culture (e.g. an attitude related to particular habits, or an iconic product the cements certain practices), these are overlapping categories and some items occur more than once in different colours and shades.
- The relative positioning of factors and influences does not represent their positioning on the chart.
- The size of the words and phrases approximately indicates the importance they were attributed by participants, adjusted to take into account variations in word length.

Figure 2. Chart produced during the second workshop. Yellow labels denote feature and pink denote influences.



6. Features and influences

The image of the highlights some of the aspects of food culture, and the influences on them, that participants felt were most important. To close the workshops, participants discussed a small number of highly rated influences in more detail. The aim of these discussions was to understand the levers for change – what influences the influences – that might be relevant to promoting healthy eating and sustainability.

The themes to emerge from this discussion were as follows.

Poverty

Poverty and low budgets were seen as a significant contributor to unhealthy eating. Participants discussed the need for structural changes to tackle poverty, such as redistributive taxation and changes in working practices, noting that people's discretionary income is key in shaping their food purchases. However, there was felt to be little political will for such measures. Participants also suggested ways of ameliorating the consequences of poverty, including through support with household budgeting and planning meals.

Transport and access

Problems of transport and food access were considered major contributors to unhealthy and unsustainable eating habits. The solutions were seen to lie in a wide array of initiatives ranging from urban grow-your-own projects and new concepts such as Landshare, to measures to improve the walkability of inner cities and have regular, accessible farmers' markets.

An ageing population was seen to be at increasing risk of food access problems. However, initiatives that encouraging different generations to cook together and share their skills were seen as important in challenging a 'can't cook, won't cook' mentality among younger and middle-aged people.

Eating on the hoof

Participants saw the practice of eating on the hoof as emblematic of the low value that many people and institutions attribute to food and to eating well. There is a culture of 'presenteeism' in workplaces, for example, and an expectation that lunch involves the speedy consumption of a quick filler. This was seen to be a relatively recent phenomenon, related to time pressures through changes in employment and family structure. However, it was also perpetuated in schools by short lunch breaks that encourage pupils to eat on the hoof.

Tatties

Potatoes – in contrast to iconic export products such as whisky, salmon and beef – was seen as an undervalued emblem of Scottish food culture. The role of potatoes as staple food was said to have declined, and potatoes were increasingly eaten in saltier and fattier forms as crisps and chips. Many children were thought now to have little idea of where potatoes come from and how they are grown. Yet, in some rural areas, potatoes are still highly valued. Participants called for the potato to be celebrated and promoted as a healthy staple food.

Supermarket profits

Supermarket profits were suggested on the chart to contribute to the relative under-promotion of healthier foods. Potential ways of influencing this were thought to include:

- Challenging shareholders' expectations on their return on investment.
- Campaigning on corporate social responsibility issues that are considered important to corporate reputation.
- Business regulation to affect the rules of the financial marketplace.
- Legislation on marketing, particularly the use of loss leaders.
- Encouraging consumers to demand healthier and more sustainable products, though recognising that retailers shape demand as well as responding to it.

Tokenism

Some participants felt that corporate initiatives to promote healthy eating were tokenistic, particularly because of the emphasis they placed on 'consumer choice', and because the benefits of healthy eating would be outweighed by unhealthy promotions. One participant described retailers offering cheap deals on alcohol during Alcohol Awareness week, for example. Other participants suggested that retailers were increasingly seeing commercial opportunities in selling healthier products and that the number of healthy eating initiatives by businesses suggested they were more than tokenistic.

Participants discussed the beneficial role that retailers could play in promoting healthy and sustainable eating. Examples included efforts to reduce the overall consumption of saturated fat and salt, and the initiative to reduce the use of plastic carrier bags.

7. Further information

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