The Stories We Tell
Consuming Food Knowledges
By: Sara Minard

By 10:30 on a Sunday morning in early November, twenty-four of us had gathered at Jeff's farm on the outskirts of Bloomington, Indiana to witness, help with, and learn from "The Pig's" demise. Among the crowd were independent small farmers, an eccentric professor-turned-self-survivalist, several cooks from nearby restaurants, a carpenter, a food scholar, a photographer from Chicago, a veterinarian and an artist. Walking down to the pasture where The Pig was laying in the sun, people were chatting excitedly.

We stood at the edge of the fence and gave The Pig last scratches and words of gratitude and thanks. Jeff lured him away from the crowd with a trail of marshmallows that ended at the barrel of a 357 pistol. Although we all knew what was coming, when the sound of the shot ricocheted through the air several of us jumped. More surprising was that a direct shot to the head was not enough to take down The Pig. He ran across his large pasture, where he was followed and shot again, after which he lay motionless in the tall grass.

Processing a hog by hand takes a long time. I had managed to live thirty-one years as a meat-eater without any hands-on experience in the conversion of whole animal to meat parts, so when offered the chance to take part in a hog slaughter at a friend's farm, I readily agreed. The desire to participate in such a gruesome task might strike an odd chord. By no means is it a requirement for my survival. At any time, any day, during any month of the year I choose, I can transport myself to a store where the work of dismantling has been done for me. So much so that I am hard pressed to think of a place where I might see a work still in progress, where the carcass has yet to be carved into neat packages. At the store, under the glare of the florescent lights, nestled in a bed of Styrofoam, abstracted animals wait to be taken home. Is this not the benefit of centralized processing? That someone else can do these things for me?

Contemporary modes of food production and provisioning changed the ways in which we know and relate to food in the United States. How have industrial forms of production...
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that it would not coagulate and could be used to make sausages by one of the chefs on hand.

quickly transferred to one-gallon buckets. Several people worked to hitch The Pig to a front-end

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This obliviousness is attributable, in part, to the ways in which concentrated and

industrialized farming operations have delimited the range and depth of information

transmitted to consumers through spatial, temporal and social dislocation. When it comes to

meat, this distancing might be aided by the fact that per capita meat consumption nearly

tripled in the developed between 1971 and 1995 (Delgado 1999). During this time,

industrial agriculture became the dominant mode of farming and its hyper-efficiency drove

down commodity costs (Lyson and Geisler 1992). Meat, especially, was aggressively

marketed and the low prices, large portions and easy access positioned as a form of

personal freedom for the American consumer (Gouveia and Juska 2002). Concurrently,

agricultural production intensified and consolidated onto larger farms. In 1900, 41% of the

United States workforce was employed in agriculture. By 2002, that number stood at 1.9%

(Dimitri, Effland and Conklin 2005). As a result, American citizens have less and less

points of connection with agricultural production, and a diminished awareness of the

pressures food places on the land and people who produce it.

While I set out to document, with words and photographs, the slaughtering of a hog, I also

want to explore how this firsthand exploit collapsed the distance between production and

consumption and led to insights about the economy of knowledge in industrial and localized

farming systems. What are the differences in the knowledges traded in short and long chain

systems of provision (Fine 1997)? The focus commodity is meat, however the general points

can be applied to the United States’ agricultural system at large. My desire is not to exhaust

this topic with expertise, but rather to ask more questions than I answer and identify future

routes of inquiry.

The Pig’s jugular slit, and I was charged with catching the blood in a large silver bowl, which I

quickly transferred to one-gallon buckets. Several people worked to hitch The Pig to a front-end

loader for transport to the processing area while I stirred white vinegar into the blood, hoping

that it would not coagulate and could be used to make sausages by one of the chefs on hand.

We formed a procession behind the tractor, and I could not help noticing how The Pig’s nose

was just grazing the ground as it moved across the pasture, and how the blood in the bucket

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In his 1986 preface to the book The Social Life of Things, cultural anthropologist Appadurai

explores the topics of food, proximity and knowledge, arguing that commodities, such as
food in a market-based society, are embodied, socially-comprised knowledges that change in space and time. Producers have the knowledge of fabrication or production. They know how to extract, grow, create and so on. At the other end of the commodity cycle, consumers know what to consume and how. An important point that Appadurai highlights is that proximity and distance tend to influence how much these knowledges diverge from one another.

Space, according to Appadurai, can be operationalized in three distinct ways. This space can be social, as between members of different social classes or different ethnic groups. Space can be realized geographically, from rural to urban settings, region-to-region, or country-to-country. Space may also be temporal when the event of production is separated in time from the point of consumption. While all of these factors have individual impacts, it is reasonable to assume that the distancing effects are exacerbated when combined.

Turning back to meat this theory is easily illustrated. Although somewhat reductive, consider the following examples and the divergence in the range of knowledge each presents:

- A shopper at the local grocery wishes to purchase pork chops for dinner. The animal has been farmed on a rurally situated CAFO in a neighboring state and processed in another by immigrant laborers. Three days later the shopper selects their desired cut out of the cooler at the store.
- A participant in a meat share scheme purchases one quarter of a hog. They are given the opportunity to visit the farm where the hog is raised as well as ask questions of the farmer regarding livestock management and production philosophies. Once the hog has reached desired weight, the producer takes it to a federally inspected processing facility where another party butchers the hog. The consumer travels to the farm and picks up their portion, which comes to them in an assortment of parts.
- A hog farmer decides to cull one of her herd to stock her own freezer. In order to save a processing fee, she decides to butcher the animal herself.

All three groups present very different proximities in relation to the endpoints of production and consumption. While I do not intend to suggest that the distribution of knowledge is uniform or predictable, it is possible to see how differing points of relation between production and consumption work to change the perspectives of both producers and consumers.

The most arduous and time-consuming part of the process was removing the stiff bristles that covered The Pig’s body. We could have skinned The Pig, however several chefs in attendance decried the shortcut. They pointed out the two inches of pork fat that envelop the hair follicles, which would otherwise be lost in the skinning process, are valuable in curing and cooking. Besides, in order to skin a pig it must be well chilled, and we lacked a refrigerated space to accommodate the body. We were also without a pot large enough to dip the pig into scalding water, which would have loosened the bristles and expedited our work. Instead, one person monitored the seething cauldron set over a wood fire and ferried hot water to pour over the pig. Meanwhile several people took turns at the exhausting job of raking the skin with bell scrapers and assorted knives. Two hours, ten logs, several expletives and one suture-worthy injury later, we had managed to debristle The Pig.

With a gambrel spreading the hind legs, the carcass was once again hoisted into the air with the front-end loader. In order to prevent fecal contamination of edible internal organs such as the heart, kidneys and liver, the large intestine must be cinched at the anus, a process referred to as “tying off the bung”. One chef with prior experience in the process advised a novice while onlookers crowded around them and onto a nearby platform. With the bung tied, the chef carved through the groin and belly of the pig, exposing the many-hued viscera contained within.

Geographers Cook and Crang open up the discussion of “geographical knowledges” (1996).
They posit that as commodities move from producers to consumers, production knowledges transmute through socially and politically constructed filters that articulate the knowledge of consumption. Consider the ways in which a single commodity, in this case sausage, may be filtered by advertisers targeting different markets. Brand P might frame itself as a budget option for busy mothers with hungry children, Brand I might capitalize on an association with manly men in plaid shirts eating manly meat, Brand G might appeal to “eco-conscious” consumers and deploy imagery of happy swine gallivanting though open fields filled with sunshine and flowers. One sausage, three ways. The irony of this is swine production is heavily concentrated and vertically integrated and all three versions could have been manufactured out of the same stock or facility.

While some commodities are separated from their means of production on their path to consumption (Hartwick 2000), not all foods are decoupled from the processes of production. Often food marketing chooses to capitalize on various parts of the production process, such as place of origin, which can create an aura of exoticism when visual imagery is employed. Conventional and organic food producers might portray the fruits in their juices as handpicked by a cheery farmer, rather than the reality of the low-paid field worker. Retail outlets position an image of a palm-lined waterfall next to a stack of imported coconut water. These powerful associations draw upon often naïve social constructs and obscure the harsher realities of production practices (ibid.).

We see local food purveyors exploit the tension between productive and consumptive knowledge. Egg sellers at the local market might display photographs of hens running though long grasses in pursuit of insects and other delectables. This imagery undoubtedly appeals to consumers who know that not all hens have this freedom in their egg-laying lives, but the pleasing imagery might also help to sell the eggs to a consumer whose politics are not part of their purchasing decisions. The local cheesemaker may draw on consumer knowledge in advertising his cheese as “unpasteurized” or “raw”. Both these producers rely on imagery and transmitted knowledge of production to differentiate their goods from other modes of production, a tactic that relies on consumers with a certain set of pre-existing consumption knowledges.

Popular forms of media such as cooking shows and magazines transmit knowledges of food use and consumption. It is not uncommon these days to see them extol the glories of “local” and seasonal foods. Glossy shots of sunburned farmers extending a handful of dew wet berries, or on-camera famous chefs slicing up heirloom tomatoes, take advantage of narrowed distance between production and consumption knowledges (Gouveia and Juska 2002). Unfortunately, the audiences for these outlets can be fairly specific, and contribute to the stereotype that these foods are for an elite consumer (Bourdieu 1984, Guthman 2002). Elitism, however, is not always the charge when it comes to cooking shows. Anyone who has seen Sandra Lee’s show Semi-Homemade on Food Network has learned that convenience food shortcuts can take on the appearance of the scratch-cooked meal. Straddling the local/organic conventional/convenience divide is the magazine Eating Well, a periodical that focuses on the nutritive and “life-saving” qualities of foods, regardless of the origin or production methods.

A cast-iron pan heated over the fire, slicked with The Pig’s fat. The liver, easily identifiable in its large singularity, dropped in. The other organs were more difficult to distinguish, and the veterinarian was called upon for her expertise. The chef cut free two kidneys and the heart, which he set aside for future use. He held up the omentum to catch the fall afternoon sun, its lacy pinkness transfixing the younger chefs. At this, the conversation regarding Pig switched from current event to future possibility, and they mused animatedly about pates and other caul-wrapped forcemeats. As they chatted, the chef used first a sharp knife, then a bone saw to detach Pig’s head from his body and one-by-one removed his trotters.

The average supermarket in the United States stocked 48,750 items in 2009 (FMI 2010), so it is not hard to imagine that these knowledges of consumption might overwhelm a consumer. This may be especially true when food items are subjected to competing moral
discourses of “good” and “bad” in relation to often conflicting conceptual categories such as environmental impact; local, state, national or global economy; personal health or finance; social or animal welfare and authenticity. This matter is further complicated by the fact that knowledges are socially uneven in their distribution (Cook, Crang and Thorpe 1998).

In response to this information overload, consumers often look to arbiters to impart trusted information (Eden, Bear and Walker 2008). This operates as a sort of shortcut guide in purchasing and consumption decision-making. Arbiters may be institutions in the form of Fair Trade schemes or organic certification, food literature such as Myra Goodman’s The Earthbound Cook: 250 Recipes For Delicious Food And A Healthy Planet (2010), Dr. Oz’s You: On a Diet: The Owner’s Manual To Waist Management (2006) or Alice Water’s The Art of Simple Food: Notes, Lessons, and Recipes From A Delicious Revolution (2007), retail outlets like farmer’s markets, ethnic markets or Costco, or ideological concepts of “localism,” “terroir,” “sustainable,” “non-GMO” or “humane.” Several researchers have cautioned against an overreliance on these forms of default shorthand (Eden, Bear and Walker 2008, Feagan 2007, Guthman 2002, Roff 2007). Buck, Getz and Guthman (1997) noted the way that organic certification underwent conceptual restructuring once large agribusinesses sought entry into the market, ending in regulation focused on inputs rather than holistic practice. An adherence to idealistic and inflexible localism can overlook the ways in which elite interests operating at the local level may exclude competing agendas or how localism does not necessarily correlate to social justice or humane treatment (Dupuis and Goodman 2005). Moreover, a quest to provide healthy food for one’s family may override concerns for the economic welfare of unseen strangers (Jackson, Ward and Russell 2009). It should not come as a surprise that people are either confused about what they should eat or they blithely ignore the issue altogether.

We brought Pig into a room inside the main barn that had been constructed specifically for butchering. A large drain stood in the center of the poured concrete floor and stainless steel counters ran the length of the room. On top of one of these counters, Pig was carved into his more familiar supermarket parts. One-by-one hams, bacon, fatback, tenderloin, loin roast, ribs, spareribs, shoulder and flank were rinsed, portioned and either cryovaced for the future, or put into hotel pans for transport to the restaurant.

I was given a loin roast on my way out, as thanks for participating in the event and lending a hand when needed. The meat inside was neither warm nor cool, but matched the ambient temperature inside the room. I found this a bit unsettling, and realized I was used to meat either hot from cookery, or cold from the refrigerator or freezer. I thought about Pig leaning against the fence earlier in the morning, and marveled at the collective exertion it took to reduce him to the lukewarm package I carried home.

Much food scholarship today seems focused on the global/industrial local/sustainable debate. Academics expend many hours and words on vilifying or lionizing the impacts of either extreme. When it comes to how we “know” our food, it is without question that industrialized food systems can hide from our view the social, environmental and economic impacts of production which, in turn, allows us to conveniently disregard the consequences of much of what we eat. Even within local food systems, knowledges are manipulated or hidden or they don’t reach all consumers equally. As the debate rages on, and we continue to see the social, environmental and economic consequences our diets have on the world around us and I cannot help but think of our food system as a drowning swimmer and the scholars as observers on the beach, arguing about who is best suited to go into the water.

The Pig – or at least the portion of him that is in my freezer – and I share a bond that I lack with other foods I eat. I know exactly where he was raised, that he subsisted on food scraps from area restaurants and sororities, who owned him, how old he was at slaughter, the way in which he was killed and butchered and how this food moved from the farm to my home. My experience on the farm effectively closed the gap between production and consumption, and I know The Pig’s complete biography.
All foods have biographies, and all biographies are constructed as foods make their way from earth to mouth. Whether global or local, who, what and where these biographies are created are fruitful inquiries, worthy of academic exploration and pragmatic application. Additionally, if we, as food scholars, endeavor to create a more sustainable food system for all people, we need to focus on how these histories are received, understood or overlooked so that we can begin to tighten the feedbacks between our stomachs and the rest of the world.

Works Cited


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Stories We Tell explores the elusive nature of truth and memory, but at its core is a deeply personal film about how our narratives shape and define us as individuals and families, all interconnecting to paint a profound, funny and poignant picture of the

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