Eating as a Cultural Performance in Early 21st Century New Zealand:
An Exploration of the Relationships between Food and Place

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Social Anthropology at Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand

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Abstract

During New Zealand’s comparatively short history as a nation, its cuisine has undergone great development. The culinary traditions brought by the early settlers, from both Eastern Polynesia and then Britain, offered a relatively limited variety, however, since the late 20th century New Zealand’s foodways have undergone a revolution; today a smorgasbord of international cuisines awaits our selection. This gastronomic range is the result of a number of factors which include the influx of diverse immigrants, increased air travel by New Zealanders, the return of military personnel from overseas and globalisation.

To conduct this investigation of the relationships between people, identity, food and place I approach the topic from three perspectives. Firstly, I examine how exotic foods are used to link immigrants to New Zealand with loved ones in their homelands, and also how the same foods act as a bridge between those immigrants and other New Zealanders. Secondly, I look at how exotic foods serve to connect New Zealanders with, generally, far-away places, as through its evocative powers food has the ability to transport ordinary people to places where they may rather be. Lastly, I explore how some New Zealanders are making exotic foods ‘ours’ by combining them with the abundance of fresh local produce. Appropriating the exotic and combining it with the indigenous to make it ours is the story of New Zealand; our society has developed through the arrival of many people and cultures, and food is a lens through which to observe this process today.

This work differs from many ethnographic accounts in that it does not focus on a coherent group of people, but rather is based around the theme of food and eating in the New Zealand context. The thesis is the culmination of approximately twelve months of data gathering for which a multi-method approach was used. This process included: a review of both academic and popular literature; visits to food-related places such as cultural festivals, wine and food festivals, Agricultural and Pastoral Shows, Home Shows, community markets, farmers’ markets, various Auckland supermarkets, ethnic food stores, specialty food shops; mainstream and ethnic cafés and restaurants, shopping centre food courts and various other miscellaneous places; attending different ethnic cooking courses and a series of semi-structured interviews. The interview process used different interviewee configurations: individuals, married couples and pairs, in an attempt to generate various perspectives and so enhance the data.

The thesis concludes that, firstly, exotic foods represent a means by which immigrants are able to connect with both loved ones remaining in the old home, and also to form new relationships with other New Zealanders in their new home. Secondly, exotic foods, through either their consumption or through people’s memories of consumption, provide a bridge between New Zealanders and other places. Lastly, New Zealanders are increasingly taking exotic foods, combining them with the nation’s abundant local and unique indigenous foodstuffs and making it ours.
The completion of this thesis not only represents a personal academic milestone, but also, until comparatively recently, an unimaginable personal achievement. However, this accomplishment would not have been realised without the generous assistance of numerous others; accordingly, I wish to express my sincere appreciation. To my interviewees who kindly allowed me the privilege of entering their homes or workplaces, to entrust me with their, often intimate, thoughts and feelings, I offer my sincere thanks; I will remain humbled and honoured to have met such incredible people. To my supervisor, Associate Professor Kathryn Rountree, I offer my heartfelt thanks for her belief in me and for encouraging me to undertake this challenge. I truly appreciate the enduring dedication, understanding, enthusiasm, direction and inspiration she offered throughout my study which far exceeded any expectations or requirements. I wish to extend my gratitude to anthropology staff members Dr Eleanor Rimoldi and Dr Graeme Macrae, and to my peer group of post-graduate anthropology students at Massey University in Albany. Through various seminars and social occasions their friendship, support and energy created proved invaluable. This study was financially supported by a Massey University Masterate Scholarship, for which I have been most grateful. Lastly, to my grand-daughter Phoebe (my frequent study buddy), and to my three wonderful daughters and their partners, for their continuous encouragement and support, and to my husband (and unofficial research assistant), who instigated my academic study and has supported me unconditionally throughout this amazing journey, I thank you all and return your love and affection.
Table of Contents

Abstract  
Acknowledgements  
Table of Contents  
List of Figures

Chapter One  Introduction  
  Aims of the Thesis  
  Choice of Topic  
  Methods  
  The Field Context  
  Interviews  
  Significance of Research

Chapter Two  Literature Review  
  Part One: General  
  Food and Social Class  
  Food and Gender  
  Food and Memory  
  Food, Commensalism and Sociability

  Part Two: New Zealand Literature  
  New Zealand Culture  
  Origins of New Zealand’s Food Traditions  
  Maori Food and Cookery  
  Early European Settlers’ Food and Cooking  
  Changes in Food Traditions in New Zealand
### Chapter Six Conclusion

### Appendices

- **Appendix A**  
  Information Sheet  
  203
- **Appendix B**  
  Interview Guide - Immigrants  
  205
- **Appendix C**  
  Interview Guide - General New Zealanders  
  206
- **Appendix D**  
  Interview Guide - Chefs  
  207
- **Appendix E**  
  Interview Guide - Specialty Food Outlet, Farmers’ Market, Self-Service Meal Preparation  
  208
- **Appendix F**  
  Interview Guide - Epicurean Delight  
  209
- **Appendix G**  
  Exotic Food Sheet  
  210

### References

  211
List of Figures

All photographs were taken by the author during the period of fieldwork.

Figure 1: Preserves competition at the Helensville A & P Show (February 2008) 13
Figure 2: Exotic and local vegetables at Franklin Market (January 2009) 14
Figure 3: A shopper with a laden trolley at Avondale Market (October 2008) 15
Figure 4: Eating was extremely popular at Auckland’s Diwali Festival (October 2008) 20
Figure 5: A menu of Scottish and New Zealand fare at the Waipu Highland Games (January 2009) 21
Figure 6: Ingredients to prepare Chicken Penang Curry and Thai Fish Cakes at a Thai cooking class (September 2008) 23
Figure 7: Eritrean coffee ceremony at Auckland’s International Cultural Festival (March 2009) 51
Figure 8: Vines growing in Central Otago (November 2008) 69
Figure 9: Exotic foods, such as olives, sun-dried tomatoes and capers in a Queenstown specialty shop (November 2008) 78
Figure 10: A food stall at Auckland’s Diwali Festival (sweets displayed on right) (October 2008) 97
Figure 11: Fresh produce and spices, such as Asian greens and various exotic mushrooms at Avondale Market (October 2008) 102
Figure 12: Exotic Christmas foods, including Panettone and Italian nougat, in Liz’s showroom (December 2008) 126
Figure 13: Shopping and relaxing at Hawke’s Bay Farmers’ Market (January 2009) 142
Figure 14: Al fresco dining in Germany (June 2008)

Figure 15: Maori cuisine is gaining prominence in New Zealand in diverse ways (Waipu, January 2009)

Figure 16: Seasonal exotic and local produce at Hawke’s Bay Farmers’ Market (January 2009)

Figure 17: New Zealand food in a New Zealand shop in London (June 2008)

Figure 18: A Queenstown café offers a selection of wild foods (November 2008)