

## FROM BANANAS TO BIRYANI

### The creation of Woolgoolga Curryfest as an expression of community

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#### *Abstract*

Since the 1940s, a Punjabi Sikh subculture has been a part of the community of Woolgoolga, just north of Coffs Harbour in northern coastal New South Wales (NSW). This began with their relocation to Woolgoolga to farm bananas. Today the area boasts the largest regional Sikh settlement in Australia, and although banana farming continues to be an important aspect of Sikh life, these original families and other newcomers have diversified and branched out into other aspects of community existence. In an area with a growing regional population and an economy largely centred on food production, services and tourism, the 'regional festival culture' has been embraced as a way to reflect and create notions of community, as well as attract interest from visitors drawn to the multicultural township. This article considers the festival as not only a case study in the expansion of regional food cultures, but also identifies Curryfest as a conduit for the promotion of Woolgoolga as a unique and diverse community. It is important to note that definitions of 'community' will always be contested, as will issues over who has the right to represent a particular community. Understandings of multiculturalism can also be visited here but we suggest that it is important not to dismiss the official project of multiculturalism in Australia as being superficial and of limited value. The social significance of food demands that any exchange of culinary practices should in fact be given recognition as an important and potentially powerful social force.

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## **Introduction**

The number of food festivals in Australia has been growing rapidly over the past twenty years, and promoters in many regions understand the ways in which food tourism enhances a region's tourism experience. The Woolgoolga Curryfest was first held in the small NSW coastal town of Woolgoolga, near Coffs Harbour, in 2006, and has since expanded to become a major drawcard for the north coast area. However, the Woolgoolga Curryfest not only presents a case study in the expansion of regional food cultures, it can also be examined in terms of the appropriation of Sikhism to promote Woolgoolga as a diverse community and a multicultural destination. This article explores the role of food as an important means of community integration, especially for those from migrant traditions. It examines the way in which the Sikh community has found its place in this regional area, despite rocky beginnings. Festivals create and reflect a community's imagined self. Woolgoolga Curryfest offers an example of such imaginings; it portrays how a community wants to see itself and how it promotes itself to the 'outside' world.

Food is so much more than what we consume to sustain ourselves and meet nutritional demands—it is “a highly condensed social fact” (Appadurai, 1981: 494), crucial to the interpretation of any culture or community. Menell's (2010) work on the culinary cultures of Europe confirms this role of food in creating and reinforcing social identity. Once we start to unravel the multiplicity of social and cultural meanings and uses of food, many research topics unfold: Germov and Williams argue that “food and eating are imbued with social meanings and are closely associated with people's social interactions in both formal and informal settings” (Germov and Williams, 2010: 6).

Recent studies have begun to highlight the importance and values of food in the creation and constant reconfiguration of identity (Mintz and Du Bois, 2002), and the important role that food plays in migrant experiences (Kalcik, 1984; Kershan, 2002;

Fernandez-Armesto, 2002). When migrants travel to new homelands they take with them many aspects of their cultural background in their minds and bodies. This can include music, dance and, of course, food. Like other traditions, ways of eating are passed down from family member to family member. Food traditions will also evolve over time and will adapt to take into account availability of produce and cooking tools. The negotiation of hybridised identities, the making of new connections to place and communities, and the reflection of the home country, are amongst the many tasks that food takes on. As a very real and visible marker of ethnicity, like clothing and music, food “is a powerful reminder of home and become[s] even more intensely important to immigrants” (Lessinger, 1995: 32). This idea of food as an essential marker of cultural identity in diaspora communities is explored by Vue et al.’s (2011) study of Hmong migrants in the United States (US), where participants stated, “food is us, helping us remember who we are” (Vue et al., 2011: 3).

The foodways of the Indian subcontinent have reached many parts of the world (Sen, 2004). Like all other nations, India has no single cuisine. The use of ‘curry’ as an all-encompassing signifier for Indian food—and, by extension, Indian culture—has a long history. As Narayan notes, curry as it existed in Victorian Britain, after its importation from the Indian subcontinent following colonialism, was a “fabricated entity” (Narayan, 1995: 64), with the resulting curry powder mixes and methods of food preparation incorporated into British cuisine usually bearing little resemblance to the authentic dish. In Britain as in other diasporic communities, the rich diversity of the many cuisines and foodways of India were often homogenised into a generalised mix. The adventurous cooks were incorporating the Other into the Self, on the Self’s terms, “a pattern not too different from the way in which India itself was ingested into empire” (Narayan, 1995: 64). Throughout the world, diasporic Indian communities have kept their food traditions alive as a way to connect to their homeland and generations past. Krishnendu Ray’s account of the foodways of Bengali immigrants in the US deals with food more specifically as “a place-making practice” (Ray, 2004: 5).

In Australia, curry has existed in one form or another for over a century. The first Australian cookery book, Edward Abbot's 1864 publication *English and Australian Cookery Book: Cookery for the Many as well as the 'Upper Ten Thousand'*, includes rabbit curry (in which the principal flavouring is curry powder). Since then, however, immigrating cooks have brought more authenticity, subtlety and complexity to Australian Indian cuisine. Anita Mannur's text *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* opens a discussion of how food can be seen as one of the central parts of identity for diasporic Indians, "performing cultural identity" (Mannur, 2010: x). Sharing food with others becomes an important way of ensuring the continuation of food cultures; indeed, food can be seen as "ethnicity at its most shareable" (van den Berghe, 1984: 296). Indian food in Australia, prepared by Indian diasporic communities, that is offered to non-Indian Australians in food festivals, performs even more complex acts. Within her influential work on culinary cultural histories and the transformation of diaspora communities in Australia, Jean Duruz suggests that here, "the 'other' may be foregrounded as exotic object of desire, temptingly displayed, its commodified meanings available for consumer appropriation" (Duruz, 1999: 309).

A brief discussion on cultural appropriation is relevant here. In their study on the use of Hindu imagery by the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Sleaze Ball, Velayutham and Wise (2001: 143) suggest there is a fine line between cultural enrichment and problematic appropriation. This relates directly to the official project of multiculturalism in Australia that seeks to promote cultural difference by 'allowing' different cultures to maintain their own traditions whilst at the same time enriching the lives of 'white Australia' through the consumption of the exotic Other (Wise, 2011). In the case of the Sleaze Ball, some members of the Australian Hindu community were highly offended by the 'Homosutra' themed event. The Mardi Gra's organisers responded by stating that they did not intend to cause offence and that they, as a marginalised group, understood the importance of protecting and promoting diversity. In contrast, food festivals are generally much safer cultural events for channelling cultural 'borrowings.'

Food has often been a key ingredient in the perpetuation of multiculturalism in Australia. *A Taste of Harmony* is an Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship sponsored event that seeks to give:

*all Australian businesses the opportunity to recognise and celebrate cultural diversity, with the aim of achieving greater understanding and appreciation of what has, and continues to be, a key strength of our nation.* (Scanlon, 2012: online)

It does so by encouraging employees to bring culturally diverse food to work to share with colleagues on National Harmony Day (21 March). Although critics of the official project of multiculturalism might suggest that food is a superficial and somewhat limited means of engaging in cultural exchange (Wise, 2011), we suggest it could potentially lead to the multicultural priority that is the “day-to-day engagement with, and openness to, the plurality and porousness of ‘real live Others’” (Velayutham and Wise, 2001: 155). Appadurai asserts “[f]easting is a great mark of social solidarity” (1988: 11), therefore food festivals, especially those embedded in diverse cultural traditions, can surely act as a catalyst to promote a deeper level of cultural understanding and lived experiences.

## **Woolgoolga and its Sikh community**

The case study at the heart of this article focuses on the Indian diasporic community in Woolgoolga. Woolgoolga is a small town, with a population of around 5000 people. Settlement began in the 1870s for cedar cutting and farming, but significant development did not occur until the 1970s, and the population of the area has grown significantly in the past 20 years. The town is named from the local Gumbayngirr name for the lillypilly plant. A marketing action plan commissioned for Woolgoolga describes the town as “a beachside village with all the allure of a bygone era. Simple pleasures abound, and the charmed essence of relaxed, lazy afternoons is evident” (R&S Muller Enterprises, 2011: 8). The Coffs Harbour City Council’s marketing describes it as “a unique locality nestled between beaches and surrounding hills filled with banana farms, both providing beautiful views and atmosphere for

Woolgoolga” (Coffs Harbour City Council, 2004: 27). As well as its laidback lifestyle and banana farms, Woolgoolga is also the home of the most well known Sikh community in regional Australia.

The Sikh religion began in the 13th century in the Punjab region of northwest India. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact date of early Punjabi Sikh arrivals to some areas of Australia and a great deal of myth surrounds their entry. Fieldwork carried out by Marie de Lepervanche in Woolgoolga in the late 1960s–early 1970s reveals some of the mystique linked to the arrival of ‘the grandfathers’:

*When questioned about the earliest members of their families to enter this country, household-heads told me that their grandfathers came first, ‘everybody had a grandfather’, all of whom came to Australia ‘in 1901... A villager in the Punjab heard from some British officials that there was work in Australia... Thus a collection of grandfathers boarded a boat, and they all set sail and arrived in 1901, i.e. before the white Australia policy became operative. (de Lepervanche, 1984: 26–27)*

Sikhs began immigrating to the Woolgoolga area to farm bananas in the post-World War Two period (Bilmoria, 1996). Most of those arriving had already been residing in Australia, in many cases working on cane farms in Queensland and northern NSW (de Lepervanche, 1984). By the 1960s the Woolgoolga Sikh community was the single largest one in the country. Nowadays 90% of the 250 banana farms in Woolgoolga are owned by Sikhs. Around 1000 Sikh people live in Woolgoolga within the Coffs Harbour local government area (which has 70,000 people). The 2006 census data reveals 9.7% of Woolgoolga residents are Sikhs (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Woolgoolga is the location of Australia’s first two Sikh temples (*Gurdwaras*), which are the main cultural and religious centres of the Sikh community (Akaal and Moore, 1995). There are important cultural links to land within the Sikh community: a strong individual and family connection to the land is related to the farming tradition that originates from the Punjab homeland. Whilst agriculture accounts for 16% of the jobs in Woolgoolga (Manidis Roberts Consultants, 2007), some of the banana farms are being replaced by blueberry plantations, which are proving more profitable.

The recent migration of retirees and downsizers from cities and southern areas of Australia to the Coffs Coast (Kijas, 2002) is changing the makeup of the Woolgoolga community, as is the settlement of humanitarian entrants now making their homes in the area. These more recent arrivals in the Coffs Harbour Local Government Area come from a diverse range of countries including Sudan, Togo, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Burundi, and Burma (North Coast Settlement Service, p.c. January 2012). More specifically Woolgoolga has, in the last five years, become home to families from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. This further contributes to the diversity of the local community and poses more questions about how to define community (Van der Veer, 2004).

Woolgoolga has previously suffered from a reputation as the ‘poor cousin’ of the thriving Coffs Harbour city, and initiatives to regenerate the economic base of Woolgoolga have been welcome. In an area with a growing regional population and an economy largely centred on food production, services and tourism, the concept of a regional festival culture has been embraced as a way to both reflect notions of community and attract interest from visitors drawn to the multicultural township.

### **Festival beginnings**

John Jorahvar Singh Arkan is a Woolgoolga resident and community leader. He runs a catering business, taking his popular *samosas* (fried or baked pastries) and curries to local festivals and markets. A third generation Sikh-Australian, his grandfather immigrated to Australia in 1902. Arkan and his family are prominent within a broad range of activities in Woolgoolga and Coffs Harbour. He is an independent Councillor on the Coffs Harbour City Council, and is the first Australian of Sikh background to be elected to an Australian local government body. He was an Independent Candidate for the Federal Government seat of Cowper in the last election. Arkan also belongs to the Woolgoolga Chamber of Commerce. He proposed the idea of a festival to the Chamber of Commerce in late 2005, and a sub-committee was formed to organise the event, which, Arkan said, was planned as a “method of social inclusion of the local Sikh community” (p.c. August 2011). From this beginning, the Woolgoolga Curryfest was established in 2006, and since then has

been held every year on a Saturday close to 13 April, to coincide with Vaisakhi (the traditional Sikh festival of the religion's founding, and the most significant date in the Sikh calendar, dating from 1699).

Joanne Forrest was the secretary of the sub-committee at the festival's inception, and acted as its co-ordinator for a number of years. She believed that one of the driving motivators of the Chamber of Commerce was to try to improve employment in the region. She also believed that the town needed promotion as distinct from nearby towns of Coffs Harbour (which was already running a number of regular festivals) and Sawtell (which had successfully established a Chilli Festival). To make this distinction, Arkan's proposal for a regular event that highlighted Sikh contributions to the community was readily accepted, according to Forrest:

*Because it already had this established Sikh community, with very recognised events within their calendar and we thought we needed to bring this out in Woolgoolga and give Woolgoolga a point of interest. And so in brainstorming it seemed like an obvious thing that we focus on curry because that was something that was natural to the Sikh community. (p.c. 2 November 2011)*

After three years of management by the Chamber of Commerce sub-committee, the festival became incorporated in 2009. The event still uses the name and backing of the Chamber of Commerce but now partially pays for the event itself, partly through the introduction of a two-dollar entry fee in 2009. Other funding has been provided by external funding bodies along the way: the committee members were successful in obtaining an AUD 30,000 Regional Development grant to run the festival. They have also received a Mid North Arts Council Grant and funding from Festivals Australia, along with small grants from the Coffs Harbour City Council for three years.

## **The Sikh Community and Woolgoolga**

The Sikhs of Woolgoolga play an integral part in their community life on both an economic and cultural level. Arkan believes that "the Sikh people in our area are

really well accepted and liked” (‘Sikking Woopi’, 2009). But acceptance into this small regional community has not always been so apparent, as de Lepervanche’s fieldwork from the 1960s documents the unease that many Sikhs experienced in Woolgoolga. Her arrival in the town in 1968 coincided with a screening of an ABC (public television) documentary depicting Woolgoolga as a village wrought with racism and prejudice. Indian exclusion from the local bowling club and Returned Services League branch further divided the town along ethnic lines (de Lepervanche, 1984). But Woolgoolga, like Australia more broadly, has evolved considerably since such times when sentiment from the White Australia policy still lingered. The recent promotion of Curryfest as a symbol of community demonstrates a change in values in regional Australia, values that embrace cultural diversity, whilst it reminds us how a history of colonialism continues to shape our everyday lives.

Many recent studies of community have focused on the connections between identity and place, questioning its character as a historically, and geographically, situated and theoretically contested idea. The community of locality is often equated with identity, feeling a sense of commitment to the places we inhabit. As Dixon and Durrheim remind us, “Questions of ‘who we are’ often intimately related to questions of ‘where we are’” (2000: 27). The festival was born out of the evolving shared narrative of Woolgoolga, and a collective understanding of meaning in people-place relationships to their environment. Simply residing in the same geographic area does not necessarily create community, but it can provide a good starting point to develop deeper community engagement. From Forrest’s point of view:

*The Sikh community had been contributing to Woolgoolga and supporting Woolgoolga through industry and their community and running parallel to everyone else. And we felt that there had come a time when some of those railway lines had crossed over temporarily, we wanted to make it something that was more thematic, and more ownership, we wanted the Sikh community to feel that they had control over what our festival was doing and that it represented their ideals and also it demystified a lot of what Sikhism is. (p.c. November 2011)*

In order to involve members of the Sikh community, the sub-committee worked hard at making it easy for Sikhs to see how they could embrace the concept of the festival. Arkan believes that the social inclusion of the Sikh community was the most important thing for the initial success of the festival (p.c. August 2011). When Arkan initially raised the idea for an event, some older members of the Sikh community questioned him as to why he was promoting it—they thought that he was “selling his Sikhism”, in his words. They were generally economically secure, so did not need the money that the festival would bring. One of his ideas was to time the festival so it would end with the Sikh Vaisakhi parade, where local Sikh people participate in increasing numbers each year. The sub-committee also developed in its membership: Forrest said that “the Sikh involvement was cautious to begin with, but after the third year we had regular [Sikh] committee members” apart from Arkan (p.c. November 2011).

Forrest believed that the primary aim for the festival was community development. She said that the “overall objective has been to expose to the broader community, via an annual festival of food, music and dance, the village of Woolgoolga and its interwoven cultural backgrounds” (p.c. November 2011). Over the years, the Sikh community involvement in the planning of the festival, the Vaisakhi parade, the Indian foods stalls and their attendance in increasing numbers, have developed a strong community synthesis and spirit that is the essence of the community. The festival brings other Australian Sikhs to the town of Woolgoolga. Forrest remarked “we’ve had a lot of Indian people [Sikhs] from Sydney that have come up to see what Sikhs in Woolgoolga are offering” (p.c. November 2011).

Curryfest coincides with another major annual event in the Australian Sikh calendar, the Sikh Games. Established in 1988, the Sikh Games has grown each year (Kaur and Singh, 2012) and brings thousands of visitors to the host town. In 1995 the Woolgoolga Sikh community, with their interest in sporting events and increasing affluence, won the games for their town (Bhatti and Dusenbery, 2001). This event was partly funded by a grant from the Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW, the first time that the event had received funds from a government source. In 1995, 2003 and 2009, the Games have been staged at Woolgoolga, with many members of the

Woolgoolga Sikh community comprising the organising team. This has provided the township with another opportunity to showcase its diversity to visitors from other regions.

The 2009 Games were filmed by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation for inclusion in a *Compass* program about Arkan, his family and his community ('Sikhing Woopi', 2009). In this program and elsewhere, notably local media, Arkan has been viewed as a great example of multiculturalism. He says, "I'm an Australian Sikh. I'm as Aussie as they come. I'm true blue". In a telling moment in this program, he adds: "A Sikh isn't someone who comes from India. A Sikh is someone who lives an awareness type of life". For him:

*There's no segregation, it's about there's a group of people living on the beach here. Some of us have turbans and beards and sell curry, and some of us are surfies and some of us are business people. Nobody is signifies that it is an Indian or an Australian or whatever it is. We're a group of people, we've loving the place that we are here, we're celebrating the differences. We're sharing [sic].*  
(*Sikhing Woopi*, 2009)

### **Festivals, multiculturalism and the creation of community**

The Woolgoolga Curryfest is promoted as a celebration of culture and cuisine. The relationship between communities and their festivals is an important one. As Douglas et al. describe, community festivals are born in response to a desire within the community to celebrate a special identity, and they may be classified as "themed public occasions designed to occur for a limited duration that celebrate valued aspects of a community's way of life" (Douglas et al., 2001: 358). Festivals provide a regional community with a way of seeing themselves, as well as a way to promote themselves to others: as part of the growing tourism industries, festivals can provide important opportunities for the promotion and branding of cultural landscape tourist sites (Collins et al., 2008: 67). This is significant given the changing demographics in regional NSW in particular, where communities are not static and culture and tradition are evolving. Therefore, as Ros Derrett writes, "festivals and events provide authenticity and uniqueness... [with] clear and targeted themes and

symbols for participants and spectators” (2003: 35). In the case of Curryfest, the Woolgoolga community is depicted as diverse and dynamic, as well as one that values cultural heritage.

In her study of this community, Carmen Voigt-Graf found that “Punjabis in Australia, and in particular in Woolgoolga, have developed a strong sense of local belonging. At the same time, they have managed to preserve their traditional culture” (Voigt-Graf, 2001: 6). In some ways the Sikh community does not need to use the festival to express ‘Sikh-ness’ as there are already many opportunities for Woolgoolga Sikhs to maintain their traditions. The establishment of two Sikh temples and a growing population with strong kinship networks have allowed daily rituals to continue. In fact, overall levels of ‘belongingness’ are high as Sikh locals have been involved in local industry for many years, own property and have attained the right to hold street processions and wear symbols of their religion, such as the turban, without discrimination. Many Australian Sikhs, including those from Woolgoolga, also travel to India and/or communicate via phone and Internet regularly to maintain family and cultural connections (Voigt-Graf, 2001: 3). Therefore, there is perhaps little ‘need’ for a festival such as Curryfest to maintain Sikh culture. It is much more about the broader community of Woolgoolga, including Sikhs, seeking to create their own unique multi-faceted cultural identity, which just so happens to have ‘curry’ as a point of differentiation.

In fact Curryfest does not necessarily promote traditional Sikh culture; rather, it presents a melting pot of diverse traditional and contemporary influences on the local area. A glance at recent programs list Indian (Punjabi in particular) musical performances—from classical to Bollywood—juxtaposed with guitar trios, Samba, carnival drumming, musicians from Ghana and a Maori cultural group, and, one year, the legendary singer Kamahl. Forrest states:

*Our initial years were very heavily focused on the Sikh community. This has spiralled out and included greater emphasis on other communities, often people who have moved into Coffs and have brought with them their own family*

*traditions and food and wanted to be a part of the community as [a] result of that.* (p.c. November 2011)

The more recent humanitarian arrivals to the Coffs Coast from many different parts of the world have also been invited to participate in Curryfest as stallholders, further diversifying the festival's support base.

Woolgoolga is not the first town to host a curry festival, nor a festival celebrating Indian or Sikh culture. Curry festivals are held in Jamaica, Malaysia, the UK (Frost 2011), the US (Martorell and Morlan, 2011: 77), and even in Slovenia. In the case of the Woolgoolga Curryfest, the Indian foods that are offered up at the festival are not just food: they are symbolic of exoticism and difference, as well as symbolic of the Sikh sub-community of Woolgoolga. They also symbolise ethnicity, and festivity. As Nandy writes,

*In a globalizing world, while the culture of ethnic cuisine and ethnic dining can become more and more a symbol of multicultural sensitivities and cosmopolitanism, it also increasingly becomes a major symbolic substitute for the culture it supposedly represents... in this cosmopolitanism, the distinctive cultural styles of food are paradoxically becoming more autonomous from the cultures from which the cuisines come and the civilizations or lifestyles they represent.* (Nandy, 2004: 17-18)

Curryfest demonstrates this role of food as a form of symbolism, as a social entity and as an important means of cultural interaction and exchange. Sharing a meal is a communal activity much more than just a culinary experience; its presence is felt much more deeply and can be the foundation for many social gatherings, as confirmed in Vue et al.'s (2011) research on Hmong migrants. The same scenario can be applied to Woolgoolga because not only is the festival about keeping cultural difference alive, it is also about socialising through the act of exchanging food. Such an exchange is also present in the weekly open meals at the Woolgoolga Sikh temple. Coming together to cook and eat strengthens community, be it at a family, religious or village level. The village of Woolgoolga, therefore, surely benefits from the development and continuation of Curryfest. Not only do non-Sikh members of the

local community learn more about their Sikh neighbours, through the consumption of food and other indicators of Sikh culture, but tourists coming to Woolgoolga for the festival come to understand more of the region's, and the community's, identity. In the festival's act of creating a distinct identity for Woolgoolga, a greater community of values is forged (Ulrich, 1998: 157).

Pereira et al. (2010) note the importance of food availability and promotion in the acculturation of food habits for newly arrived refugees in particular. This is again relevant to Woolgoolga, and in fact the entire Coffs Harbour Local Government area, as new and diverse populations will come to festivals and markets and will partake in the food experiences of their new homeland. If all they are presented with, especially in the public food arena (i.e. festivals), is sausage sizzles, pies and lamingtons, then that is what they may perceive to be 'Australian' food, something to aspire to. Food festivals can effectively keep traditional (and non-traditional) food from a diversity of cultures alive and well, evolving and taking a place in the rich and diverse culinary experience that is contemporary Australia.

Lucy Long's definition of food tourism describes food as:

*a subject and medium, destination and vehicle, for tourism. It is about individuals exploring foods new to them as well as using food to explore new cultures and ways of being. It is about groups using food to 'sell' their histories and to construct marketable and publicly attractive identities, and it is about individuals satisfying curiosity. Finally, it is about experiencing food in a mode that is out of the ordinary, that steps outside of the normal routine, to notice differences and the power of food to represent and negotiate that difference.*  
(Long, 2004: 20)

The Curryfest has never been promoted as a celebration of 'local' food, or even 'Sikh' or 'Indian' cuisine, but instead a celebration of local cultural diversity. However the festival's feedback from 2007 reported 76% of respondents being attracted most for the food. Forrest states, "for the majority of people that we have had feedback from, they come for the food" (p.c. November 2011). For Curryfest, the role of food is a

means of cultural exchange, a cultural transmission that makes an emotional connection with Woolgoolga.

### **The Curryfest continues**

The Woolgoolga Curryfest has grown markedly since its inauguration in 2006. By 2008, the festival had attracted 40 food stalls. Of these all were from the mid-north coast or the north coast, but only 8 were Indian food, including, of course, plenty of curries. In 2009 there were 60 food stalls. Already 80 food stallholders have booked their place for next year, along with other market stalls. There are a few examples of semi-local food marketing throughout the festival's history. Jack Thompson, veteran Australian actor, lives in Woolgoolga, and has acted as the festival's patron since it began. His involvement was procured through a personal contact within the committee. The second year he did several media interviews, which, Forrest said, "really pulled in the broader community. At that time he was launching his line of sauces and we sold and promoted these as a thank you gesture for two years" (p.c. November 2011). Thompson continues his patronage of the festival. At other stalls, locally prepared food comes from local restaurants offering traditional dishes from India, Morocco, Sudan, Thailand, Israel, Germany, Holland, England, and Scotland – as well as a local smokehouse and ice-creamery. However, the *biryanis*, *kormas* and *vindaloos* rule every year. To further capitalise on the popularity of the curries, one of the guests last year was *Masterchef* celebrity Jimmy Seervai, who gave three very lively cooking demonstrations during the day. Seervai said that the festival "embraced the eclectic mix that makes up Woolgoolga. It's like one big mix of curry spices" (Jensen, 2011: 3). As Bessiere (1998) and others note, experiencing local cuisine through demonstration or experiential interaction allows a tourist to take ownership in a destination.

Kelvin Harris has been the co-ordinator of the festival since 2009, when he took over from the Chamber of Commerce subcommittee. In the process he moved the primary aim of the event from community development to tourism. Arkan believes that now the festival is on a completely different scale: "it's a business plan [now, not a community festival]" (p.c. August 2011). It demonstrates the ever-changing nature of

the relationship of food and festivals to local communities. The National Roads and Motorists' Association is the main sponsor—the event is now called the NRMA Woolgoolga Curryfest—and other underwriters are mostly local media businesses. The heightened level of marketing is aimed at attracting visitors from the adjacent regional areas of Coffs Harbour, Grafton, Northern Rivers, the Central Coast and the Gold Coast. Harris's research shows that the festival is receiving repeat visitations from Sydney and Brisbane. The 2011 Curryfest attracted around 11,000 people; Harris estimates that over 13,000 people will attend the 2012 Curryfest, which will include multicultural cuisine, traditional and modern dances, music, comedy, arts, crafts, yoga, meditation workshops and cooking classes (p.c. August 2011). Harris made the decision to grow the event; he said, "We've decided to expand on the popular one day event to try and increase overnight visitation to the region for the Curryfest" (ETC, 2012). The issue of commercialisation of the event and the 'branding' of Sikhism will no doubt continue to play out in the future. This highlights the fact that communities, traditions and indeed festivals are not static, fixed entities and they will always change and evolve over time.

Food is an increasingly important economic and cultural resource, and the Curryfest has capitalised on this very successfully, providing a unique and memorable food experience for locals and visitors alike. Alongside farmers' markets, food festivals help to strengthen and challenge a sense of place and community identities, and although local produce has not been promoted directly at Woolgoolga, local cuisine has. Direct marketing to consumers via events like Curryfest helps to foster long-term customer relationships. Thus, it can be seen that the integration of food and tourism is an important vehicle for sustainable regional development.

## **Conclusion**

The small and growing town of Woolgoolga on the mid-north coast of NSW is home to a significant Sikh population, the largest settlement in regional Australia. Early arrivals came to farm bananas and now own a significant proportion of the banana farms in the Coffs Harbour Local Government Area. Early resistance to this group of newcomers included the banning of Sikhs from attending the local bowling club and

RSL. From that point in the 1970s, the local community has moved on to embrace Sikh culture and recognise the role of this significant group in strengthening and diversifying the township on both an economic and social level. Curryfest was conceived in 2006 as a means to distinguish Woolgoolga from other coastal towns and promote curry as a point of difference to be embraced. The festival grows and evolves, and continues to provide a point of intercultural encounter and exchange for locals and visitors. In this way it also provides an expansion of meanings of Woolgoolga as a place of multiple identities – food becomes a cultural mediator, and provides a celebration of the multiplicity of identities for Woolgoolga and a popular home for the expansion of collective identity. More recent arrivals in the area, particularly those from different African nations, have added to the mix of this multicultural festival, still further trading on the use of ‘ethnic food’ as an indicator of multiculturalism but interweaving more cuisines into the changing gastronomic landscape of the mid-north coast of NSW. Curryfest serves not only to promote Woolgoolga’s tourism ambitions but also to strengthen and promote its own community, an always-evolving mix of people living and celebrating; as Ien Ang puts it, “together in difference” (2003: 141).

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