

POST-ORGANIC?

The cultural dimensions of organic farming in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales

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Abstract

Organic food is enjoying increased mainstream acceptance, and the market growth that comes with that, but as a consequence has been subject to scrutiny over its ability to deliver the environmental and social benefits it is sometimes seen to embody. This article responds to the limited space thus far afforded to farmers' voices in the literature on this topic. Using an innovative case study approach and focusing on four farms in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales, each with their own experiences of organics, we explore how farmers understand both the growth and nature of organic farming systems. We discuss organics as 'generative metaphor' in these farmers' narratives, operating at the intersections between farmer agency, local places, culture, and forms of social organisation, and global discourses of alterity, ecology, and sustainability. While their stories describe a considerable opening of organic farming in recent years, contrasting this with earlier defenses of the classification standard in the face of cultural and economic marginalisation, providing an alternative to conventional food remains central to farmers' descriptions of their place in the food system.

Keywords

Alternative food, organic farming, food movements, community resilience, narrativity

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Introduction

Growing at an average of 11.5% per year from 2007–12 (IBIS World, 2012), the Australian organic farming industry is gaining increasing mainstream acceptance. Producers have access to a larger market, and consumers a wider range of organic options. However, this mainstreaming comes with its own set of problems. Recent writing stresses the limitations of organics as an alternative to the pitfalls of conventional or ‘industrial’ food, as increased mainstream acceptance and profit potential challenge its environmental and social sustainability credentials. The limitations of the alternative/conventional divide have been comprehensively canvassed from a range of perspectives (e.g. discussions in Allen et al., 2003; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006; Slocum, 2007). The trend in this literature has been to identify the links, overlaps and tradeoffs between these (not so) separate spheres, especially in terms of the market embeddedness of alternatives (Goodman et al., 2012). In short, the growth of the market has resulted in ‘industrial’ organic food, in which the large-scale supply chains of conventional food are replicated, albeit without synthetic herbicide and pesticide use (Lockie et al., 2002; Lockie et al., 2004) and consumers are confused over labeling (Henryks and Pearson, 2010). Further, these large scale systems confound consumer responses to related but not necessarily corresponding concerns over supporting local farmers or sourcing nutritional food, which often underpin purchasing decisions (Pearson et al., 2011).

In response to these issues, based on their research in the United States, Goodman and Goodman (2007) have adopted the term ‘post-organic’ to describe the shift in alternative food networks from a preoccupation with organics, to a focus on local food systems with their socially imbedded networks of supply and responsibility. While we concur that this sort of epistemological complication is warranted in terms of understanding contemporary food systems generally, in this article we refocus on organics as a ‘generative metaphor’ (following Fischer and Hajer, 1999: 2) for particular farmers in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales (NSW), Australia. By ‘generative metaphor’ we intend to convey how the deployment of the term ‘organic’ did not simply express an already existing assembly of concepts more elegantly, but

actually played a part in constituting and then interpreting food production practices in the region.

While much of the literature addressing the cultural dimensions of food analyses organic food in terms of the appeals of its distinctiveness to consumers (for example Guthman, 1998), or does not acknowledge the importance of producers to food cultures (notably Ashley et al., 2004), this article positions the cultural dimensions of organic food *production* at the heart of understanding local food cultures. Farmers' place, and indeed sense of place, in the food system is of key importance to the sustainability of local food cultures, and regional communities more broadly. Regions such as the Northern Rivers, developed from an agricultural base, face the possibility of significant decline in an increasingly globalised food system. As a vibrant community that has seen renewed growth since the 1970s, including in parts of the agricultural sector, the Northern Rivers exemplifies how some farmers have maintained and exercised local agency.

Organic farmers' attempts to reshape the food system have drawn on global trends such as the rise of organics, alternative food, and counter-cultural movements, but have also been about negotiating the specifics of local places and forms of social organisation. As innovators, employers, and natural resource managers, as well as producers of food, farmers contribute to the food cultures and non-urban places that attract new settlers and visitors alike to the region. Community resilience can develop out of effective local responses to global trends (Gray and Lawrence, 2001) and this article addresses this possibility by examining how organic farmers in the Northern Rivers have maintained agency by developing local narratives in dialogue with the shifts around organic food (namely, its increased mainstream acceptance). This 'reflexive localism' suggests that:

...an inclusive and reflexive politics of place understands local food systems not as local 'resistance' against a global corporatist 'logic' but as the outcome of mutually constituted, imperfect global processes in which the local and the global make each other on an everyday basis. (Goodman et al., 2012: 24)

Farmers' voices are an important addition to the literature on the cultural dimensions of food not only because they have thus far been relatively unrecognised in such accounts, but because the ways in which their contributions problematise these can shed light on how local communities maintain agency in the face of broader changes. By tracing farmers' narratives of the development of organics in the Northern Rivers, we explore the various ways in which organics can be understood as an alternative and profoundly local movement. Notions of providing an alternative to conventional food systems remain at the heart of farmer narratives of their role in the food system in the Northern Rivers, largely because of the history of interrelated alternative movements moving into the area. In line with key local cultural touchstones such as the 1973 Aquarius festival², 1979 Terania Creek protests³, or current pilgrimages to the Channon Markets, Nimbin or Byron Bay, the 'alternative' is an important feature of Northern Rivers food culture. The Northern Rivers attracts sea changers, tree changers⁴, and tourists alike because of this culture, as well as the natural environment and non-urban spaces that farmers play a role in maintaining.

Organic Agriculture

Self-identified organic agriculture and grower groups began in Australia in the 1940s (Jones, 2010), with Federal Government interest only emerging in the 1980s as a consequence of the need for export standards to gain entry into the European market (eventuating in the 1992 national organic standard). As a consequence, grower groups have typically led developments in Australian organics (Bernzen, 2013: 286–87). Even today this legacy is felt in the 'hybrid' model of organic certification (ibid: 287). This involves an export certification standard and import controls overseen by the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service (AQIS); a voluntary Australian Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Products⁵ (Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry, 2012); and domestic certification by a range of government accredited private grower organisations such as Biological Farmers Australia (BFA) and the National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Australia (NASAA).⁶

The Australian Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Products (Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry, 2009) is designed to be complimentary to other existing standards, including those outside the organics industry. It provides the minimum structure required to identify and maintain organic standards from an industry and trade perspective. It states:

Organic: means the application of practices that emphasise the:

- *use of renewable resources; and*
- *conservation of energy, soil and water; and*
- *recognition of livestock welfare needs; and*
- *environmental maintenance and enhancement, while producing optimum quantities of produce without the use of artificial fertiliser or synthetic chemicals.* (Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry, 2009: 8)

This Australian certification system arose out of the efforts of the organic agriculture movement, which explicitly aims to change the food system by providing an alternative to conventionally produced food (Goodman et al., 2012: 9). The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) defines organic agriculture in opposition to the ‘adverse effects’ of conventional farming:

Organic agriculture is a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs with adverse effects. Organic agriculture combines tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved. (The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, 2009: online)

This association with social movements’ ‘collective, organized, sustained, and non-institutional challenge to authorities, power-holders, or cultural beliefs and practices’ (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003: 3) often cast early organic farmers as the cultural Other or outsider (discussed throughout this article in terms of ‘alterity’) in their communities. As organic food has become more accepted this

alternative/conventional divide has become less pronounced. However, by exploring how farmers narrate their experiences of being organic food producers, this article demonstrates that the alternative nature of organics was, and still is, a key dimension of local food culture in the Northern Rivers, regardless of the conflation of 'organics' with certification in other forums.

The Northern Rivers Region

On the far northeast coast of NSW, Australia, the Northern Rivers constitutes approximately 20,732 square kilometers in the corner of the state. It is bounded by the Queensland border to the north, the ocean to the east, the end of the Clarence Valley to the south, and the Great Dividing Range to the west. This includes the local government areas of Ballina, Byron, Clarence Valley, Kyogle, Lismore, Richmond Valley and the Tweed. It overlays the areas of groupings of Bundjalung people, and also includes the Yaegl and Gumbaynggirr people (Regional Development Australia, 2011: 1), and has an estimated population of just over 143,000 (at June 2010, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

It is a sub-tropical environment of rolling green hills, sweeping floodplains, rainforest remnants and beaches. The caldera of rich volcanic soil that nurtures much of the region was deposited over 25 million years ago by a now long extinct volcano, Wollumbin or 'Cloud Catcher' (or Mount Warning) and the region retains this association with fertility and plenty (Tweed Shire Council, 2008). It is one of the most biodiverse regions in Australia (Regional Development Australia, 2011).

While for most of the 20th century associated with dairying, the 1950s and 60s saw farmers move away from the industry in the Northern Rivers as profitability reached unsustainable levels for many (Wilkinson, 1999). The value of land decreased sharply, and remained depressed until the (albeit uneven) rise of hippie counter-culture brought new settlers to the region in the early 1970s (Kijas, 2003). This counter-culture is exemplified by the 1973 Aquarius festival, the 1979 Terania Creek protests, the development of 'intentional communities'⁷, and in current tourist centres of Nimbin, Byron Bay and surrounds.

In many ways these newcomers were continuing the agricultural traditions of the region, even if they did so by overlaying their own interpretations of food production, the land and the environment. In particular, counterculture served as a context through which the back-to-the-land movement began to take form internationally, and many back-to-the-landers in Australia ended up in the Northern Rivers as ‘new settlers’. This movement, rooted in anti-capitalism and counter-urbanism, focused on a reciprocal relationship with nature, spanning ‘self-sufficiency, cooperative economic relationships, soil sustainability, biodiversity’ (Wilbur, 2013: 155). While sharing many political ideals with hippies, back-to-the-landers’ focus on rural food-production and ecological sustainability meant that they were more likely to be cultivating crops than protests.

These ‘alternative’ influences remain evident in the local culture, and are part of what attracts newcomers to the ‘rainbow region’ (Wilson, 2003). The natural environment and creative cultures alike attract visitors from all over the world, and since the 1970s the region has seen significant population growth above the NSW average, from amenity migrants seeking out these characteristics (Regional Development Australia, 2011).

It remains a highly productive agricultural region, predominantly crops (coffee, tea, sugar cane, rice, wheat, barley, sorghum, maize, triticale, field peas and soybeans); livestock (chicken, beef cattle, dairy cattle, sheep and pigs); vegetables (beans, beetroot, broccoli, cabbage, capsicum, chillies, celery, cucumber, eggplant, garlic, ginger, herbs, leeks, lettuce, onions, peas, potatoes, pumpkin, spinach, sweet corn, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, zucchini); fruit (oranges, lemons, limes, mandarins, grapefruit, cherries, nectarines, peaches, plums, avocados, carambolas, custard apples, guavas, jackfruit, lychees, mangoes, rambutan, blueberries, raspberries, strawberries, bananas, kiwifruit, pawpaws, papaya and pineapples, squash and melons) and nuts (macadamias and pecans) (Regional Development Australia, 2011: 22). The agricultural production value of the region totals AU \$362.4 million (from the 2005–06 Agricultural Census, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

The agriculture, forestry and fishing sector is by far the largest in terms of number of businesses, at 22%, although over 60% of these do not employ any staff (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). The sector directly employs around 6% of the population, well above the under 3% NSW average (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Further, this figure does not include the many food processing and tourism jobs that relate directly and indirectly to the region's food culture.

'Alternative' food initiatives have been a significant feature of the region since the 1970s. For example, 1991 saw a pioneering course at the local TAFE (vocational education and training centre), which was the first accredited to use the name 'Organic Farming' (p.c. with Dave Forrest, March 2012). In 1999, the Rainbow Region Organic Market was launched, billed as 'the first market of its kind in Australia' (Tweed Richmond Organic Producers Organisation, 1999). Although the number of organic producers in the Northern Rivers has been rising over recent years, producers are typically small-scale horticulturalists. This is in contrast to the majority of organically managed land in Australia, which is grazing land and pastures (Willer and Kilcher, 2011).

The history of innovation in local, sustainable, socially engaged food has more recently been supported by the NSW Government, through its Environment Trust. The Food Links project, funded to AU \$2 million, involved cooperation from Rous Water and all seven councils of the region, along with many community groups and individuals, to deliver a range of sustainable food projects in the region in 2010-11.⁸ This included sustainable agriculture co-investment projects with farmers, village showcases with community groups, marketing and education to consumers, food production and distribution in indigenous communities and farmers' markets (Northern Rivers Food Links, 2012). Food Links brought together many groups who had already been working on food security and community resilience issues in the region.

Thus the agricultural tradition of the Northern Rivers region has come to include notions of alterity as important drivers of economic and social wellbeing. Alternative

food cultures play an important role in the local culture as well as the attractiveness of the region to newcomers.

Research Methodology

The material used for this article is drawn from data gathered through the “Landed Histories of the Northern Rivers” project.⁹ Using case studies (Yin, 1993: 1994), the landed histories methodology frames particular farms in the context of the cultural, political, economic, and ecological history of the region. This micro-historical approach blends historical land records and other archival material with interviews with food producers to develop detailed case studies of particular farms. Employing techniques arising from history, oral history and anthropology within a broader interdisciplinary framework, we work with particular parcels of land defined simply by land selection procedures and cadastral surveys. As a result, our histories are bounded and constrained by the lines created in the colonisation and fragmentation of Australia into the fee simple parcels of land. Though not universal or evenly felt throughout Australia, the imposition of English land and property law in the Northern Rivers created a political and economic geography that created a landscape of small-holder family farms, and it was this landscape through which settlers made their lives. These were lives that were very much affected by global political and economic forces, and certainly most immediately by the ecological contexts in which people found themselves, but people could and did exercise agency through their relationships with their lands, and with each other.

The inclusion of contemporary interlocutors is quite purposeful, and reflects the inclusion of participatory research values in the program of research. Most of the key members of the research team are long resident in the region (i.e. Ferguson, Kijas, and Wessell), and have extensive networks including both new and old farming families in the area. As important, the research methods have been fundamentally open ended in practice, and we have made our wish and intentions to make as much of the stories and insights that participants offer available publically. Rather than working from the assumption that confidentiality and/or anonymity ought to characterise the work, we have sought avenues to ensure that the people in the

research own their own stories, and are recognised as authors in and of themselves. This is not to deny or ignore the role of researchers, but to acknowledge the agency of participants. It is important that this agency be acknowledged in practice, and the practice of matching story to a name, the person to their insights, and the research results to the communities from which they are derived is part of a new ethics in community based research (Evans, 2004; Butz, 2008; Svalastog and Eriksson, 2010).

This approach produces a deeply contextualised account of food production, which neither generalises about the nature of the land, or those who produce food upon (or with) it. It includes food producers from a range of perspectives, geographical areas around the region, farming techniques and marketing strategies, in order to canvas a broad range of experiences.

Farms were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on farms and farmers who were able to contribute key perspectives, experiences, and expertise to the research. In this article we focus on those farms in our sample that make use of organic methods. The analysis zooms in and out from participants' personal narratives, to local community socio-cultural analysis, and macro-analysis of the organic food industry (drawing on the work of Pamphilon, 1999). This approach highlights how personal narratives are constructed in dialogue with (but not limited to) local community histories, social structures, and macro-political issues. By focusing on contemporary farmers' own perceptions of organics and using this as the starting point and guide for macro analysis, the aim is to engage with the various ways in which farmers make sense of and order their specific knowledges and experiences rather than interrogating the objectivity of their accounts (following the work of Barry, 1989; Portelli, 1991). In other words, the cultural dimensions of organic food production in the region are examined here in terms of the how 'organic' operates within farmers' own narratives to generate possibilities for action and interpretation.

The four case studies discussed below were developed by Ferguson using the Landed Histories methodology. As the daughter of a food producing family from one of the intentional communities in the region, Ferguson's interests in alternative

farming systems is longstanding. The selection of case studies within the larger sample in the Landed Histories program reflects Ferguson's personal knowledge, contacts, and indeed contexts; within the framework of the Landed Histories methodology, Ferguson's knowledge and capacity to select appropriate exemplars for the case studies enhances the work (i.e. we do not seek a representative sample in a statistical sense, rather our sample is based on insider knowledge and is purposive, based on key informants located in a variety of subject positions and on a variety of lands and land types). As the analysis below turns on contemporary discourse, the overlap in narratives reflects a real conversation in which the participants are interlocutors and agents, and the analysis a form of heurmenutic thick description (Geertz, 1973).

The case studies

Organic Forrest is a certified organic family farm located in the hinterlands of Byron Bay, which has been producing organic fruits and vegetables, macadamia nuts, and coffee for over thirty years. One of the owners (Dave Forrest, interviewed for this research) has also been extensively involved in the development of organics in the Northern Rivers through the North Coast Institute of TAFE, the Tweed Richmond Organic Producers Organisation (TROPO), Landcare groups, the Rainbow Region Organic Farmers' Markets and many other activities.

Summit Organics is a certified organic family farm located just south of the Queensland border, adjacent to the Border Ranges National Park. Originating as Summit Coffee Plantations growing organic coffee over twenty years ago, the farm has been focusing on certified organic vegetable and herb production in an approximately six acre market garden for the last twelve years, managed by Rod and Tania Bruin (Rod was interviewed for this research). The farm hosts regular farm walks and volunteer days with members of the public and North Coast Institute of TAFE students, with a particular focus on using organic compost to improve soil conditions.

New Govardhana is a Hare Krishna community located in the Tweed Valley near Murwillumbah, northern NSW. Certified organic agricultural production on the property is achieved through an extensive Willing Workers On Organic Farms (WWOOFers) program, overseen by those ongoing residents who are concerned with food production (in particular Madreya Das, who was interviewed for this research). The farm was registered certified organic in 2004, and is still regularly changing what is grown, and the techniques used to build soil fertility, as growers build skills and new visitors arrive.

Bonnie Walker has been an avocado and macadamia farmer (along with her husband) on the Alstonville plateau, just west of Byron Bay in NSW, for around twenty years. She is also Chair of the Landcare group SoilCare. Bonnie's farm is not certified organic, but employs methods described as 'biological farming'. Her work with SoilCare involves facilitating opportunities for learning about biological methods to achieve soil health for organic and non-organic farmers alike. While drawing on expertise from many organic farmers (such as Dave Forrest of Organic Forrest), this is an important crossover between organic and conventional farmers in the region.

The role of organics and organic farming in the history and present of the region is revealed in/through the history of these four farms.

Post-Aquarius: remembering organic farming in the 1970s and 1980s

The 1970s and 80s are often cast as the starting point for organics in the region. Although Jones (2010) is quick to point out that the roots of the movement in Australia can be found much earlier than this, the influx of alternative seekers (especially those influenced by the back-to-the-land movement) to the Northern Rivers in the 1970s and early 1980s is a key part of the foundation narrative for those who were interested in new ways of producing food.

When Sue and Dave of Forrest Organics first arrived in the region in the late 1970s, they purchased a steep, weedy block, which had previously been part of a dairy farm. The dairy industry had declined sharply from the mid-1960s, allowing new arrivals to buy land relatively cheaply. Many were specifically interested in organics:

From the late 1980s the farming groups like Tweed Richmond Organic Producers Organisation, of which I was a foundation member, were actually more of a group of people that had moved to this district to actually farm organically in the region and so we had that focus in the broader region, but there was still that proportion of people that actually were looking to maintain agriculture and productivity but do it in a new improved way. (p.c. with Dave Forrest, March 2012)

However, despite the region's attractiveness to those looking for an alternative to conventional agriculture, they still found themselves struggling with limited markets for organic produce:

From 1980, for two years I grew small crops for Sydney Wholesale Market. There were basically very low to no markets locally for produce and we would put it on the train from Lismore or Bangalow... I had a few agents in Sydney and you'd send them some samples and things but they didn't even know what they [the native raspberries that were being sent] were... (ibid)

The perceived outsider status of organic farmers at this point ('organic' not yet understood as having the potential to attract a market premium) meant that significant work went into creating new markets and organisations (such as TROPO, mentioned above), to serve the needs of these new farmers:

The money was always appreciated but to actually have a market was the first step that you had to have. It was, particularly at that time, relatively small but significant in terms of dollars in... But [I was] definitely looking to secure some farm income and the prices at the wholesale markets [were not very good]. (ibid)

This process of organisation was an important foundation for those who would come later. Finding likeminded people engaging in similar practices was not a matter of relying on direct neighbours as had been the case for dairy farmers in the region's history. But, the countercultural movement that had provided part of the attraction of the region in the 1970s provided some opportunities to address this relative geographical isolation:

Communications at that time were very different to what they are now and you basically had to bump into somebody somewhere and a lot of those connections actually came through some of the community focal points such as the Terania Creek protests and the development of The Channon Market – a couple of focal activities where you actually could bump into people of a similar mindset. (ibid)

While the isolation of organic compared to conventional agriculture marks the story of this period, this does not necessarily mean that these perspectives fit neatly into the post-Aquarius period as a simple example of counterculture. The self-sustaining ambitions of the intentional communities that started in the 1970s were often difficult to realise in practice, and the back-to-the-land ideal was not shared by all alternative-seekers. Ultimately, 'An organic farm is a farm' (ibid) and the innovation and discovery narrative of this period is still one of agro-ecology in action¹⁰, where farmers developed practice-based challenges to taken for granted cultural and structural forms.

The growth of organics in the 1990s

The 1990s are spoken of as a period of new opportunities for organic producers in the Northern Rivers, with more farmer networks and existing markets that new producers could connect with, as a consequence of the work of the earlier 'pioneers'. Organic farming was beginning to shed its outsider status by focusing on certification standards, and this was perceived positively by participants in this research. Certification promoted products to consumers by distinguishing organic produce, and providing a mechanism through which shoppers could judge producers' claims about farming practices.

Consumer choice is now recognised as being much more complex than these efforts suggest (e.g. Henryks and Turner [2011] discuss the ‘paradox’ of organic consumption choices), and the campaign for a national certification symbol points to problems with the existing system (Organic Federation of Australia, 2013). However, seen in the context of the relatively recent introduction of the possibility of claiming ‘organic certification’ at that time, it represents an important tactical achievement. Organic certification was an important determinant of trust in the farmers’ produce. Certification bodies had started to appear in the late 1980s (NASAA in 1986 and BFA in 1987), while in the Northern Rivers the producers group TROPO had started in 1989. Government interest in organics had also started in the late 1980s, and in 1992 the national export standard was introduced (Bernzen, 2013).

In the Northern Rivers, the work Dave Forrest described in the previous section was starting to attract more attention from people interested in learning to farm organically:

In May 1991, I was teaching Organic Farming – course through TAFE – official commission to teach that with the name Organic Farming... got 50 per cent of students, particularly in the production horticulture area, asking about organic farming, so that was a strong impetus to be able to then look for something that was not being done as part of another course or under another heading to actually say “well this is an organic farming course”. That was quite successful and TAFE actually gave it accreditation state-wide in 1993. (p.c. March 2012)

New farmers started to come to organic farming for diverse reasons. Seeing organics less as a concrete commitment than an opportunity for innovation with potential financial benefits, Rod Bruin and his father began farming organically:

And then Dad said, “I think we should go organic. If we are going to do that [start growing coffee], let’s do it organic” because he’d been reading some stuff. I said “oh yeah we could do that”. He said “well it’s worth a dollar more a packet and I think it’s good, you know, to get away from chemicals.” And I wasn’t that, you know, into it yet, but I thought well, it’s a bit of extra money; yeah we’ll give it a go. (p.c. March 2012)

Rather than focusing on barriers and building new structures as outsiders in the market and the community, Rod describes organic vegetable growing as something they tried during a period of particular hardship. Although the organic farmers' market was still relatively new at this stage, the story is still substantially shifted by the availability of this outlet for organic produce. Rather than focusing on building up structures to support organic farmers, the story in the 1990s is more concerned with shifting production in response to changing environmental and market conditions. Rod commented:

Someone said to me "where are you going to sell them?" I said "I don't know, I just want to grow them, I'll work that out when we get them" and then Tania had heard one morning that the Lismore Organic Markets had been opened for 5 or 6 months and they were asking for more stall holders and had a bit of radio publicity on and when I came home she said "I think we should go to the Lismore Organic Markets and sell the sweet potatoes and we can take some coffee along and see how we go". So we did that, we went down there and for 3 hours at the markets we'd earned \$280 cash. This is like 12 years ago. And I had never received money before straight away for a product so we were pretty excited by that. (p.c. March 2012)

Despite this, farmers remained heavily dependent on organic grower groups, still relatively isolated among regional food producers (compared to more recent years):

I think Lismore saved us in a lot of ways not just financially. Because at the time when we became organic we were it. You know, we were up the end of the road here isolated, organic and I know that a lot of people just thought we were bloody crazy really. Those times were a lot, you know, over 20 years ago organics were almost frowned upon – you were a bit of an outcast. So to find a marketplace in Lismore where everyone was so accepting and loved us and other people were there like-minded we were at home, we were amongst friends. We had farmers that we'd meet with every week and talk about stuff; it was such an important thing. So from there I suppose we just, yeah, I don't know if we would have survived if we hadn't have gone to Lismore. (p.c. with Rod Bruin, March 2012)

Ultimately, despite the growing acceptance of organic farming in the region in the 1990s, the certification of produce remained an important point of distinction for Rod, a boundary that was economically and environmentally worthwhile, and thus worth defending:

At the end of the day we're strong believers in the certification program and we don't like all the hoops we have to jump through and the bookwork but we believe it's worth it and that gives us our credibility and it give us our checks and balances. (p.c. March 2012)

Being on the right side of the regulations provided farmers with not only a way to talk about the quality of their product, but also an indication of their commitment to environmentally-conscious cultivation systems. These explanations may seem out of place in a contemporary environment where direct contact with producers is more and more emphasised as the hallmark of ethical produce, but seen in the context of the lack of support and understanding of organic food until the late 1980s, the commitment to a certification standard seems a pragmatic response, not to mention a way for the industry to develop a collective identity rather than a reputation as (potentially damaging) outsiders.

Is there a post-organic? The 2000s

The more recent story of organics in the region is less well resolved. Speaking of relationships and circumstances that are still fresh or even ongoing potentially carries a degree of risk, but it is also the lack of practiced telling and retelling that is notable here. These farmers are themselves reflexive and engaged in a series of overlapping, intensely local conversations about organic farming; a more or less agreed consensus has emerged about the past, but the recent and present is somewhat more in flux.

Many of the controversies around organic food, as discussed earlier in this article, centre on the extent to which it has deviated from or become enmeshed with forms of social activism or alternatives and how this has conflated organic with local, just,

sustainable, healthful food sources. In the context of greater industrialisation of the organic food supply, these questions seem particularly important. However, a different take on this is evident in the Northern Rivers. In terms of the social and political dimensions of food production, organics has been an important movement, and this importance continues to come through in farmers' practice based challenges to established cultural and structural forms.

For Rod Bruin, an appeal to the importance of local food is found in the same interview as a defense of organic certification standards. As a way of confirming that they are meeting the standards they claim to adhere to by identifying their produce as 'organic', he invites people to visit the farm. This suggests a coupling of the certification requirements of long value chains to the personal responsibility of local food systems. In this case, no longer is 'organic' certification enough. The ability to personally confirm the claims of farmers is also important:

At the end of the day I say to people "if you're not sure about what someone's doing give them a call and ask to come out and see it for themselves" and our bottom line is that anyone's welcome at any time to come out to our farm to have a look at what we're doing. And I think that's better than any certification program anyway. (p.c. with Rod Bruin, March 2012)

On the other hand, newer organic growers, exemplified here by those operating the large WWOOF program at the Hare Krishna community near Murwillumbah, demonstrate a commitment to lifestyle movements and social justice for young people, and with little concern for issues around certification and consumer trust. Madreya Das says:

...that would definitely affect us if our primary concern was what will sell at Coles. That would definitely change what we do. Definitely. But yeah our primary concern is what the Temple wants, and what the restaurant and more and more so before we get out of this WWOOFer volunteer circle, what they want. I get them as much fruit as I possibly can. Heaps. They go through a tremendous amount of fruit, on a daily basis, woofers and volunteers. They tend to be young, they tend to be vegetarian, they tend to be health orientated... So

they love fruit, they love organic, they'll take silverbeet leaves straight out of the garden that they worked on. Go over here pick a couple of bananas off the tree, mix with a little whatever, put it in the blender and that will be their breakfast. And they love that kind of life. And I love that kind of life for them. (p.c. November 2012)

The diminishing importance of defending the organic certification system is evident in other ways as well. One of the most striking elements of organic farming in the Northern Rivers in the last few years is the ability of farmers to engage in building large coalitions with farmers from non-organic backgrounds, in particular through a Landcare group called SoilCare. Tapping into the resurgent focus on soil health both nationally and internationally, SoilCare was able to secure funding in 2010 through the Caring for Country initiative, for its activities in 2011–12. Although relying predominantly on the expertise of organic farmers (at least initially) with teaching experience through the local TAFE, SoilCare is not concerned with promoting organic farming. Instead, it focuses on providing opportunities for all farmers to learn more about ways of improving the soil health on their properties. Farmer and chair of SoilCare, Bonnie Walker, commented:

I remember when I took an organic farming course... and the first day someone asked the question "do you think all farmers will be organic one day?" and Dave [Forrest] said "no but hopefully one day all farmers will be using organic farming principles." So you know, people don't need to be organic but they can use those principles, which is, biological farming basically is what organic farmers use. So what he was saying is that people will gradually adopt more sustainable farming methods as they learn. (p.c. July 2012)

Biological farming, promoted by SoilCare, thus provides a socio-cultural as well as scientific middle ground for information sharing among primary producers facing the impacts of degradation of their soil, arguably the most important resource on the farm:

Biological farming is a system of farming where farmers work with nature and they use biological processes to manage. So in the soil, that is, using soil biology to make your nitrogen, to recycle nutrients, to get the nutrients to your plants,

and it's encouraging and providing habitat for that soil biology. Above ground it's using biological control of insects, pests. It's looking after your soil, managing your soil health with organic inputs and it's understanding what every practise you do, how that will affect your soil. (ibid)

However, organics remains an important element of these shifts. An emphasis on social alternatives is still very much evident in the way organic farmers discuss their practices. Indeed, while there is significant emphasis on creating spaces for conventional farmers to take up organic methods (such as through biological farming), the potential for organic farming to be a component of larger changes has appreciably increased. Free of the need to address the absence of markets, social, professional and educational networks, government standards and community support, organic farmers use organics as a platform to address larger issues. Far from organics being subsumed into a larger ethics of local sustainable food, it provides the organisational legitimacy to take further steps, to create environmentally sustainable local food systems, or support young people to find agency, where there is a need.

...it's almost like a big part of the world's problems are nutritional and diseases and the whole carbon issue, you get to a point where you go "well if you were looking for one solution to a lot of these problems organic farming and biological farming and looking after the soil has an effect on all those things..." we look at all these problems and it's kind of overwhelming but you can just go 'well let's just not worry about that and let's concentrate on organic farming' and you know you are fixing so many of these problems so it's like it's a breath of fresh air to have something so simple, such a simple solution, that you can work on and know that you are doing so much good. (p.c. with Rod Bruin, March 2012)

While the narrative of organic farming has in recent years opened considerably, and is less concerned with defending the certification system or building new structures in the face of cultural and economic isolation, this must be understood in relation to how earlier achievements feature in the stories of organic farmers. In particular, the role of organic farmers in building local food systems and teaching farming practices to those from non-organic backgrounds is rooted in the strength of the organic system, itself generative of a wider and inclusive conversation among farmers in the region.

Conclusion

The transformation of the food system involves social and political changes. Despite the emerging focus on organic produce as an increasing part of the retail food system, the industrialisation of organic supply, and the displacement of the importance of organics by local food movements, organics remains a key element of the food culture of the Northern Rivers. It provides a position, which they understand as legitimate and affording them considerable agency, from which to engage with the changing global food system.

The story of the history of organics, as told by the participants in this research, suggests that things have indeed changed. But although there is more cross pollination between organic and 'conventional' food, and although alternative food systems now encompass much more than 'certified organic', organics remains an important source of value for organic farmers. This has allowed them to take part in expansions and boundary blurring from a position of relative strength:

You [the organic farmer] are no longer the secondary inhabitant of the farming community in fact more and more you are being recognised that potentially the way that everybody has to go as fast as possible. (p.c. with Dave Forrest, March 2012)

Although organic regulations can be distilled into the important role they play in long value chains (Bernzen, 2013), we should not overlook the variations that may exist in the social standards attributed to organic food within different communities. For these communities to retain their resilience, these local narratives (which of course do not originate wholly within the local community) must be recognised as important. The Landed Histories methodology reflects, refracts, and reinforces the ontological centrality of local narrative here (and arguably elsewhere), while the case study method provides a transparent and appropriate vehicle for this sort of history and analyses.

Even as narratives have shifted over time, organics has remained an important generative metaphor for food producers. Indeed, an awareness of these features of local narratives gives insight into the nuances of local resilience and innovation. Further, by unpacking this assemblage of meanings, we are able to explore how biological farming has emerged as a possible alternative to strict adherence to organic certification standards, for some contemporary producers. This outgrowth, driven by food producers themselves, suggests that farmer agency, in terms of both practices and cultural forms, is as central to emerging research and debates over the future of organics, as consumer and market analysis.

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Endnotes

¹ The Northern Rivers Landed Histories Research Group includes Gayle Cooper (transcription), Mike Evans (CI), Hazel Ferguson, Johanna Kijas and Adele Wessell (CI), all of Southern Cross University, and Kate Gahan (transcription). Reference to the group in the authorship of this article reflects the collective inputs into the ethics protocol, methodological framework, research supports, and general intellectual contributions to the research outputs emerging from the project; the primary contribution to the writing and scholarship central to this article is reflected in the named author(s).

² The Aquarius festival of 1973 was the major countercultural festival held in Australia. It was over a ten day period in the small dairying village of Nimbin in the Northern Rivers. Arranged by the Australian Union of Students, it brought young people from around the country together in a countercultural gathering of 'pot, acid, sex, folk music and rock and roll,

and occasionally truth, beauty, freedom and love.’ (Turvey, 2006: 38). After the event, many young people remained in the area, aided by the declining agricultural sector’s cheap land prices, and their own willingness to pool resources.

³ In 1979 Terania Creek, near Nimbin, was the site of the first successful non-violent logging blockade in the world. The Terania Native Forests Action Group (TNFAG) was a group of various post-Aquarius ‘new settlers’, who had gradually started to get to know one another, and heard that the forest which had attracted them was to be logged (clear-felled) (Turvey, 2006: 40–45). The action was the cause of considerable conflict between the old and new settlers in the area.

⁴ The terms ‘sea change’ and ‘tree change’ are Australian terms describing internal migration out of the cities and to the coast or country for lifestyle reasons. Recent demographic writing on ‘amenity migration’ discusses this trend.

⁵ This standard is AS 6000–2009. It is based on the 1992 export standard (Bernzen, 2013). Although it is not a compulsory standard in the sense of requiring food producers to seek accreditation directly from AQIS, it underpins the certification system via AQIS requirements that grower organisations that certify producers do so at least to this minimum standard, in order to be accredited. Further, the standard can be used to establish if a product is organic in the event of market failure (for example, false advertising), meaning retailers will typically not stock products marked ‘organic’ unless they are certified.

⁶ In the Australian context, certification with any of these accredited grower organisations involves an audit process carried out by that organisation. AQIS requires that, in order to maintain accreditation, certifiers uphold the minimum organic standard set out in AS 6000–2009. In addition, each certifier maintains varied additional requirements on top of this standard. Typically, certifiers require producers to complete a form detailing farm practices at the start of the certification process, with detailed records kept and inspected thereafter. An inspector will visit to verify the information provided, and take soil and produce samples for testing. If the farm passes the first inspection, it enters ‘pre-conversion’ for a year, and then conversion to certified organic normally occurs within three years, with periodic inspections. Certification applies to the farm system (farmer, land and produce) and may not apply if any one of these changes. Australian organic certifiers are NASAA Certified Organic, The Organic Food Chain (OFC), AUS-QUAL, Australian Certified Organic (ACO), Bio-Dynamic Research Institute (BDRI), Safe Food Production Queensland (SFQ), The Tasmanian Organic Producers (TOP). All have their own marks of certification, although the Organic Federation of Australia, the peak body for the Australian organic sector is currently lobbying for a national organic mark (Organic Federation of Australia, 2013).

⁷ Intentional Communities, sometimes referred to as Multiple Occupancies (MOs) after the NSW State Environmental Planning Policy (SEPP) 15 that legalised ‘Rural Landsharing Communities’ involve sharing land between individuals or families. Their shared legal rights to the land normally include a private home on the property, and responsibility for maintenance of the public areas. ‘There is a continuum within Intentional Communities some having a high level of sharing including shared meals, work and facilities while others are restricted to maybe a workday a month.’ (The Australian National Intentional Communities Conferences & South East Australia Communities Gatherings, 2001: 5)

⁸ Although this is notable as the largest recent example of investment in local alternative food initiatives (and arguably demonstrates the region’s success in developing a vibrant local food culture), the Northern Rivers Food Links project was not mentioned by any of the farmers whose stories are discussed in this article.

⁹ This methodology was first presented in 2012 in Wessell et al.; a more detailed discussion will be forthcoming, and we will be relatively brief here.

¹⁰ Although it is not the purpose of this article to map the ecological dimensions of farmer narratives, or farmer's relationships with the land, it must be acknowledged that these issues are important to the explanations that the farmers discussed in this article gave for taking up or maintaining organic practices.

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