

## COMMUNITY GARDENS AND FARMERS' MARKETS

### Exploring Representations of Food Culture in the Illawarra

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#### *Abstract*

Over recent years, farmers' markets and community gardens have increasingly become a feature of the urban landscape and a popular representation of food culture. In endorsing the increasingly popular paddock-to-plate ethos, they purportedly promote sustainable food systems thus contributing to the reduction of food miles, increase of food security and building of strong communities. For these reasons, farmers' markets and community gardens have become significant mechanisms for the expansion of local food systems, regional socio-cultural development, and local economic revitalisation. The Illawarra, in regional NSW, has embraced them wholeheartedly. Since the 1980s the region has experienced a transition to a post-industrial knowledge-based economy, which has been accompanied by profound demographic changes. Using mixed methods of research, this study evaluates how the Illawarra's recent socio-cultural shifts find expression in the local food culture by examining how community/school gardens and farmers' markets have impacted on local food systems. The overall findings are suggestive of a socio-economic rift between the Illawarra's northern and southern suburbs, which are represented in the way social agents enact practices of food consumption and production. In the affluent north, farmers' markets cater for foodie communities

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favouring practices of stylised consumption of food; by contrast, the ethnic-diverse south pragmatically uses community/school gardens as sites of food production and social empowerment.

*Keywords*

Illawarra, region, community gardens, farmers’ markets, food culture, food systems, social change

## **Introduction**

Driving southbound on the Five Islands Road through the suburb of Port Kembla, a large billboard at the entrance of the industrial site BlueScope Steel reminds us that we have entered *Australia’s Industry World’s* territory. Operating since 1928 as Australian Iron & Steel Limited (AIS), and since 1935 as Broken Hill Proprietary (BHP) (BlueScope Steel nd), the Port Kembla Steelworks regulated the Illawarra’s economic heartbeat for over seven decades. In 2002 its demerger – BlueScope Steel – was publicly declared, and as recently as March 2015 a further demerger – South32 – was announced, the media suggestively indicating that “BHP cuts ties with former heartland in the Illawarra, ending their 80-year connection” (McLaren, 2015).

The region’s historical association with heavy manufacturing and coal mining industries has given it negative connotations. Usually portrayed as a polluted and unattractive region, the Illawarra has been since the 1980s neoliberal rationalisation of the steel industry, typically represented as a region struggling to maintain a narrative of place (Garrett-Jones et al., 2007). Yet, the Illawarra offers complex and textured human narratives, which find expression in their many-layered food stories. This dynamic process not just gives the region its distinctiveness; it also bears testimony to the particularities of its food systems.

Geoff Tansey and Tony Worsley refer to food systems as “...the how and why of what we eat – i.e., how food is produced and reaches our mouths and why we eat what we do” (1995: 1). Food systems consist of complex biological and economic-political processes in which the tangible practices of food production, distribution, consumption and waste management form an intricate unit. Food systems are also underpinned and encoded by the intangible socio-cultural patterns that constitute food culture (Tansey and Worsley, 1995: 2).

This study explores Illawarra’s food systems and the diverse food culture of the people that call it home. It examines the community/school gardens and the farmers’ markets considering them as sites where cultural representations of food production and food consumption respectively take place. The objective is to examine Illawarra’s food culture through the lenses of its demographic heterogeneity and explain how social clusters embody cultural practices to make sense of the world.

Using the north-south divide as a metaphoric conceptualisation of space, this study contends that this spatial split finds equivalence in the Illawarra’s cultural and social diversity and is translated in the ways practices of food production and consumption are social and culturally manifested. Hence, this study asks the pertinent question: do representations of food culture vary according to postcode?

This study conceptually frames the *region* as a discursive formation centred by the interplay between place, people, and the competing values associated with social and cultural diversity. It understands regions as contingent and historical units, rather than ahistorical, consensual, unifying and homogeneous entities. Arguing that

food plays a significant role in the discursive construction of *regions*, this study endeavours to better understand the cultural components of the food systems in the Illawarra.

In a highly interconnected and mobile world, the backlash against globalisation and cultural homogenisation has accentuated the need to better understand the articulation between place, food, and identities. This can be accomplished in different ways: by theorising and analysing how social markers and cultural signifiers contribute to the development of local identities and particularities (Massey, 1984); by examining the actions taken by local peoples to regain control over their food systems; and by evaluating the policies of local governments that in attempting to promote regional development, they are in fact endorsing regionalisation.<sup>1</sup> Local institutions have now realised that only by supporting local economies, social development, promoting cultural capital and endorsing local identities will they be able to assert local particularities and better compete against other regions in attracting economic investment and a sought-after highly mobile and specialised workforce (Barnes et al., 2006).

This study resumes the path outlined by previous works. Particularly acknowledging the roadmap laid down by the 2013 Wollongong City Council's (WCC) *Illawarra Regional Food Strategy*, and the work of Kathleen Gannon (2010), this paper closes the gap left open in the literature. Whereas the former outlines the blueprint for the development of sustainable and fairer food systems, the latter restates the significant role of school gardens in promoting more sustainable schools and communities. This study adds to the field by articulating the Illawarra's cultural specificities with its food systems and its people's ways of life.

## Methodology

### Framework – How food frames the region

Julia Csergo’s (1999) and Barbara Santich’s (2002) works have conceptually framed the present analysis. The former explores the role played by regional cuisines in the project of nation-building after the French Revolution; the latter examines how food frames the *region* through the concepts of regionalism and regionalisation.

Csergo (1999) examines how the strategic categorisation of regional cuisines and cataloguing of regional foods play a fundamental role in ideologically claiming the *region* as a tool of space-management and place-making. Using the metaphor of the “patriotic garden”<sup>2</sup>, Csergo demonstrates how French national elites drawing on regional gastronomic specialities discursively narrated the nation as a cohesive but diverse gastronomic unity. During this period of rapid cultural changes, national elites, in a top-down process, utilised easily identifiable culinary indicators, to map out the newly formed French Republic to its citizens, nurturing the sense of an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991) belonging to a diverse but cohesive nation unified by the plurality of its regional foods.

Csergo’s (1999) study is relevant in the present context for various reasons. It draws our attention to the significant role that the classification of food according to *regions* play in the project of nation-state, by highlighting how a scientific process of qualification, codification and classification of regional food can produce a national gastronomic discourse. Comparable to the effect of administratively dividing the nation into *regions* to maintain political control (over) territory, the naming of regional foods and specialities produces a centralised gastronomic discourse and a unified and overarching narrative of nation. Describing the rich regional gastronomic diversity through the metaphor of a “patriotic garden”, Csergo

highlights the significant role of food as a unifier of an idealised national territory and substantiates the process of regionalism as a top-down process initiated by national elites (1999: 506). By establishing and naming local specialities, hegemonic groups “fix” the values they deem “unique” and rooted in “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), which once culturally integrated, taken-for-granted, and naturalised further validate the project of nation.

Csergo’s conceptual analysis of the *region* across the nineteenth century highlights its relevant role in representations of place subsequent to periods of cultural and social homogenisation (Soja, 1989: 172). Reasserting the discursive character of the *region* as an essentialised and static place *made* for a purpose, it highlights the significant articulation between place and food within the context of nation as a geo-political, cultural, social and economic entity. However, it also reminds us that in the current context of globalisation the *region* can only assert its importance if it becomes a dynamic place, a tool that reclaims local-identity, recognises cultural hybridity, and recasts local economies. It is at this point that Csergo’s analysis intersects Santich’s argument.

In her study of Australian foods, Santich (2002) discerns between regionalism and regionalisation. Defining regionalism as the “foods, food production and consumption practices of a region at a certain time” (2002: 6), Santich asserts that regionalism is static and associated with food and food habits “typical” and unique of that region, often defined by *terroir*. Contending that only countries with a lengthy history of settlement such as China, Italy or France may lay claim to regionalism, Santich (2009) notes that in Australia only the Barossa region in South Australia would qualify for that label. Contrary to regionalism, regionalisation is a dynamic process, and a powerful tool in “region-building” (Santich 2001: 15). Associated with political decentralisation, regionalisation “...implies the purposeful development or

enhancement of foods which differentiate the regions and helps define its identity” (Santich 2002: 6). Regionalisation is associated to local economic development by which “governments or industry create[ing] administrative regions for more efficient programs management and delivery with devolution of power from central administration to regional managers” (Dore and Woodhill in Santich 2002: 6). Regionalisation can be seen as a reaction to globalisation and an attempt to retrieve power from global markets, returning it to the producers (Santich 2002: 7). Thus regionalisation is a progressive process because it encourages local producers to take control over the particularities of place, dynamically articulating them with its people, culture and food habits to generate local identities.

Here Csergo and Santich’s arguments shed light on the analysis of the Illawarra’s food systems. For most of the twentieth century that robust political and economic centralisation identified the Illawarra as one of the national’s industrial strongholds. The role of Illawarra’s food systems that during the nineteenth century had been the main source of local economic revenue, were marginalized. Since the 1980s globalisation has been increasingly counterpointed by decentralisation and regionalisation (Santich, 2002). These dynamic processes are giving the power back to local agencies and communities to have a say over local food systems. In regional Illawarra, the implementation of the programs *Building Better Cites* and the *Illawarra Regional Food Strategy*, analysed elsewhere in this paper, are examples of how policy-making can affect communities, and local food systems.

It is not this study’s intention to claim the Illawarra as a region with distinct speciality or typical foods (regionalism). Instead, I argue that the Illawarra is a region undergoing rapid social change, and experiencing a process of regionalisation which is dynamic and underpinned by non-essentialised values. Endorsing the present concerns over the environment, sustainability and food security, the

Illawarra and its peoples aspire to create more resilient communities and food systems.

It is in this space that the current study of community gardens and farmers’ markets takes place. Examining them as specific sites of food production, distribution and consumption within food systems, they become platforms of social action where individuals are empowered to exercise control over the food they produce and choose to consume.

### **Methods**

A constructionist standpoint and the use of mixed methods of research underpin this study. Data collected include primary and secondary textual resources, media reports, reputable online sources, and material collected in informal personal communications exchanged with individuals responsible for the management of community gardens. The judicious use of these resources considerably expanded the pool of data collected, which would have otherwise been hampered by the variables of time and space. For example, the use of the internet facilitated the virtual communication with community agencies and enabled the access to material released by institutional organisations such as Food Fairness Illawarra.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the non-obtrusive method of direct observation was carried out when visiting farmers’ markets and community gardens.

Ellen Taylor-Powell and Sara Steele (1996) refer to direct observation as “...an underused and valuable method for collecting evaluation information” (Taylor-Powell and Steele, 1996: 1). Valued for providing the opportunity to observe and document activities and behaviours without having to rely on people’s eagerness to respond to questions, direct observation proved to be a reliable method of research in this project. It enabled the researcher to *look at* what people *do* in farmers’ markets whilst shopping and browsing through the stalls; to *see* and *listen* to people in



community gardens, as they went on about their mundane practices of working the land. Direct observation facilitated the collection of valuable data in a non-obtrusive fashion, without interfering with individuals’ routine or impinging on their behaviour whilst allowing them to maintain anonymity. Only individuals whose profiles are part of the public domain are named in this study.

Data collected followed the necessary criteria of unbiased and rigorous note-taking, to record and evaluate different accounts of food culture in two selected communities in the Illawarra: school and community gardens in the south; the popular farmers’ markets in the north.

## **Narrating the Illawarra**

### **Nineteenth century: a colonial agricultural past**

The Illawarra is a thin coastal strip of regional NSW located south of Sydney. Adjoining the Royal National Park in the north, the Illawarra is framed by the Tasman Sea in the east, and a steep escarpment in the west. This narrow strip of land widens to the south, flowing into the rolling and bucolic green farmlands of Shellharbour and Kiama. It comprises three Local Government Authorities (LGA) – Wollongong, Shellharbour and Kiama (Regional Development Australia Illawarra, 2014), and it is home to around 413,210 people (IRIS, 2013). This study focuses on the Wollongong LGA because it is the largest of the three, thus the more representative.

Many have called the Illawarra home. The original owners of the land – the Durwhal people; the early white pioneers and loggers that in a few decades decimated vast red cedar tropical forests; the early dairy farmers that supplied Sydney and NSW with butter and milk; the miners that in successive waves gutted the coal-rich mines

in the northern suburbs; the southern-European blue-collar workers that after the second World War arrived at the local shores to satisfy the labour-hungry Steelworks in Port Kembla; and finally, the more recent influx of affluent middle-class professionals who since the late 1990s have been inducted to work in the thriving knowledge and service-based industries. These are the people that in successive but different ways have contributed to the social and cultural fabric that makes this a place – a region called Illawarra.

Located in a coal-rich area, the Illawarra was for most of the twentieth century predominantly known as an industrial hub. Nevertheless, prior to industrialisation, in the early decades of white settlement, the region contributed to the colony's economy with timber logging and food production, particularly mixed farming staples such as maize, pumpkin, turnips and potatoes (McDonald, 1976: 31). Wheat production was a significant contributor to the region's economy until the 1850s when wheat rust infestations led to consecutive years of total crop losses, steered disheartened farmers from wheat farming, and prompted them to focus instead on grazing and cattle rearing (McDonald, 1976; Sicomb, 1999). The result was a thriving dairy industry, which "...in the latter half of the nineteenth century [made] the Illawarra the main butter-producing area in New South Wales" (Walker, 1960: 7).

When the gold rush came to a halt in the late 1800s, Chinese migrants abandoned the mining districts and moved to the Illawarra where they successfully initiated market gardens (Birchmeir, 1997; The Helensburgh & District Historical Society, 2004). These (mostly) men together with the colonial farmers never ceased to give their valuable input to the region's economy and food systems. To date, their legacy still constitutes a strong marker of local identification; it gives the Illawarra people a robust sense of place and continues to contribute to the region's economy,

particularly in the south where the dairy and cattle industries remain strong (Dayal, 1980).

### **Early twentieth century – the industrial era: BHP and *Australia's Industry World***

Despite the solid integration of agricultural activities in the Illawarra's economy and ways of life, the region's industrialisation at the turn of the nineteenth century brought new people, new habits and new ways of life to the area. The exploration of coalmines in the northern districts and the development of heavy manufacturing industries in the south, etched enduring marks in the Illawarra.

The development of Port Kembla's harbour contributed to the establishment of an industrial and export hub for most of the twentieth century. With new employment opportunities and government-sponsored programs, new migrants were attracted to the region. A labour force, which had thus far been predominantly of Anglo-Saxon background, became thereafter more ethnically-diverse in nature (Burrows, 2012: 55-56). The arrival of southern European unskilled workers throughout the 1950-60s triggered socio-cultural changes that impacted on the local food culture. Italians, Greeks, Spanish, Portuguese and Macedonians were the main ethnic groups settling in the Illawarra, particularly in the areas of Port Kembla, Warrawong and Cringila. In the main from blue-collar and rural backgrounds, these men and women were accustomed to an economy of subsistence, which they upheld by preserving their customary cultural practices, eating habits and maintaining the tradition of having a backyard with a chicken run and a vegetable garden.

To date, these first generation migrants (and some of their children and grandchildren) still hold their backyard and vegetable patch close to their heart, as illustrated in Sandra Pires' short-film *My Backyard Your Backyard* (2012). Capturing

grassroots features of the Illawarra's way of life, the daily routines of three Italian families are simply recounted through the narratives of their food culture. Pires (2012) captured the seasonal tasks associated with the planting, harvesting and preserving of food; feeding the chooks; fetching the freshly laid eggs; the annual ritual of making home-made tomato sauce; the communal meals on summer hot days, and the amicable contests amongst families and friends, to award a prize to the grower of the largest, best-looking and most flavoursome home-grown crop.

These practices, some rituals and others daily routines, have contributed to the maintenance of small-scale food systems and embedded food culture that these men and women have faithfully maintained in the shade of the smokestacks that ruled the region until the early 1980s. This mix of industrial landscape and rural backyards constitutes one of the identification markers of the Illawarra.

### **Late twentieth century: the post-industrial era; a city of Innovation**

The restructuring of the local steel manufacturing industry was one of the effects of the neoliberal rationalisation that characterised the 1980s. Extensive workforce reshuffles led to the retrenchment of as many as 7,000 employees between 1981 and 1983 at the Steelworks-BHP operation in Port Kembla (Phibbs and Mangan in Barnes et al., 2006: 342). In the words of S. Watson, "the steel recession of the 1980s hit the Illawarra region hard. In the space of six months in 1982/83 nearly 20,000 jobs were lost in steel and coal" (1991: 63). The Illawarra had to deal with the economic, social and cultural effects of de-industrialisation.

Wollongong, the largest city and dominant regional LGA in the Illawarra, takes leadership in the process of self-reinvention, aggressive re-development and regional decentralisation. In what Barnes et al. refer to as a "schizophrenic quality"

(Barnes et al., 2006: 343), Wollongong over a period of two decades was relabelled three times in as many consecutive marketing campaigns. From the city of the Leisure Coast in the 1980s, to the city of Diversity in the 1990s, by June 1999 Wollongong was given the logo that it still proudly displays – the City of Innovation (Barnes et al., 2006: 343; Garret-Jones et al., 2007: 2). These events illustrate the rapid socio-cultural shifts that accompanied the restructuring of the local economy.

From 1999 to 2004, a steering committee was instituted to lead the *Wollongong Image Strategy* (Barnes et al., 2006: 343). In alignment with the Australian Commonwealth program *Building Better Cities*, which aims to “... recast cities as players attracting highly mobile capital” (Barnes et al., 2006: 337), the *Wollongong Image Strategy* led by a team of consultants in “image making” and “place-branding” prioritises and welcomes “...potential business, students, gentrifiers, tourists and sea-changers” (Barnes et al., 2006: 343). The impact (and arguably the success) of these policies is highlighted by data released by IRIS in 2013.

Between 2006 and 2011, the region’s population increased by 4.9%, equivalent to 19,000 people (IRIS 2013). The changing nature of the local workforce shows that in 2011, 22.5% (or 18,601 people) of the Illawarra’s workers are professionals (profile.id, 2014a), corresponding to a sustained trend – 11,952 professionals in 1986, increasing to 16,774 in 1996 (O’Shannessy, 2002). During the same period managerial jobs followed a similar drift with a total of 2,944 managers in 1986; 5,349 in 1996 (O’Shannessy, 2002), and 11,496 in 2011 (ABS Illawarra, 2014). The steady increase in white-collar middle class since the 1980s is in stark contrast with figures for the blue-collar workforce.

In 1939 Port Kembla employed 60% of the men in the region (Burrows, 2012: 55). By 1976 the numbers had dropped to 41% (Schultz in Watson, 1990: 62), and by 1991 "...heavy industry employed only 22% of the region's workforce" (Lee in Burrows, 2012: 61). In turn, by 2011 the category of "Technicians and Trade Workers" represented only 15.3% of the total labour force in the Illawarra (profile.id, 2014a).

To better establish the region's demographic profile, an analysis of the household income was undertaken to correlate economic affluence and residence. Based on the 2011 census, 33%, 28% and 30% of households earning more than 2,500 AUD a week are respectively located in the northern suburbs of Austinmere, Thirroul and Wombarra (profile.id, 2014b). By contrast, only 6%, 9% and 11% of households respectively in the southern suburbs of Cringila, Port Kembla and Dapto could claim the same weekly income (profile.id, 2014b).

These figures highlight two significant points this study aims to establish. Firstly, the shifting demographics of the region illustrate the economic structural changes of the Illawarra as it transitions to a post-industrial era. Secondly, it demonstrates the preferential residential location of higher income earners in the northern suburbs, thus supporting a socio-economic rift between the northern and southern districts of the Illawarra.

The next section analyses how these socio-economic and cultural gaps between north and south find expression in food systems, thus addressing one of the key questions this study raises—do representations of food culture vary according to postcode?

## One region, two narratives of food culture/systems

On the cusp of a post-industrial era, community groups in association with local LGAs – Kiama, Shellharbour and Wollongong – are cooperating to construct more sustainable local food systems. The *Illawarra Regional Food Strategy* is the blueprint for a more sustainable future. The policy-making document claims that its purpose is “to identify how the partner Councils can best ensure that the important role of food in the lives of our community, and the future of our region, is recognised and enhanced” (Illawarra Regional Food Strategy, 2013: 15).

The document clearly describes:

*...how, in partnership with our community, agencies, businesses and organisations, the Illawarra Councils can work together towards a vision for: a vibrant, sustainable local food system that is resilient, prosperous, fair and secure. (Illawarra Regional Food Strategy, 2013: 15)*

A clear plan for action, the *Illawarra Regional Food Strategy* supports decision-making and facilitates action across a range of community organisations. In partnership with the LGAs, community groups have set their own goals to embark on innovative approaches to food systems, favouring, maintaining and strengthening the traditional links that the Illawarra has always had with the land.

In the following section the work implemented by some of these agencies is explored. Starting with the community/school gardens in the southern suburbs of Dapto and Cringila, we then proceed to the farmers’ market in the northern suburb of Bulli.

### **Food Production in the South: Community and School Gardens**

According to the local organisation Food Fairness Illawarra (2014a) there are seventeen community gardens peppered throughout the region. Ten of them are located in the southern suburbs, of which Warrawong hosts two; in turn, Cringila, Port Kembla and the historically agricultural suburb of Dapto account for one in each locality. The Dapto Community Farm and the school garden in Cringila have been chosen to illustrate how small communities using community gardens can regain control over local food systems and implement social change.

Dapto Community Farm is a well-established project that manages garden markets in stretches of fertile soil. Located within the perimeter of the Mountain Range Farm, this community project is an example of a mixed business where private and social enterprises work collaboratively.

The land housing the Mountain Range Farm was originally a large dairy farm that in 1960s became a privately owned flower plantation – Flowerville (Dapto Community Farm, 2015). In 1984, Flowerville was abandoned subsequent to the February floods, “...the largest 24-hour rainfall ever recorded in temperate Australia...” (Nanson and Hean, 1985: 249). After decades of neglect, in 2001 the present owner, Lance Carr, purchased the five-hectare property to develop a wholesale plant nursery. Carr’s ambition was to run a commercial organic palm-tree farm alongside “...several business and community organisations” (Mountain Range Farm, 2014). The successful implementation of this objective witnessed the Mountain Range Farm taking part in several community projects, of which the Dapto Community Farm is the most recent.

The Dapto Community Farm is described as a “non-profit association operating an organic vegetable farm” (Dapto Community Farm, 2014). Its objective is to “involve



the community in growing organic food and therefore provide them with the opportunity to find out about the benefits to themselves, their community and the earth" (Dapto Community Farm, 2014). The two-hectare community garden consists of 30 to 80 metre-length raised concrete garden beds, where vegetables, herbs and flowers are grown according to organic principles (Dapto Community Farm, 2014). For a small monthly fee of \$8AUD to \$40AUD, depending on the size of the land leased, locals gain membership and access to the use of cool rooms, packaging rooms, and washrooms, which ensure hygienic and safe standards of food storage.

Lance Carr explained that most of the Dapto Community Farm's harvest is consumed by the lessees (personal communication with author 22 November 2014). Any surplus goes into a system of food distribution consisting of vegetable boxes sold directly to the public twice a week in stalls at the farm's entrance. Alongside these amateur growers, small self-employed farmers, using sustainable techniques and organic principles of land management, produce vegetables that supply the commercial food chain. Whilst some of this produce is distributed to the central Sydney Flemington markets for wholesale, the rest is sold at the local farmers' markets, community co-ops, and Wollongong's fine food restaurants willing to support local producers and endorse sustainable practices of food production.

The Dapto Community Farm is a project that integrates social enterprise and independent members of the community. It successfully incorporates small communities into small-scale food-systems, promoting their connection with the land, fostering capacity-building and self-sufficiency. Importantly this project gives small farmers access to land, enables self-employment and encourages the development of local food systems. As Helen La Trobe (2001) argues, when the chain between production, distribution and consumption is shortened, food miles are

reduced, communication and trust between producer and consumer consolidates, possibly paving the way for changes in the current large-scale industrial farming.

Similar grassroots projects are proactively motivating adults and school children to work the land. In the suburb of Cringila, *Permaculture Partners-Living Classrooms* is an exciting and promising project launched in 2003 at the Cringila Primary School. Since then the project has been successfully extended to other five schools, all of which are located in the southern suburbs of Wollongong – Kemblawarra, Lake Heights and Port Kembla Public Schools and Warrawong Public and High Schools.

In the schools where the program *Permaculture Partners-Living Classrooms* is implemented, the aim is to engage students in "... learning practical skills and more importantly learning motivational skills which will empower them in their future" (Warrawong High School, 2015). These are significant goals in any school demographic even more so in the southern suburbs of the Illawarra an area, which has historically had high youth unemployment,<sup>4</sup> and a socio-economic disadvantaged and diverse ethnic population.

A case study published by Sustainable Schools NSW, describes the Cringila Public School population as consisting of 156 enrolled students. Of these, 3% are Indigenous Australians, 45% are from Arabic background, 35% from Macedonian background and 10% from African background (NSW Government, nd). The same document found that the *Permaculture Partners-Living Classrooms* program provides the school population with "... vocational and educational opportunities leading to employment, and to build community, business and school partnerships" (NSW Government, nd).



Figure 1: Warrawong High School—*Permaculture Partners-Living Classroom's* students (reproduction with permission by an authorised person)

Similar conclusions were found in a study conducted by Kathleen Gannon in 2010, that included nineteen Australian and New Zealander schools, one of which was the Cringila Primary School. Gannon (2010) analysed the socio-cultural and economic benefits arising from the implementation of permaculture in school curriculums. Gannon's conclusions highlight the advantages of a food-production centred curriculum because it “provided a stimulating environment for students, staff and the wider community” (2010: 2), giving communities and schools the chance to create more sustainable future for themselves.

These studies show consensus in validating the significant role that food can play in building resilient communities. The use of community gardens and school gardens implement inclusive practices of knowledge-transfer, community empowerment, and create opportunities for more sustainable patterns of regional food production, distribution and consumption, inducing healthier food habits and a better appreciation of food. These are significant indicators that if integrated in policy-making may offer far-reaching social benefits, particularly in the current environment where systemic diseases like obesity and diabetes are starting to take a heavy toll on individual well-being, health institutions and government budgets.

Pursuing to find the answer to the question guiding this study – do representations of food culture vary according to postcodes, the next section explores farmers’ markets in the region’s northern suburbs and examines the cultural representations associated with food distribution/consumption within food systems.

### **Food Consumption in the North: Farmer’s Markets, Style, Leisure, and Food Culture**

The structural changes experienced by the Illawarra over recent decades have affected the region deeply. As I contend, these shifts have not just been experienced differently in the northern and southern suburbs of the Illawarra; their manifestations in the local food systems also differ.

Aspiring to be perceived as a cosmopolitan centre with a vibrant food culture, the Wollongong LGA has endorsed the local hospitality industry. Enthusiastically supporting the revitalisation of the Wollongong Central Business District (CBD), a \$200 million redevelopment was launched in October 2014. Areas previously considered “dead spots”, have since become alive with bars and tapas restaurants adding to the number of outlets which already existed in the Keira Street food strip.

The vibrant cosmopolitan food culture implemented in the Wollongong CBD extends to the Illawarra’s northern suburbs. Cafés, restaurants, boutiques and speciality shops populate previously dormant mining townships that have over the last three decades undergone vigorous redevelopment. The old miners’ cottages of Coalcliff, Wombarra and Bulli are now the residence of middle-class families and single professionals who bought the initial owners out of the area, and claim it as their own, by shaping it to their own needs and aspirations. The small villages of Austinmer and Thirroul have seen real estate values pushed to median prices of

\$968,000 and \$892,000 respectively, as reported by Residex at the end of the 2014-2015 Financial Year (Residex, 2015).

To the newcomers, the Illawarra offers a coastal village atmosphere, a stylised but nostalgic lifestyle. As part of this stylised world, food holds a significant place, and services associated with its provision are in great demand because they cater for affluent patrons eager to have access to items of consumption that endorse regimes of taste and style (Bell, 2002; Highmore, 2013). It is in this environment that food culture flourishes and farmers’ markets have found keen audiences because they are perceived as spaces where lifestyle and practices of consumption intersect.

According to Food Fairness Illawarra there are ten “wonderful local markets”, which the local residents are enticed to visit “to support local produce and have a great time” (Food Fairness Illawarra 2014a).

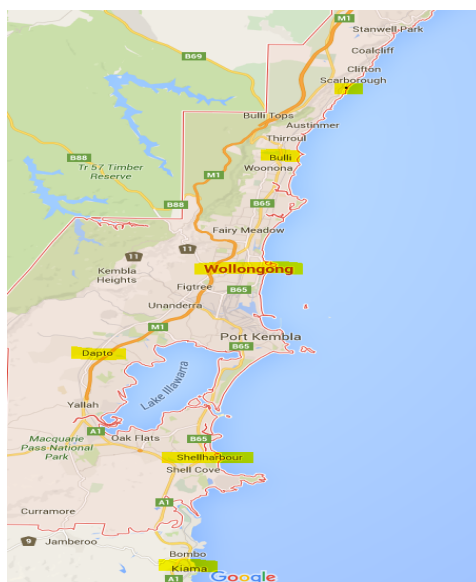


Figure 2: Illawarra map. Locations of farmers’ markets are highlighted (Food Fairness Illawarra 2014a)

As Figure 2 illustrates, the markets are scattered throughout the region and have different *modus operandi*: from frequency (weekly/monthly), to days of operation

(weekday/weekend), and systems of governance regulating who sells what, where and how. These differences create hierarchies of value and indexes of classification, which are produced and arbitrated by the Australian Farmers' Market Association (AFMA). Amongst a wide range of classificatory parameters one stands out – the markets accreditation by this institution. In the Illawarra only the Bulli Foragers Farmers' Market and the Kiama Farmers' Market comply with the AFMA's system of accreditation. This factor is of paramount relevance because it legitimises the markets and endorses them with a significant marketing promotional tool, in particular for populations that advocate the principles heralded in currently popular discourses, and that the AFMA proclaims and clearly defines.

*A Farmers' Market is a predominantly fresh food market that operates regularly within a community, at a focal public location that provides a suitable environment for farmers and food producers to sell farm-origin and associated value-added foods and plant products directly to customers. (Australian Farmers' Markets Association, 2015b)*

In this study the focus is on the most recently launched event – the Foragers Market – located in the northern suburb of Bulli. In July 2014, the local daily newspaper, *The Illawarra Mercury* reported that “[A]round six thousand people flocked to the inaugural Foragers' Markets at Bulli Showground for a chance to hang out, listen to live music or stock up on fresh produce” (Fuller, 2014). The high number of visitors was arguably the result of a competently organised publicity campaign, fully supported by the local media in the days preceding the event. The markets' organiser Kirrilly Sinclair, claimed in an interview to *The Illawarra Mercury*:

*It wouldn't have happened if the community didn't want it. I could build a beautiful market but it's up to the community whether or not it works, and I think today they said 'absolutely' that this is what they want. (Sinclair in Fuller, 2014)*

Sinclair's determination in organising the event is unveiled in the markets' website, which asserts:

*...founded by Kirrily Sinclair, an ex-Sydney-sider who moved to the northern beaches with her family to enjoy the beautiful coastal lifestyle and all it has to offer. She quickly recognised the need for a market supporting farmers and makers and bringing the community together. Already having a love affair with markets, she decided to start one up. (Foragers Market, 2014)*

The markets have continued to receive robust advertising endorsement via social media and the Foragers website. In addition, large colourful banners are strategically displayed by the side of the Princes Highway to catch the attention of local residents and Sydney-siders driving through the area for a scenic Sunday drive.

To maximise the AFMA's endorsement and validate the markets accreditation, the Foragers website describes the event with narratives that have become discursively familiar. Laying claims to the markets' "uniqueness" and "authenticity" they trumpet the quality of the produce sold in the stalls; the low food miles; the use of fair trade practices; and promote the "wonderful producers who believe in staying away from nasty chemicals ... love sustainable farming and really take the hard road" (Foragers Market, 2014). These statements, which are constantly recycled in the media, have become cachet in portrayals of farmers' markets, and are described in literature. For example, Wolf et al. (2005) report that the popularity of farmers' markets is associated with consumers' expectations for fresh food of high quality, whilst La Trobe (2001) highlights the markets' role in restoring social interaction and relations of trust between producer and buyers by "...increasing accountability and building consumer confidence" (La Trobe, 2001: 182).

Foragers Market's website also describes it as a place for community building. Depicted as a place where people "connect with the community", share "food stories" and experience "togetherness and mutual support" (Foragers Market, 2014), the markets are described as a safe place built upon relations of trust where everyone goes about their business in a carefree and friendly way. Direct

observation undertaken for this study reveals how much thought and planning has gone into offering the Foragers' Market's patrons a safe place for relaxation, leisure, fun, quirkiness, and the exercise of stylised practices of consumption. The market's popularity is suggestive of how these attributes are highly valued by regular customers. Amongst these features, eating and enjoying food in a relaxed atmosphere takes priority.

Taking advantage of Bulli's countryside feeling, a large *al fresco* sitting area has been carefully created providing ample space with outdoor-furniture for visitors to leisurely enjoy food, as they relax to the sound of live music. These added-features have increased the venue's popularity by meeting patrons' expectations, providing them with a relaxed but stylish social setting where people come together in what Ray Oldenburg (1989) coined as the "third place". In his study of urban city dwellers, Oldenburg (1989) refers to "third place" as venues that are neither work nor home. Instead, they constitute places where people come together in brief encounters to produce ephemeral communities of "loose ties" (Oldenburg, 1989), usually only lasting as long as the encounter does. Corroborating with Clare C. Hinrichs' argument that "[D]irect agriculture markets promise human connection at the place where production and consumption of food converge" (2000: 295), this study notes that the Foragers Market has become more than a place for the supply of food; it is a "third place" where fleeting communities come together on Sunday mornings to enjoy an idealised and relaxing environment where they enact practices of stylised food consumption.



Figure 3: Bulli Foragers Market (photos by author)



In contrast to the outdoor atmosphere where food is leisurely consumed, inside the large Showground pavilion, four rows of stalls display and sell an assorted range of fresh and value-added food. Over a period of three months, direct observation was undertaken, stalls were tallied and averages were calculated. The number of fresh vegetables and fruit stalls varies greatly from week to week: from a minimum of two, to a maximum of eight, stallholders advertise their produce's origin with large signs. Produce comes from as far afield as Orange (320km northwest of Wollongong) and Brayton, near Goulbourn (153km southwest of Wollongong), to as nearby as Campbelltown (53km north of Wollongong). Noticeably, there is an absence of produce locally grown in the community gardens of the region. One stand selling fresh seafood from Moruya in the NSW South Coast makes irregular appearances. In turn, Black Angus beef from Mooby Valley in the Hunter Valley (320km north of Wollongong) and cured meats by Bäcka Gourmet Foods from Queensland, are permanent attendees. Dairy products are also sold – some locally produced in Gerringong, others from Mudgee in regional NSW. The diverse provenance of these products raises questions about the meaning of *local* food, which as Hope and Henryks note "...is a highly contested and nuanced concept through which multiple economic, social, environmental and psychological criteria intersect" (2013: 95). However, the vast majority of stalls in Bulli sell locally produced value-added food, with an average number of twenty stands, the majority selling hot cooked food, others selling jams, chutneys, dainty cupcakes, breads, chocolate bonbons and other gourmet foods.

Barbara Santich observes that food locally produced, or "food of the region" (2002: 13), is more often than not represented by trendy gourmet foods. Arguably, these value-added products contribute to the development of the local economy by providing an income to small business and self-employees. Nonetheless, their prevalence at the markets also raises questions about the impact these farmers' markets really have on the local systems of sustainable fresh food production, which

as the AFMA proclaims is their intended objective. In fact, C.C. Hinrichs, acknowledging that farmers' markets are sites of relevant social interaction, also raises the question "...are they most fundamentally markets like any other, but with the gloss of *gemeinschaft*?" (2000: 298).

In the light of these findings, and validating the original hypotheses, the Bulli Foragers Market is more than a place for the supply of food. If on the one hand the market is a platform for the distribution, exchange and consumption of food thus arguably contributing for the development of local food systems, the market is also a place where the embodiment of symbolic cultural practices takes place. Read as a text, the direct observation of the market attendees sitting in the *al fresco* area whilst socialising, conversing, eating, relaxing and listening to music, reminds us of symbolic forms of social and cultural capital which stand for choice, style, taste, leisure, and fun, which constitute the lifestyle values and dispositions kept in high regard by affluent middle-class cohorts (Bell, 2002). These findings are in alignment with previous studies, in particular with research undertaken in Scotland, where Carey et al. claim that "...urban consumers reported enjoyment of shopping at Farmers' markets as a lifestyle activity" (2011: 304).

## Conclusion

This paper examined community/school gardens and farmers' markets as representations of food systems in the Illawarra. Guided by the question: do representations of food culture vary according to postcode?, this study established the discursive production of *region* by highlighting the interplay between place, people, and the role of food in their ways of life.

Noting the Illawarra's social, cultural and economic specificities, this paper demonstrated how the region's demographic diversity finds expression in practices that enact food culture, endorse local food systems, counterpoint globalisation and promote the assertion of local identities. Further, this study established the preferential place-specificity in cultural representations of food systems. In the affluent northern suburbs of the Illawarra, food culture has become part of lifestyle choices and practices of consumption. Here, the trend has found expression in farmers' markets as sites of consumption. By contrast, in the south, dynamic grassroots organisations are determined to use community and school gardens as places where the enactment of practices of food production, empower communities and provide them with the "strategies [that] have the potential to become harbingers of a new shift in food and agricultural activism" (Alkon, 2014: 28).

This paper illustrated the enduring cultural role of food. Centring the analysis in the Illawarra, a region undergoing a process of deep social, cultural and economic shifts, this study demonstrated how cultural representations of food are time-specific and fragmented along the vectors of class and place. If, as Julia Csergo clearly described, food played a pivotal role in the nineteenth century project of nation-state, through the discursive construction of essentialised regions, under the current conditions of globalisation the cultural role of food in processes of regionalisation is still prevalent. This paper has established that in the twenty-first century the region still plays a significant role as a platform where cultural representations of food are enacted, only this time as contingent sites of struggle and un-evenness, constantly being destabilised; sites where the articulation between place and food is called into being for the production, reproduction and performance of cultural identities.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Santich's (2002) description of the term is analysed in this work.

<sup>2</sup> In post-revolutionary France, Geography was taught at school with maps divided into regions, each represented by a garden growing vegetables, fruits or foods 'typical' of each area.

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<sup>3</sup> Described as a “not-for-profit alliance of community groups, individuals, agencies and government organisations, administered by Healthy Cities Illawarra, committed to good food for all.”

<sup>4</sup> According to the Australian Local Government Association, in 2014 the rates of youth unemployment in the Illawarra were 18.4%, with the national average at 12.6%.

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