

“SUNSHINE HAS A TASTE, YOU KNOW”

Using regional food memoirs to develop values-based food practices

Donna Lee Brien

Central Queensland University

Margaret McAllister

Central Queensland University

Abstract

Alongside providing a source of entertainment, the growth in food media of all kinds reflects a genuine consumer interest in knowing more about food. While there is culinary information available that serves to educate in relation to food-related practices (shopping, food preparation, cooking, eating out) in ways that can serve to build confidence and enthusiasm, we propose that, in order for new food practices to be not only adopted, but sustained, consumers need to hone and develop personal values that will complement their technical and practical knowledge. This is the marrying of evidence-based and values-based practice that makes for sustained change in personal habits and practices (Fulford 2008). This discussion proposes that regional food memoirs – and specifically those by food producers – can arouse interest and curiosity, build knowledge in regional food systems, and connect consumers to food

producers and production. This, we propose, can activate consumers to develop and embed the kind of learning that reinforces a belief in the need to be an ‘authentic consumer’. An authentic consumer is one who knows themselves, their own needs and desires, and makes choices consciously rather than automatically. It follows that an authentic food consumer is engaged with their local food systems and aware of the challenges that confront these systems. A small, but indicative range of memoirs of Australian regional food memoirs, are profiled to examine values, such as being empathic, respectful, compassionate and altruistic, which enhance the possibility for a person to become an authentic consumer.

Keywords

Values-based knowledge, food memoir, food writing

writing about my life on the land is a way of explaining what it is I actually do. Unlike many jobs ... farming goes on unobserved ... The farm is my canvas through which I can express so many things. (Newell, in Ryan, n.d.)

Alongside providing a source of entertainment, the growth in food media of all kinds reflects a genuine consumer interest in knowing much more about food. A recent instance of this was the so-called ‘MasterChef effect’ (Hunter, 2010). When this competitive cookery television show was at its height of popularity in Australia, major supermarket chains reported significantly increased sales of ingredients after they featured in recipes on the show. There was also an acknowledgement that a high proportion of this increased spending was on fresh produce including seafood and specific specialist cuts of meats, and basic processed foods such as bread, cheese, yogurt or prepared stocks, rather than highly processed, pre-prepared foods (Australian Food

News, 2010). Despite some cynicism around the claim, this increased interest in all products culinary—including food writing—was dubbed the ‘MasterChef effect’ and the term has moved into more general use (Brien, 2104), although there is no evidence on how lasting the phenomenon itself has been.

While there is much culinary information available in various media that serves to educate people on food-related practices (shopping, food preparation, cooking, eating out) in ways that can serve to build confidence and enthusiasm, we propose that this is only one side of the story. In addition to acquiring a solid foundation of knowledge and skills, and adopting new food practices, these practices need to be sustained. If sustained, the longer term benefit will be delivered in terms of the replacement of mindless consumerism – that is, material consumption that is driven by habit, fashion, coercion, or subliminal manipulation (McCracken, 2001) – with a consumer culture that is more mindful and authentic. Authentic consumers are those who: have a clear self-identity; know their likes and dislikes, needs and desires; and make choices based on these preferences, rather than on manufactured desires (Sheth et al., 2011). To become authentic consumers, individuals need to hone and develop personal values that will complement their technical and practical knowledge. This is the marrying of evidence-based and values-based practice that makes for sustained change in personal habits and practices (Fulford, 2008).

While values-based practice seems to be mostly written about in terms of health and social care (McCance et al., 2013; McCormack, 2004; O’Halloran and Blackwood, 2010; Scott et al., 2011), its basic premises can be utilised in thinking about the provision of information about, and education on, regional food systems. As in the health care system where the so-called ‘medical model’ of objective, rational decision making prevails over all, much food writing about sustainable regional food systems emphasises the development

of evidence-based practice, which tends to privilege the use of rationalism, objectivity, pre-set outcomes and an examination of ‘the problem’ in these terms (Mullen and Streiner, 2004). Overlooked in this endeavour is the development of an appreciation of subjective experience and, as Fulford (2008) argues, the development of a more values-based practice. That is, where actions are taken not just out of reason and logic, but because of passion and feeling. Rebalancing, so that both evidence-based and values-based practices are achieved, enhances the likelihood that practitioners are at once skilled in making objective decisions and taking actions that are considered world’s best practice, while at the same time able to be empathic and compassionate so that the object of the decisions and actions (be they patients or diners), feel as though their unique needs have been catered to (O’Halloran and Blackwood, 2010).

This paper draws upon a recently developed teaching and learning experience that harnessed the power that memoirs (of eating disorder) possess to connect readers with the wider world (Brien and McAllister, 2013; McAllister et al., 2014). In this case, we examine how regional food memoirs – and specifically those by regional food producers – can arouse interest and curiosity, build knowledge in regional food systems, and connect consumers to the process and reality of food producers and production. This, we propose, can activate a reader to develop and embed the kind of learning that reinforces a belief in the need to be an authentic consumer who knows his- or herself, acts consciously rather than automatically, and is engaged with the local food system and its challenges. Through this learning, the reader has the potential, therefore, to become an empathic and respectful consumer, sensitive to cultural and social factors around food production and distribution. In this context, we define and profile a small, but indicative, range of Australasian regional food memoirs by food producers, focusing on the potential of these memoirs to assist consumers in developing a more values-based practice when it comes to food preparation and consumption.

The regional Australian food memoir

A memoir is a record of events written by a person having intimate knowledge of these events, where this narrative is based, at least in part, on the personal observation and memory of the author, and wherein the author does their best to relate the truth of what happened (Couser, 2012; Gutkind, 2012; Yagoda, 2009). In the contemporary publishing environment, memoirs are increasingly, but not always, written autobiographically (that is, the author is the main subject of the memoir), but these differ from the kinds of texts known as autobiographies in that memoirs present an aspect or part of a life rather than a full-blown account of the entire life, which is the definition of an autobiography. Biographical memoirs are written about a part of someone’s life by someone who has observed it (Brien, 2006).

The memoir is a popular form of non-fiction text with contemporary readers (Feather and Woodbridge, 2007) and, therefore, has the ability to relate a significant amount of material beyond the actions of the narrator or his or her subject (Gutkind, 2000). In terms of relaying information about food, Ame Gilberta identifies writing as the medium “most used to frame food” and lists forms from “the poetically concise language of recipe, biographical subtext of cookbooks, or narrative food memoir, to countless literary passages where food speaks about time, place, desire and connection” (2006: 389). Alasdair Pettinger adds that food writing can “offer Geertzian ‘thick descriptions’ of eating and drinking experiences that condense a range of conflicting feelings, and acquaint us with some of the economic, social and cultural tensions that lie behind them” (2008: online). The food memoir (which, by definition, narrates the gastronomic and other food-related aspects of the author’s life) is a form of food writing that has the potential to relate important information about food in an easily consumed and digestible form. Some food memoirs fit into the confessional/survival sub-genre and narrate extreme experience –

examples here would be those memoirs written by cooks and chefs such as *Heat: An Amateur's Adventures as Kitchen Slave, Line Cook, Pasta Maker, and Apprentice to a Dante-Quoting Butcher in Tuscany* (2006), Bill Buford's tale of career change from New York-based editor to cook, and celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay's *Roasting in Hell's Kitchen: Temper Tantrums, F Words, and the Pursuit of Perfection* (2006) and *Playing with Fire* (2007). Memoirs by competitive eaters (Fagone, 2006; Nerz, 2006) and by those with eating disorders could be added to this group (Brien, 2013).

While many such popular contemporary memoirs are read for the pleasure of consuming this content – which describes experiences often very different to those of the reader's life – Lee Gutkind has described how memoirs that have lasting value engage with a sense of wider cultural memory and history. These memoirs endure as works of literature because they are “unique on a personal level, but universal so that all readers can understand and relate” to the messages they relay (Gutkind, 2000). A number of food memoirs by Australian primary producers fall into this second category. One reason for this is that these memoirs support “statistical representations of the ‘average farmer’ ... [that] conceal more than they reveal” by assisting readers to, in Geoffrey Lawrence and Ian Gray's terms, “grasp what might be happening ‘down on the farm’” (2000: 33) – an unknown world for many of today's consumers. Unlike smaller countries like England or the Netherlands, farm activities are not on display during a normal commute in Australia. Most farms are well out of the way of the population and thus seasonal indicators of the food cycle – such as sowing, harvesting, fattening cattle and so on – showing what products may soon become available, are not visible for most consumers. Reading about the daily life of the farmer provides a meaningful connection between consumer and farmer, but also between the eater and the food. Another reason is that such memoirs narrate stories of regionality that are of national interest and significance. Sharon Butala suggests, moreover, that even the most seemingly straightforward career-focused memoirs contain

an underlying narrative of value because, whatever their station in life, working people “write about what they have learned in life” (2010: 23) and, at their best, “help advance the individual’s ideas about what it means to be human, what one’s possibilities are, and what one’s responsibilities as a member of the human race might be” (37).

While the Australasian food memoir has received some scholarly attention recently (Brien, 2011; 2012), this is still a nascent field of study when compared to overseas examples and, especially, American food memoirs. There, Barbara Frey Waxman’s foundational study of the food memoir focused on:

The kind of culinary memoir that chronicles the growth and development of the memoirist through the lens of food memories, in narratives that either begin with childhood or that interpose frequent flashbacks to earliest formative experiences ... that, like the bildungsroman, traces the evolution of the youth into a mature food aficionado, into a food professional, and (often) into a contented adult. (2008: 364)

Waxman purposefully did not address what she describes as “another form of autobiographical food writing that describes a writer’s recent adult experiences with food”, although she does note that “this type of food writing is also extremely popular and has literary merits” (2008: 364). This not only shows the recentness of scholarly interest in this form of memoir, but also how rich the field is for scholars and those with an interest in the form outside the academy. Our purpose in this paper is to show how these memoirs – of the “writer’s recent adult experiences with food” – can be useful in building values-based practice in terms of food consumption, because of what they reveal about food production.

Such memoirs also harness (and, to a certain extent, arise from) the current popularity of paddock-to-plate eating, and the increasing profile given to certain farmers by restaurateurs, food magazines and others. This situation, indeed, prompted Julia Reed to posit that the food producer is new celebrity

star when it comes to food: “Superstar chefs are a dime a dozen. The new foodie hero (is) the farmer” (2010). We suggest that this heralds an opportunity to appreciate, and perhaps to utilise peoples’ desire for a more meaningful connection between the food they choose to eat and how it has been grown. Thus it is not just what people *do* eat, but what they *would like* to eat – an example of values-based practice. While, in comparison with international publishing in this area, there are a modest number of Australian¹ food memoirs of any kind, this is a part of the contemporary publishing industry that is currently is growing to meet reader demand (Brien, 2011).

Narrating regional identity

In selecting a sub-genre of food memoir that relates regional food experience, which we call the regional food memoir, we follow historian Katherine Morrissey’s assertion that regions are what she describes as “mental territories” in which the “boundaries ... are those they [the residents] draw themselves. Perceptual regions are created and developed in people’s minds. They are vague, shifting ideas, but they engender strong loyalties” (Morrissey, 1997: 8). We also draw on the way historian Kathleen Conzen understands regional identity and regionality as a dynamic force, being influenced by, and influencing, culture more broadly:

Scholarship ... long focused on identifying sets of objective characteristics common to a geographical area and uncommon elsewhere ... But to historians, such objective makers of “regionality” are of less intrinsic interest than is the culture that generates them and the assumptions, habits, and norms that shape and are shaped by a region’s culture. (2001: 91)

The idea of what specific geographical space is being referred to in terms of regional identity also shifts in terms of context – the same individual may, for instance, identify with a local village/town, larger geographical area, and even a single nation state in differing circumstances (as one of the authors of

this paper found in a study of chefs in two country towns in the New England shire of New South Wales, see Brien, 2008).

This means that the term ‘regional’ ultimately refers to a self-understanding of identity that is emotional, cognitive and shifting, rather than stable and purely driven by location. As Andrew Robert Lee Cayton and Susan E. Gray write in their introduction to their collection of essays on regional history, *The American Midwest*,

regionality is about how people locate themselves intellectually and emotionally within complicated landscapes and networks of social relations ... we assume that identity exists as a fundamentally political process, and what gives it vitality are the many voices together continually contesting, negotiating, and redefining the Midwest. Thinking about regional history, therefore, necessarily leads us to focus on the stories people tell about themselves. (2001: 4)

Like these editors, we have also located expressions of regional identity and, by extension, ‘regionality’, in forms of self-storytelling – and, in this case, in the self-storytelling in the book-length memoir. To illustrate the potential of these works in terms of mobilising values-based practice, the below discussion will consider three high profile memoirists.

Patrice Newell

Patrice Newell is a biodynamic farmer turned memoirist. Newell brings to both tasks a background in journalism with a high profile career in television as a reporter and presenter. That was until, in 1986, she took up running a 10,000 acre beef cattle property on the historic property ‘Elmswood’ in the upper Hunter Valley in New South Wales. Newell sums up her central motivation as a farmer as: “the land must define its use” (Claxton Speakers, 2010). She thus first established a biodynamic beef production business, supplying butchers and restaurants in the Sydney region and establishing a

home delivery operation for individual local consumers, as well as exporting to Europe. Then, in 1997, she established an olive grove to produce olive oil. She wrote about the experience of raising beef and olives in her first book, *The Olive Grove* (2000) which Newell describes as a “sea change” story, one of “learning of the drama of farming – of floods and droughts and the mustering of cattle – and of my struggle to plant and protect our first olive trees” (Newell, 2010). In 2003, she followed this volume with *The River*, a book that begins as the story of the small stream that flows through her property (and which can flood with violent consequences), but which develops into a thoughtful consideration of the complex issues many farmers face in terms of water security. *The River* chronicles her fight to save the waterway when she discovers a new coalmine is to be established upstream. Mark Tredinnick describes the memoir’s wide-ranging subject matter as:

the story of a farm and a river in drought, the natural history of a river, the author’s truncated walk from the river’s rise to its sad end, the threat of the mine, the tending of her olive groves, the convoluted geology (wonderfully encapsulated) of the river’s terrain, something of the aboriginal possession of the river, something of her life on the land with Phillip Adams and their daughter Aurora. (2003: 116)

Ten Thousand Acres: A Love Story (2006) continues this trilogy about her relationship with the land and how this is manifested through her quest to develop sustainable agricultural methods that are environmentally responsible. This volume includes many beautiful pictures, and aims, in her words and these images, to move beyond the rhetoric of debate to the heartfelt meaning of story:

beyond the angers and arguments of debates on ecology and climate change to the deepest feelings we have for our farm and the wild landscape that embraces it ... beyond the crops and the cattle, high above the olive groves and the old homestead into the old stories hidden in its hundred hills and valleys. (Newell, 2010)

Ten Thousand Acres powerfully narrates how, as a farmer, Newell both lovingly tends and deeply appreciates the land she farms. She confesses, for instance, that her first touch of soil, wind and leaf on Elmswood was “wondering, awed and tentative” (Newell, in Bantick, 2006) and how, since then, she has grown to love the farm deeply, despite the hard work and, at times, heartbreaking disappointment, involved in this task. The relationship is most easily expressed, Newell states, as one of environmental responsibility: “To be a good farmer, you must keep the land alive” (Newell, in Bantick, 2006). This statement emphasises the point we wish to make about values-based practice because it denotes a way of working that goes beyond good technical farming practice, to a more compassionate, ethical practice.

Even Newell’s *Tree to Table: Cooking with Australian Olive Oil* (2008) is much more than the practical guide the subtitle presents. The text does provide considerable information on such aspects as purchasing and storing olive oil and how to discern their various flavour profiles. It also provides recipes for breads, dips, infusions, dressings, soups, salads, seafood, risotto, pasta, meat and desserts all featuring olive oil provided by both herself and a series of famous Australian chefs including Stephanie Alexander, Maggie Beer, Tony Bilson, Kylie Kwong and Damien Pignolet. What really brings this text to life, however, is the underpinning narrative of Newell as olive farmer, and what she writes about her farm, her kitchen and her life as a regionally based producer. In this, her celebration of Australian olive oil is always filtered through her memoirist’s single consciousness of the oil that she produces:

Clearly, I love extra virgin olive oil; its ancient origins, manifold produce and sublime flavours. There are over nine million olive trees growing in Australia, but they represent only 0.7 percent of the world’s olive industry. As the concept of traceability from farm to kitchen grows ever more important, the argument for local olive oil gathers serious weight. (Newell, 2010)

In order to make this argument, Newell attempts to personally connect with the reader – going beyond describing how the olives are grown to involve the

reader in her own life: “Beyond the olive grove I invite you into our nineteenth-century homestead and discuss everything there is to know about Australian olive oil” (Newell, 2010).

Continuing in this vein, Newell also describes in interviews how, in 2006, she began growing garlic on a commercial scale when her friend, a retired vegetable farmer, Graeme Ayton, “offered her some bulbs of hard-neck purple garlic that he had raised successfully from seed stock in Victoria” (Newell, in Ratcliff, 2010). Again, in describing this venture, Newell focuses on environmental sustainability and crop diversity, trialling several varieties that can be grown organically and biodynamically. Rather than try to force the garlic to suit her situation (using chemicals, for instance), Newell describes how the crop likes to grow and be harvested:

Garlic hates weeds more than anything, and it doesn't like to share its space ... It responds to its position and won't thrive with weeds around, so weed management is crucial, which means an awful lot of bending down ... Growing garlic is incredibly intensive; it has to be harvested at a very precise time [dry weather with low humidity] ... When it rains, the cloves fill with water, a head of garlic can trap four tablespoons of water, which inhibits the garlic's ability to dry properly. (Newell, in Ratcliff, 2010)

In such narration, the garlic becomes a character in the story, with its own habits, likes and dislikes, which the farmer must try to serve. Although Newell never shies away from the business side of what she does, and often describes herself in business terms – “I run a 10 000 acre farm which grows biodynamic beef, olives for olive oil and garlic” (Newell, in Ryan, n.d.), she also clearly positions herself as loving her farm and the land it inhabits, and having found a place there: “the decision to live in the country and become a land manager was a truly conscious one and I know this is where I belong” (Newell, in Ryan, n.d.).

It is the way these multiple, but integrated, roles as activist, primary producer and writer are shared with readers that activates this memoir and brings Newell’s values-based practice to life on the page. As can be seen in the examples above, Newell’s overarching ethos is motivated by living a more conscious and ‘mindful’ life, and by avoiding what is often termed the ‘mindlessness’ of acting without any thought or reflection. By closely observing the land in which she is placed, ‘listening’ to it, Newell posits, the land will, in turn, communicate – and, in her case, lets her know how, and what, to farm. Although a businesswoman, she is driven by sustainability and quality, rather than greed and profit and, in turn, derives enormous satisfaction from this approach. This is, then, a lesson for dual audiences. The first for consumers – not to mindlessly eat, purchase, consume and so forth – but, instead, to consciously observe and similarly ‘listen’ to the messages of seasonality and local availability in terms of their purchasing and cookery. It also holds a similar message for other farmers and food manufacturers – to ‘listen’ to the land in their food practices.

Maggie Beer

Perhaps the most famous autobiographical memoir by a regional farmer and food producer is that which is embedded in the cookbooks of Maggie Beer. Although born and raised in Sydney, Beer is now completely and closely identified with the Barossa Valley region of South Australia. This is, at least in part, because, since 1993, Beer’s popular cookbooks have contained a significant proportion of memoir. Her cookbooks, *Maggie’s Farm* (1993), *Maggie’s Orchard* (1997), *Maggie’s Table* (2001), *Maggie’s Harvest* (2007) and *Maggie’s Kitchen* (2008), can be read both individually or together to provide both a comprehensive life story narrative as well as her personal reflections on her journey from city girl to farmer to high-profile processed food producer. *Maggie’s Farm*, for instance, details how, in 1973, Maggie and her

husband Colin Beer purchased a vineyard near Nuriootpa in South Australia’s Barossa Valley in order to farm pheasants (1993: 1). In *Maggie’s Table*, Beer calls this the “luckiest accident of my life” because of the opportunity it afforded her to connect with farming: “the quality of our life here is so deep and rich, and so centred around the soil, the seasons and the community, that I now wonder if I was ever a city person” (2001: 2). As well as Beer’s personal manifesto of food production and consumption, *Maggie’s Farm* and *Maggie’s Orchard* chart the story of the how she began her artisanal food production business at the farm – initially in the Pheasant Farm Shop and how this then expanded into the Pheasant Farm Restaurant. In 1977, Colin Beer was awarded a Churchill fellowship to study game bird breeding in Europe and America (Beer, 2001: 4). While in Scotland, the Beers visited a farm that directly marketed a wide range of its turkey products to customers through its farm shop (Beer, 1993: 2). Following their return to Australia, the Beers used this knowledge to model a farm shop, which became known as the Pheasant Farm Shop, to sell their produce in 1979. The shop sold pates, terrines, prepared and cooked pheasant and quail, pickled quails’ eggs and fresh-baked bread. This also reflected what Maggie Beer has described as their “philosophy of dealing direct with the end consumer” (Beer, 1993: endpapers). Beer began writing recipe sheets to assist buyers of the pheasants who often overcooked (and thereby spoiled) the meat. Within nine months, the couple had expanded the shop into a restaurant (Beer, 1993: 2), which, with Maggie as the chef, initially offered a simple fixed menu featuring their pheasant. This then expanded into *à la carte* dining and the hiring of another chef. Signature dishes remained the Beers’ own pheasant and what became known as the Pheasant Farm Pate. The restaurant won many honours including the Remy Martin Cognac/Australian Gourmet Traveller award for the Best Restaurant in Australia in 1991. Beer is clear that local food was the key to this success: “Fresh regional produce was the heart of the restaurant, the food from our own farm driving my cooking style” (Beer, 1997: vii). In

Maggie’s Table, she describes how this worked in sympathy with, and getting the most from, seasonality:

I learnt quickly about the rhythm of the seasons, how to delight in fruit and vegetables picked ripe and at their best, and how to maximise the potential of not only what can be grown here but what is available in the wild. (Beer, 2001: 3)

Beer closed the restaurant in 1997 to focus on local food production and the development of Maggie Beer branded products.

The Barossa Valley is now, itself, classified as “an internationally recognised brand” that is “heading towards iconic status” due to a mixture of the international success of both its top-end, boutique and commercial wines, as well as the region’s scenery, historic towns and buildings, restaurants and cafés, arts and crafts and cultural heritage (Roberts and Deery, 2008: 17). The regional identity of the Barossa has a strong food component, with the prominent ‘Barossa Food’ brand promoting only local produce. Beer’s shop is indeed now a major tourist attraction, a key component of both major daily sightseeing and longer tour itineraries of the Barossa Valley, and an acknowledged contributor to the success of the region as a tourist destination. Beer definitely promotes her food (and herself) as regional – following writers such as Jean-Françoise Revel who asserted that the only real cuisines were regional, because of the enduring distinctiveness of local ingredients (1982). Sidney Mintz agrees that there can be no national cuisine, only regional cuisines for “a national cuisine is simply a holistic artifice based on the foods of the people who live inside some political system, such as France or Spain” (1994: 104).

Like Newell, Beer is unashamedly a businesswoman, and also explains her business model in terms of a sustainability approach. Creating verjuice from otherwise waste grapes is one such example. In an extended interview with ABC national television, Beer unequivocally states her innovative upcycling

of surplus into a prestige product, was prompted by this desire: “I was making something out of things that would otherwise have been wasted.” She continued:

the verjuice came because in 1984 we couldn't sell our Rhine Riesling grapes. So I said, “OK, alright. I read about this verjuice. Let's make some” ... we were the first in the world to do it commercially, and the rest of the world has followed. And that was only because, here I was surrounded by great produce and I couldn't use it because we couldn't sell it. So I did something else with it.

(Beer, in ABC *Talking Heads* 2006)

It is interesting how this narrative does not stress the idea of innovation in clever creativity, but how this creativity and innovation arises from a desire for sustainability.

Beer's memoir is consistently 'on message', whether it appears in the cookbooks and columns she has authored or in interviews or other public appearances. This autobiographical food narrative emphasises highly environmentally sustainable activities that are, moreover, viable for both consumers and other producers. These include producing, purchasing and consuming local foods, as well as creatively rethinking the function of some foods and food products that would otherwise go to waste. Her memoir also reflects her practice of developing and maintaining a direct relationship between producer and consumer. This is never, however, presented in marketing terms, where it could be read as a kind of spin to enhance sales. This direct relationship, instead, functions to make aspects of life more meaningful for both the food producer and consumer.

The power of this values-based practice is evident in the savagery of the criticism this year when certain of her products bearing the “Maggie Beer. A Barossa food tradition” label were judged to be in breach of Australian consumer law because, although they were not made in South Australia, the court found the labeling could mislead consumers they were (Sampson, 2014).

This case is also revelatory about understandings about regionality. Although, as the label on each of these products stated, these products were made in Australia, the “Barossa food tradition” brand was seen to be more powerful than this actual information. Faced with this dilemma, readers could perhaps ask themselves, what does it mean to have a regional Australian identity as a diner, a food shopper and cook? What is it that I value about my connection with Australia and the land I live in that might assist me in living my life, through – and with – food, in a more meaningful way?

Jackie French

Much of Jackie French’s long series of popular publications – from bestselling fiction and non-fiction for both adults and children to her print media columns – contain material that is about, or inspired by, her life in the Araluen Valley in the New South Wales Southern Highlands. Her *Seasons of Content* (1998), republished as *A Year in the Valley: Seasons of Content* (2010), is a memoir that, as the new title states, charts not just her year in that location, but that year as reflected in the seasons, and the happiness and satisfaction this brings her. French’s life in the valley, as author, wildlife carer and produce grower, is one that is determined by the climate and living in close connection with her surrounds. She describes this memoir as a celebration of this life and what it has given her: “that is why I’m writing this. A celebration, if you like of the lives outside my window as I type: the lyrebirds and the broccoli, the peaches and the wombats ... our lives here in the valley and the seasons and our food” (2010: 8). French celebrates home-grown and locally sourced produce, clearly explaining why:

I could buy a peach in the supermarket and it would probably taste good – but not quite as good, as it’s been picked green and firm enough to travel, not sticky ripe from the tree (and sunlight does have a taste, it’s just that most of us have forgotten it) – but it wouldn’t have the memories. No matter how good this taste, it wouldn’t be as rich. (2010: 8)

French not only clearly explains how she has learnt from the land and its animals, but how she purposefully set out to do this. She describes Smudge, the first wombat she “lived with”:

We’d eat breakfast together as the sun slid above the ridge. I followed him about the bush, first from loneliness, and then for a deeper reason, as I learnt for a time how not to be human, to look at the world in different ways. (Those nights formed the basis for my gardening theories, and my fiction ... which is another story.). (2010: 22)

Wombats feature through this story – cohabitants of the house and outbuildings as well as the surrounding bushland. Such reasoning leads her to the understanding that living on rural land involves responsibilities alongside food production: “We’re custodians of this land, not owners ... an unremitting, sometimes gruesome battle to preserve the tiny helpless ones who live here too” (2010: 345). Here French reveals the courage and resilience that it takes to persevere on the land, and reminds readers of the need for respect – in land cultivation, food production and consumer towards farmer.

Reading works such as this by French, which activates appreciation for respect for food growing, selection, preparation, and consumption, may also engender other values that enrich food culture – such as slowing down processes rather than speeding them up, practicing contemplation and hesitation in relation to making food selections, and displaying altruism and generosity. French, like the other memoirists above, also embodies the value of attentive listening, in terms of paying attention to what the land, and its creatures, communicate to her. One of the things French repeatedly learns from her environment is that she is helpless in relation to the weather: “It is frightening to be so powerless”, she writes in terms of drought – “knowing that the weather is irrevocable and has no malice” – and noting that such a recognition is “something we are not used to as humans” (2010: 27). This provides an illuminating illustration of French’s role as a farmer as but one part of an ecosystem in which nature is all-powerful.

Reader reaction

Reader reviews on such online websites as bookseller *Amazon* and reader community *Good Reads* indicate that some readers have noted and understood these messages and responded to them in a positive way. Although a complete survey of such reviews is outside the scope of this project, these are a powerful reminder of what critic Stanley Fish calls literature’s dialectical potential, with reading an experience that forces people into a “rigorous scrutiny of everything they believe in and live by” (1972: 1) and suggests literature’s capacity to change lives. In relation to Newell’s *The Olive Grove*, there are a number of comments that seem to indicate inspiration and even transformation in behaviour. Readers’ inspiration ranged from starting a farm, “I want to buy a few hectares and start planting olives right now!”, to using home garden space more productively, “I’m going out to buy a couple of olive trees for our little backyard”. There was a definite understanding of the value of locally grown food from small producers – “and [I] will always buy Australian grown and pressed olive oil ... from smaller producers if I can”. Readers of this book and *A Thousand Acres* also appeared to understand how Newell’s respectful relationship with the land she farms influences the food she produces:

I love the way this woman so loves the land ... ‘the bush’, that derisive term that denotes emptiness and pointlessness and the necessity to build a housing estate over it. Patrice has delved into the land and shared her developing knowledge of the everyday ‘unsexy’ edible and inedible grasses and other plants that are native to the area. So much life going on in an everyday patch of dirt.

Newell loves the land and has a real passion for bio-dynamically grown olives and beef which as you read further into the book inspires you to do the same.

Other reviews show that Beer’s *Maggie’s Table* is widely admired by readers, and although there are more comments about the author and her recipes than

anything else, there is evidence that at least some readers noted her message about small scale food production:

Although the recipes rule, the photographs (and they are on almost every page) show the true nature of the down to earth & hard working life in the Barossa Valley. Highly recommend!

French's *Seasons of Content* has attracted similar comment – “Loved sharing in the daily delights of living in the valley!” – including on the superiority of the taste of the food so produced:

Jackie is now on my list of people I'd like to have dinner with. But she'd have to cook. In her kitchen. With her produce. I'd just eat and listen.

We suggest that this small selection of review comments suggests that, in engaging with these food memoirs, readers have definitely gained some positive understanding of regional food production.

Conclusion

There is a dual benefit implicit in this understanding. As readers learn about meaningful farming, their relationships with food may be enhanced and their food choices may become more discerning; but also support for sustainable farming practices may grow. In this context, helping readers develop and maintain positive and responsible food practices requires that they, as consumers, possess an equal blend of evidence-based knowledge and strong values. The small number of memoirs profiled in this discussion provide only a tiny snapshot of the field as well as the possibilities they offer, but do suggest how powerfully relevant values can be relayed to readers. These values – empathy, reliability, commitment and courage, contemplation, hesitation and slowing down, as well as care and respect for the natural world – when taken together, add up to values-based consciousness around food production and a sense of the place of food in personal identity. For consumers, the development of such values can prompt not only a matching interest in ethical consumption, but assist in combatting the tendency for such

practices to be short-lived. It could also have a similarly profound effect on other producers. As Australia matures in its self-identity, there may be a realization that the country comprises not one, but many, distinct as well as fused cultures and regions. In this way, regional food production will be valuable and meaningful to all Australians, individually and collectively. The marrying of evidence-based and values-based practice enhances the potential for sustained changes to be made in personal habits and practices (Fulford, 2008). An appreciation of subjective experiences and discussion of regional food practices in personalized and localized ways, is a powerful way to resist the tendency for technologism to dominate food culture (as it has other realms of society). In this technological world view, where evidence-based practice prevails, the problem is given centre place, and strategies such as objectivity, measurement, control, and efficiency are prioritised. Yet a more creative world view makes way also for an appreciation for values-based practice, and thus for the building of a more human and richly diverse world.

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Endnotes

¹ In this investigation, we define memoirs as Australian if they are by authors who identify as Australian, wherever they are published, rather than memoirs published in Australia, although all are published in Australia in this instance.

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