

## ***Northern Ireland food culture: moving beyond spuds***

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### Abstract

This title offers a synopsis of a PhD study entitled “Food, culture and decision-making: implications for the food supply chain in Northern Ireland”. The study consists of four projects linked to the stages of the life cycle; a childhood study with 8 to 11 year old children using both image-based research and an age-appropriate questionnaire; an adolescence study using computer-based questioning; an adulthood study exploring consumer typologies using Logit models; and an elderly study of in-depth interviews, creating personal narratives of life and food. Results have revealed how Northern Ireland's food culture is characterised by change. Traditional food practices have both disappeared and endured and culturally novel food practices have emerged and continue to evolve. This dynamic food culture promotes gastronomy in Northern Ireland, one that involves more than daily consumption of potatoes, cabbage, soups and stews.

### Keywords

Food choice, culture, food culture, Northern Ireland.

### Introduction

Potatoes, through both their success in sustaining a population and the devastating effects of their failure, have become synonymous with Ireland and by extension or association or actual geographical history, with Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board website outlines the food traditions of the country, stating that “Most traditional dishes have their roots in potatoes and bread...” (Northern Ireland Tourist Board 2012). Specific traditional dishes are outlined on the website and include potato-based dishes such as champ, pasties, boxty and the ultimate collaboration between potato and bread – potato bread farl. Further traditional Irish recipes promoted featuring potatoes include Irish stew and colcannon. The Tourist Board proclaims “We also love our spuds fried, roast, baked and simply boiled in their ‘jackets’ to be peeled ceremoniously at the table” (Northern Ireland Tourist Board 2012).

On this evidence, food and eating in Northern Ireland must therefore be heavily dominated by potatoes. Is this a reality for people living in Northern Ireland? Or an out-dated notion that serves more for tourism purposes than for providing an accurate account?

This paper explores the concept of 'food culture' in a Northern Ireland context. This will involve discussing the concept, leading to an outline of exploratory research conducted within Northern Ireland and an insight into the reality for people in 2012. As such, it is based on the work achieved to date as part of a PhD study entitled 'Food, culture and decision-making: implications for the food supply chain in Northern Ireland'.

Researching the areas of food choice and questioning why increased knowledge has not resulted in individuals making better food choice decisions and subsequently having fewer diet-related disorders, resulted in uncovering the concept of food culture. This paper is based on a desire to explore the concept further and in particular from a Northern Ireland perspective.

Lang and Heasman (2004) define food culture as a constellation of socially produced values, attitudes, relationships, tastes, cuisines and practices exhibited through food. This definition of food culture encourages consideration of food as a social medium which can touch every aspect of life. Moreover, it recognises the potential of a social grouping to influence food choice behaviour, which promotes associations with the influence of culture on its members' lives through the learning and adoption of behaviour. Lang and Heasman (2004) continued to specify that when people sit down to a meal together every action they take – sitting on chairs, using plates and cutlery, the order of food, the type of food they choose, where and what they eat and how much – is an indicator of food culture. This reveals the extent to which food culture permeates every interaction a person has with food and why it is warrants study.

But is food culture to be found at a national level or at a smaller local level or at a family level or at an individual level or at all of these levels? Lang and Heasman's (2004) food culture comprises both the social 'cement', binding groups together with shared assumptions, and opportunities for difference and distinction whereby people can express their identities through food. Therefore, the answer appears to be that food culture may exist at all four levels and on many more. Lang and Heasman (2004) stress that food culture is not homogeneous, a fact which is becoming a new reality for food policy. The change component of food culture and its dynamic nature are consequently key aspects of any study of the concept.

Wahlqvist (2007) identifies food culture as arising out of the place of a people's origin, whether they still live there or not. This suggests an enduring influence of information, education and or practices which people are exposed to through their immediate and wider environment. It also stresses how necessary it is to situate a study of food culture within the specific context — the geographical setting; the particular year(s) the study is conducted; and the demographics of study participants. In particular, the geographical setting of the study is pertinent as Wahlqvist (2007) suggests that food culture is shaped by resources (climate, land, soil, water, and fuel), by belief and information (religion, education and literacy,

communication), by ethnicity (indigenous or immigrant), technology (hunting, gathering, agricultural, horticultural, aquacultural, fishing: food processing and storage, transport, cooking); colonisation; and by health status and health care — all of which are linked to an individual country's position.

The concept of food culture is directly related to the theories of food choice and therefore the factors that may influence individuals' food-related decisions. Daborn *et al.* (2005) assert that the reasons why individuals buy and eat the foods they do is a complex bio-psychosocial process that is relative to person, place and time. This highlights both the complex and changeable nature of food choice, which must be subject to influencing factors that can vary in strength and priority. Significantly, Keane and Willetts (1994) also recognise the potential influence of a wide range of factors on food choice but that these factors change as the individual moves through the lifecycle while social class, ethnicity and gender are the parameters within which decisions about food are made. Therefore, age must be viewed as an important influencing factor on an individual's knowledge, attitudes and behaviour on food choice decision-making. This is the basis for conducting research with different age groups in Northern Ireland to explore the concept from different perspectives.

It is now pertinent to place this study within the context of its geographical location and give an overview of its particular intricacies. Northern Ireland, as its name implies, is geographically part of the island of Ireland (the southern region being the Republic of Ireland) but it is also constitutionally part of the United Kingdom (with Scotland, England and Wales) with its own devolved government and justice system. These complexities have led to Northern Ireland being regarded as a bicultural society, "...as a region that is largely divided between two cultural identities" (Nic Craith 2003, p.1). This is particularly significant as Bareham (1995) argues that what food we buy, where we buy it and how we consume it is ultimately connected with the culture in which we have been brought up.

## Methodology

In order to effectively explore the different dimensions of food, culture and decision-making and the implications for the food supply chain in Northern Ireland, a dynamic methodological approach was required. Age was identified as being an influencing factor on food choice, culture and decision-making; subjects that are central to the study. As such, a methodology shaped by this factor and more specifically by the human lifecycle was developed. The five stages of the lifecycle – childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood and elderly – were linked to four distinct research projects as the young adulthood and adulthood stages were considered together. It was envisaged that after conducting the individual research projects, the results will both offer particular insights specific to the stages of the lifecycle and when considered together will enable a full picture to be painted.

As the overall methodological approach was guided by age, the methodology for each research project was chosen to be age-appropriate.

### *Childhood project*

The childhood project was centred on three research methods – a collage; an age-appropriate questionnaire; and a food plate. The collage was chosen in order to allow the sample to present themselves – to reveal the elements that combine to make up their world. The questionnaire explored their level of involvement in decision-making, their food choice behaviour and the different influences on their diet. The food plate was based on the “draw-and-write” technique and was designed to identify a ‘typical’ meal for the sample – each participant was instructed to draw a typical meal for them on a paper plate and then write on the back what the meal was, who cooks the meal, who they eat the meal with and where they eat the meal. In addition to the importance of adopting the appropriate methods for this life stage, it was imperative that the correct age sample within the childhood spectrum was chosen. It was decided to recruit participants between the ages of 8 and 11 years (representative of Key Stage 2 pupils within the Northern Ireland education system) as they have a level of literacy and sufficient communication skills in order to participate fully in the research. The sample was recruited through within the school environment, within 8 primary schools that represented the three main management types (Roman Catholic Maintained, Protestant and Integrated), the six geographical counties of Northern Ireland (with 2 schools recruited in the larger counties of Antrim and Down) and the two settings of rural and urban. A total of 186 children participated in the research, 180 created a collage; 182 completed a questionnaire; and 180 produced a food plate.

### *Adolescence project*

The adolescent project involved a computer-based questionnaire that explored the subjects of food choice, culture and decision-making from the perspective of 12 to 18 year olds. Within the questionnaire, a conjoint analysis was designed to examine the meal occasion from an adolescent perspective – the type of food they prefer to eat; the amount of food they want to eat; who they want to eat with; and who influences their choices. The sample for this study was also recruited within the education system in Northern Ireland, through secondary schools and further education colleges. A total of 282 adolescents have completed the questionnaire to date.

### *Adulthood project*

The project which combined participants from the young adulthood and adulthood stages of the lifecycle was also centred on a questionnaire format, which was made available on paper and in computer-based form. The questioning was structured within five key sections – demographics; interests; food and self; food consumer; and decision-making. Moreover, the decision-making section was designed to produce consumer typologies using Logit models, which would reveal the different type of consumers within the sample whose differences will

have direct significance to the food supply chain in Northern Ireland. This stage of data collection is ongoing.

### *Elderly project*

The elderly project involved conducting interviews with individuals over the age of 65 (the guide age for retirement within Northern Ireland) and producing narratives for each participant that reveal their experiences with food through their lifetime. Each interview began with a semi-structured component that identified the participants' gender, age, family, home life, working life, leisure time and any health concerns which affect their diet. The second, larger part of the interview focused on allowing the participants to speak freely about their past diet and their current diet and the varying transitions and notable experiences between the two. The sample was recruited through organisations in Northern Ireland which people over the age of 65 are active members.

### Results and discussion

The purpose of this paper is to explore how food culture in Northern Ireland has moved beyond the traditionally held view by those living outside the country but also the promotional messages by the national tourist board that potatoes are dominant. This section will outline the results of the research methods utilised in the study.

Within the childhood project, both the questionnaire and the food plate investigated the food choice and consumption behaviour of the participants. 182 participants completed a questionnaire, within which they were asked to indicate their 5 'favourite' foods and drinks and also 5 foods and drinks they do not like. The three most frequently mentioned 'favourite' foods were Coke (90 participants, 49%), followed by pizza (62 participants, 34%) and chips (56 participants, 31%). Conversely, the three most frequently mentioned foods that the participants disliked were mushrooms (32 participants, 18%) and Brussel sprouts (32 participants, 18%) followed by onions (28 participants, 15%). These results indicate that this sample enjoy high-fat and high-fat foods, which may have been expected when asking children to select their favourite foods. Although asking the participants to indicate their favourite foods does not fully represent their dietary intakes, they offer an insight into foods that may feature to some extent. It is therefore significant that chips were present in the sample's top three as this suggests that children living in Northern Ireland continue to consume potatoes but they prefer to consume them after they have been processed into the higher-fat alternative of chips.

The food plates (n=180) component of the childhood project reflected 'typical' meals the participants consume. Similar to the other image-based research method, the collage, the food plates were content analysed and the dominant themes related to the meals identified. From this process, six themes were identified — convenience; takeaway; traditional; modern foods/meals; sweet; and fruit and vegetables. These themes give an indication of the wide

range of meals represented on the paper plates supplied to the participants. Within the traditional theme (69 food plates), participants depicted meals such as the traditional Sunday dinner/roast dinner; potatoes and chicken; Christmas dinner, which included potatoes; and mashed potatoes, gravy, chips, chicken, Coke. All of these meals indicate that potatoes remain a significant food item within this sample of children's diets. However, a dominant food/meal that emerged from the food plates must also be noted — pizza. 22 participants (12%) drew pizza on its own; 38 participants (21%) drew pizza with other foods; and 12 participants (7%) drew pizza with chips. As the food plates were proposed to reveal a typical meal for the sample, they cannot therefore be considered representative of their overall diet but provide an insight into eating behaviour. Pizza dominance of the sample's food plates, followed by Spaghetti Bolognese as the second most frequently represented meal by 13 participants (7%), reflects a significant consumption of foods not typically associated with Northern Ireland, which in turn suggests a growing cosmopolitan consumption behaviour. Other notable food plates include McDonald's (8 participants, 4%); an Ulster fry (2 participants, 1%); prawns (1 participant, 0.5%); and sushi (1 participant; 0.5%). In addition to drawing a 'typical' meal, the participants wrote about the meal on the back of their paper plate — what the meal was; who prepared the meal; where they consume the meal; and who they consume it with. This component of the food plate revealed that eating a meal remains a family activity, which occurs at the table, prepared by the mother.

The adolescent project consisted of a computer-based questionnaire completed by 282 participants, of which 105 were male (37%) and 177 were female (63%). Data collection is to be continued with a group of male students, which will balance the sample. Within the questionnaire, the participants were asked to indicate their favourite dinner. This question elicited a broad range of responses with the majority of the sample (19 participants; 7%) choosing chicken curry, followed by Sunday dinner (15 participants, 5%) and pasta (15 participants, 5%). The participants who chose chicken curry and pasta reflect the changing consumption behaviour occurring within Northern Ireland while the participants who chose Sunday dinner (a traditional meal consisting of meat, potatoes and vegetables, typically consumed on a Sunday) reflect the traditional, more conservative style of consumption. A key component of this research project is a conjoint analysis of a section of the questionnaire which required the participants to indicate their meal preferences in relation to a number of aspects — the type of food; portion size; who they are eating with; and who chooses the food. This section of the project is currently under analysis and as such will not be presented in this paper.

The elderly project involved conducting interviews with individuals over the age of 65 with the aim to compile narratives, which would reveal the story of the individual's experience of food culture in Northern Ireland throughout their lives. Currently, 26 participants have been interviewed (12 male (46%) and 14 female (54%)) and narratives compiled for each. Data analysis for this project is currently ongoing and involves transcribing the information gathered in the interviews and cross-matching the emerging themes and concepts. Preliminary results have identified the period of transition being experienced by individuals of this age group who make comparisons between their past and their current diet. The

narratives also speak of the individuals' experience of being introduced to new foods and behaviours while still continuing their traditional consumption behaviour. Viewed together, the narratives stress the process of adaptation to a new stage of life that the individuals have and are undergoing, which has direct implications for their attitudes, shopping behaviour and ultimately food consumption. One element of this adaptation identified within the semi-structured component of the interview was the increasing significance of the link between health and diet for these individuals, who specifically mentioned their experiences with diabetes, osteoporosis, heart palpitations, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and stroke and the impact of these disorders on their food choice.

## Conclusion

This paper reviews the four research projects that make up a PhD study exploring the concept of food culture in Northern Ireland and offers an answer to the paper title as to whether it is moving beyond spuds. Each project aimed to investigate the concept of food culture from the different perspectives of the different stages of the lifecycle – childhood; adolescence; young adulthood and adulthood; and elderly. As such, it is possible to trace a trajectory through the results and identify the differences between the experiences of each group and in particular between the two extremes of the lifecycle – childhood and the elderly.

A key result from the childhood project was the identification of the diversity that exists within the sample's diet. The sample's favourite foods reflected the trend of young people to prefer high-fat and high-sugar foods while the food plates indicated that a 'typical' meal can be classified as either representing convenience foods, modern foods/meals, takeaways, traditional foods, fruit and vegetables and sweets. The research conducted with the children highlighted the dynamic nature of food culture in action in Northern Ireland. These children indicated in their food plates that they continue to eat the traditional staple of their country but that they also enjoy foods that have become readily available, such as pizza and pasta, and the more exotic, sushi.

The adolescent project further reinforced that young people living in Northern Ireland enjoy high-fat and high-sugar foods. Moreover, the top two results of the sample when asked to indicate their favourite meal (chicken curry and Sunday dinner) also reflected the trend found in the childhood project for adopting new flavours while continuing to consume traditional foods.

The narratives compiled within the elderly project indicated a differing trend to that found in the two projects discussed above. Within the narratives, the participants spoke of continuing the eating behaviours that they had experienced within their home as children while making adjustments to their diet with the new products and innovations now available. As such, this sample were more representative of the traditional diet associated with Northern Ireland and reflected the changes that have occurred within their lifetime in food choice and consumption.

It therefore may be suggested that when comparing the two projects conducted with individuals under the age of 18 (childhood and adolescence) and the project conducted with those over the age of 65 (elderly), that they are both representative of the Northern Ireland food culture. Within this food culture, potatoes and other traditional foods and practices still have a significant presence and these exist alongside new flavours and adaptations. It appears that cultural echoes from the past are present in individual's diets that can be heard and observed by others but which may be acted upon in an unconscious manner without having knowledge of their exact origins. These cultural echoes may thereby have an influence on food consumption behaviour and ensure that traditional foods and practices continue to characterise the diet of Northern Ireland. This paper reflects the dynamic, changeable nature of food culture and implies that any study conducted on the concept in the future could chart additional changes being experienced by individuals living in Northern Ireland.

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