

The Social Life of Wheat

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Traditionally food networks have been presented as being of either a 'conventional' or 'alternative' character; a binary, problematic in itself, that stands emblematic of a deep rooted modernist dualism. The modern paradigm produces a series of binaries (conventional/alternative, nature/culture, consumption/production and so on) that disable our capacity to explore, articulate and understand the dynamics of contemporary food networks. Drawing on the preliminary findings of an ethnographic study that 'follows' wheat which is both organic and biodynamic from 'field to fork', this paper considers the complexities inherent in a so-called 'alternative' food network.

Beginning with the cultivation of the wheat seed I trace the social relationships, practices, discourses and knowledges through the cultivation and harvest of a grain crop and off the farm. The tracing continues as I follow the harvested grain in to a traditional watermill, where the grain is stoneground into flour, and out again, to the kitchens where the flour is transformed, before finishing at the tables where it is consumed. I suggest that this symmetrical exploration of wheat reveals a dynamic 'lively' network, which traverses the 'conventional'/'alternative' dichotomy. More generally, I suggest, that the wheat guides us to a theorization of food networks that, emphasises continuity and connection over rupture, contradiction or mutual exclusion.