

The contribution of Australian alternative food networks to sustainable food consumption practices

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Supermarkets linked to global supply chains dominate the Australian food system and have a higher influence on shaping people's habits and diets (Pulker et al., 2019). They belong to the "food from nowhere" regime that relates food consumption to cheapness and convenience and is often disconnected from cultural and emotional aspects (Campbell, 2009). In a different fashion, Alternative food networks (AFNs) are fringe players operating outside corporate controlled supply chains with the goal of enhancing fairness in Australian food systems (Dixon and Richards, 2016). The distinctive operational practices and values of AFNs create a sustainable relationship with food provision.

A case study was conducted between the months of July and October 2018 with nine initiatives to investigate key aspects of the sustainable relationship with food present in Australian AFNs. The data collection consisted of the gathering of information and documents available in websites and social media, 23 semi-structured interviews, and visits to the sites of operation (when applicable). The AFNs that participated can be classified as urban agriculture initiatives, buyers' groups, food hubs, specialist retailer, and pop-up market. Half of them have less than five years of existence and have a not-for-profit structure. They are in their majority run by a group of no more than four people and count with the support of volunteers. The scale of AFNs that participated are small when compared with similar initiatives in the USA or Europe (Fonte, 2013; Moragues-Faus, 2017).

The analysis of the sustainable relationship with food from AFNs revealed four main aspects shaping it: the adoption of a seasonal food supply; the availability of foods that can't be found in supermarkets; the reconnection with food growth; and the rejection of

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aesthetic standards. The adoption of seasonal food supply is the main aspect that shapes the different food provision relationship from AFNs. Founders of AFNs recognise the environmental and the health value of eating seasonal food and members are interested on learning about seasonality. This connection with seasonality helps members to remember that food is the product of natural processes. Therefore, food is not viewed merely as a commodity subjectable to economic profit. This is an approach that differs in a great deal from the idea that a certain kind of produce should be available at all times. Interviewees reported that seasonality also stimulated them to build capacity to adapt their diets. Balázs et al. (2016) also found out that the seasonal supply of a box scheme was acting as a learning tool for consumers.

AFNs often have available food that differs from what is offered in supermarkets. AFNs are increasing access to diversified products by incorporating bushfoods. Bushfoods are native varieties of food normally know by aboriginals' elders but that are often unfamiliar to urban Australians. By increasing the knowledge on bushfoods, AFNs are helping to create a local food identity. Moreover, the production and consumption of edible weeds are encouraged. Members of an urban agriculture initiative in Melbourne run tours to teach people about edible weeds available at the city. Urban gardens are also used to grow food varieties unavailable in supermarkets, be it to enable access to a culturally appropriated diet or making the most of the local climate. The growing and offering of different products fosters biodiversity, something key to sustainable food systems (Willett et al., 2019).

AFNs are also helping people to reconnect with food growth and the real appearance of food. Members of urban agriculture initiatives reported that often people who have always lived in urban areas do not know how certain foods are grown or how labour intensive it can be. The involvement with urban agriculture has made people recognise the value of farmers works and change their food price assumptions. Aesthetic standards are adopted by Australian supermarket chains and have influenced the image that people have from food. Aesthetic standards are not followed by AFNs that are sourcing produce in all shapes and sizes, a practice that helps to reduce food waste. Interviewees said that after consuming from AFNs the symmetrical fresh food in the supermarket looks unnatural.

The food from nowhere regime might have shaped the mindset of a whole generation around food but it is not irreversible. AFNs emerged inside this setting and are helping to construct a more sustainable relationship with food consumption. There is still a parcel of people that engage with AFNs and are not impacted by their ethos. Regardless, their capacity to teach about seasonality, introduce new types of fruits and vegetables in people's diets, and change food aesthetic standards, should not be discredited. In the Australian case, it does not seem that AFNs potential for sustainable transformations is the limiting factor in the process of changing people's relationship with food. In reality, what still marginal is the governmental support that they receive. So far, expansion has happened by cooperation among AFNs and support from local communities. More favourable policy contexts and governments incentives could change this reality. Action is needed not only in the form of direct support to AFNs, but also by the establishment of regulations seeking to make all food system players accountable for social, environmental, and health impacts created.

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