

Eating well

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In his recent book, *The practice of eating*, Alan Warde contrasts eating with other social practices such as driving about which he suggests there is more general agreement about its effective conduct: 'Although driving styles vary', he argues, 'there is a fair level of consensus about what it means to be a good driver. By comparison, what it means to eat well is much less clear' (2016: 171). There are several appealing things about his reasoning. First, Warde explores eating as a compound social practice (involving the coordination of a range of related practices such as shopping, storing and cooking). This emphasises the need for close observation of specific practices 'on the ground' rather than generalizations based on reported behaviour or other sources at one remove from the observation of everyday life. Specific reference to eating also provides a sharper focus than more abstract references to consumption (which Warde suggests is a moment in various social practices). Referring to the general process of consumption rather than to the specific practice of eating tends to position 'consumers' in reductive terms (as people whose main purpose is to buy and consume goods) rather than in broader terms as active citizens or members of the public. Focusing on the practice of eating also makes us think about what we eat – about food and drink, their material and symbolic properties, and their combination in eating occasions, often shared with others. Finally, thinking about 'eating well' encourages us to explore the ethical and moral questions that attach to the practice of eating, avoiding the kind of moralization that frequently accompanies polemical debate about food in political circles, media reporting and campaign rhetoric.

So what does it mean to 'eat well', and how might the question be approached from different (environmental, ethical, political) standpoints? The environmentalist Wendell Bell once remarked that eating is an agricultural act, emphasising the connections between eating and the land about which he feared modern 'industrial eaters' were no longer very much aware (1989: 126). But this is just one standpoint among many possible others. Eating well might involve tough questions about animal welfare, the rights of agricultural workers, the length and complexity of food supply chains, global imbalances in trade, the political and economic forces that lead to chronic malnutrition and periodic famine in some parts of the world while, in other places, growing numbers of people are being diagnosed as overweight or obese. How do individual decisions about what to eat impinge on other people's dietary options and how are individual 'consumer choices' shaped by the wider structures and systems that govern the increasingly globalized political-economy of food? What do the essays in this special issue on 'Food/Media/Space' have to say about these issues and how would their authors answer Alan Warde's question about what 'eating well' might mean at the level of social practice?

Bell, Hollows and Jones show how campaigning culinary documentaries such as *Jamie's School Dinners* could be read as conforming to a neoliberal political strategy that leads to the responsabilization of individual consumers who are held to account for their dietary decisions, ignoring the wider structural forces that shape those decisions. But the authors also suggest that food media can open up other narratives and political possibilities. While there is a tendency to 'blame the victim' in these programmes, they also raise questions about fair and sustainable food, sometimes highlighting the role of the big supermarket chains in shaping 'consumer choice'. The

paper examines some of the complexities involved in eating well, where high animal welfare standards come with a price premium; where the improvement of production standards is assumed to be a matter for self-regulation by food retailers rather than a question of government regulation; and where celebrity chefs play a crucial role as cultural intermediaries and moral entrepreneurs, seeking to change consumer behaviour while building their own brand image. Eating well, in this paper, is fundamentally a question of moral authority and identifying the 'locus of responsibility' (cf. Jackson 2015: 192-4).

Flowers and Swan explore the political and ethical issues involved in culinary tourism in southwestern Sydney where ethnicity is commodified as a business development strategy. While most of their paper is about representational strategies and the dangers of 'cybertyping' on the Taste-Tours website, the paper also engages with the notion of 'edible diversity' and the challenge of rendering ethnic difference digestible, negotiating the boundaries of fear and fascination, desire and disgust. As a social practice, this often amounts to a process of visual rather than bodily consumption and tourism websites rarely show images of people actually eating. Making ethnic difference palatable, the authors suggest, can also involve an emphasis on feminised, friendly and exotic images rather than the masculine, criminalised and dangerous stereotypes that are often associated with the Lebanese, Chinese, Greek, Egyptian and Pakistani residents of this area of Sydney. Here, then, Alan Warde's question becomes a variant of the well-rehearsed argument about 'eating the Other'.

Lavis's paper addresses the affective viscosity of food porn through an analysis of pro-anorexia websites. Lavis makes a provocative argument about the materiality of the virtual, where images of food are used as a weight-loss tool, giving users the sense of satiety, of having eaten, without actually ingesting food. Suggesting that food porn is 'eaten', in this virtual sense, Lavis blurs the distinctions between actual, anticipated and imagined forms of consumption. In this way, she suggests, food porn can be used as a tool for managing the desire for food, and eating is reconfigured as tasting without swallowing, viewing without chewing, and ingesting without incorporating food. This chapter questions the visceral and affective dimensions of eating well, through the specific example of food and eating in cyberspace.

Based on an analysis of the National Geographic's reality TV show *Wicked Tuna*, Silver and Hawkins show how the complexities of marine stewardship are negotiated through the conventions of prime-time television documentaries. The programme makers quickly realised that they could get more traction with their audience by focusing on fish as food rather than fish as wildlife. If viewers found arguments about wildlife conservation and sustainable fishing too abstract, their attention could be more readily engaged by focusing on the interpersonal drama of the crew members who catch the fish and then by emphasising fish as food on the plate: targeting their viewers' stomachs, tastes, identities and emotions rather than engaging directly with the complexities of over-fishing, the politics of fish quotas or the vicissitudes of international agreements. Here, eating well is about domesticating the politics of sustainable fishing, focussing on eating, cooking and caring for oneself and one's immediate family rather than thinking in planetary terms or over longer time horizons.

Wells' paper on colorectal cancer refutes the tendency in nutritional research to focus on individual ingredients or dietary components. To avoid this kind of nutritional reductionism, it is worth reminding ourselves that people eat food, not minerals or calories or vitamins. In this case, the

focus is on dietary fibre where scientific research has established a link between the consumption of particular kinds of fibre and the reduced risk of certain forms of cancer. News stories about this issue were framed in different ways but online commentaries included many objections to the dietary advice to consume more fibre, focusing on the inconsistencies of expert opinion and popular resentment about being told what to eat. Thinking through the gaps between 'lay' understandings and 'expert' knowledge might also be a valuable contribution to current debates about eating well.

While there has been something of a moral backlash to television shows such as *Man vs Food*, accusing them of celebrating gluttony and dietary excess, Abbots and Attala propose an alternative view in their paper on media representations of competitive eating. Rather than seeing these events as grotesque or disgusting, they show that the practice involves training and skill, learning to ingest large amounts of food in record time. Instead of seeing competitive eating as the antithesis of civilised or healthy eating, they suggest that competitors often work within rather than against orthodox nutritional frameworks: you have to be fit, to control your body, to train and exercise, in order to succeed at bouts of competitive eating. Both the practice itself and its representation through social media raise some intriguing questions about what eating well might mean in this particular disciplinary context.

In the final paper, Barnes focuses on the making of 'good food' in Jamie Oliver's *Save with Jamie* television series which explores the process of eating well in a time of economic austerity. In this case, the celebrity chef emerges as a kind of knowledge broker between people, food and the practice of eating. Audience responses to the series were complex with many viewers pledging to change their everyday eating practices while others resented being lectured on poverty by a multi-millionaire. While Jamie Oliver associates 'good food' with nutrition, taste and home-cooking, other views of eating well on a budget are equally possible as illustrated by Jack Monroe's acerbic criticisms of Jamie Oliver's dietary advice.

Looking at the papers in terms of Alan Warde's question about what it might mean to 'eat well' raises some important issues about the relationship between food's material and symbolic dimensions, about its embodied, affective and visceral qualities, and about how these issues are represented on TV and in social media. Focusing on 'eating well' as a social practice rather than a moral discourse helps to avoid the tendency to blame the victim for falling short of the approved behaviours that are espoused in official advice, endorsed by expert scientific opinion, and supported by celebrity chefs and other culinary intermediaries. Ethnographic research on the social practices of buying, cooking, eating and disposing of food (e.g. Evans 2014, Meah 2014, Meah & Watson 2011) has called this view into question, demonstrating the 'good' reasons that underpin what others might label 'bad' behaviour. As these comments suggest, there is no simple answer to the question of what it might mean to 'eat well' – but it is a provocative question and one that the contributors to this special issue help us to address.

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