What We Talk About When We Talk About Local Food: Alternative Food Networks in Syracuse, NY and Class Identity Formation

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What We Talk About When We Talk About Local Food
Alternative Food Networks in Syracuse, NY and Class Identity Formation

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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And Renée Crown University Honors
August 2013

Honors Capstone Project in Geography
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Date: May 17, 2013
ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to investigate how alternative food networks exist in Syracuse, what participation in these networks means for the individuals who choose to be involved in them, and what this means for the way that participants conceptualize their class, their consumption patterns, and their community in terms of their personal identity construction. In order to answer this question, the researcher interviewed four participants in alternative food networks in Syracuse, New York. Two of these participants were farmers who served the greater Syracuse area with their CSA farms, and two of the participants were employees of the Central New York Regional Market Authority who ran the Market Authority’s Mobile Market. After conducting four semi-structured hour long interviews with participants, the conclusion was made that participants use their involvement in alternative food networks as a means of expressing and affirming their middle class status. Their class status is expressed as a product of both their consumption and community formation in addition to participation in AFNs. After looking at the data collected from the interviews, it became clear that participant’s reasons for being involved in AFNs include the continued affirmation of their middle class identities.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my Advisor Don Mitchell for telling me I could do this, and that my ideas were interesting even when I was entirely certain that I could not, and they were not. I would also like to thank my parents for their continued support and encouragement; their phone calls were appreciated even when my tone when I answered might have implied otherwise. But most of all I would like to thank my roommates Cassandra Baim, Emmery Brakke, and Heather Newkirk for coming in my room and telling me everything was going to be fine and that there is a life beyond this project every time I was curled in fetal position around my laptop absolutely certain that there was not.
PART I
INTRODUCTION

Food is fundamental. It is a physical necessity for human life, but it also serves innumerable functions in society beyond bodily nourishment. It is impossible to understand the choices people make concerning what food they consume without also looking at the social aspects of their consumption, and how food contributes to the formation of identity. The way in which people in the United States interact with their food has undergone massive shifts in the past decade, and it is becoming widely accepted that the way in which Americans interact with their food is changing on a fundamental level. One of the main ways in which people have altered how they interact with their food is reflected through their increased participation in Alternative Food Networks (AFNs).

Alternative food networks are defined by Angela Tregear as “forms of food provisioning with characteristics deemed to be different from, perhaps counteractive to, mainstream modes which dominate in developed countries” (Tregear 2011:419). She then goes on to describe examples of these alternative modes of production including “localized and short food supply chains, farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSAs), community gardens, and organic schemes” (Tregear 2011:419). The goal of this paper is to investigate how alternative food networks exist in Syracuse, New York and to begin to
understand how those who participate in these networks understand both the networks and their role within them on the individual level in terms of their consumption patterns, their class, and their community.

The easiest way to understand the changes which are occurring in America on the national level is to observe some simple statistics released by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). In 1994 there were 1,755 farmers markets in the United States; by 2012 this number had increased to 7,864. In keeping with this trend, in 1986 there were two community supported agriculture programs in the United States and today there are over 4,000 (USDA, KYF Mission). These two facts alone make it very clear that the agricultural landscape of the United States is changing in terms of how people choose to interact with their food.

This shift is being reflected in very real ways concerning what kinds of foods people are seeking out and purchasing. I wish to understand how people choose to become involved in AFNs as a way of understanding these national trends. The increased focus in recent years on alternative food networks can be said to coincide with the emergence of a “food elite consisting of increasingly knowledgeable consumers who are seeking food products which can be bought direct from producers, or at least traced to their origin” (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000: 285). The food elite described here is not an all-encompassing group, however, as not all people who consume food choose to participate in this marked “turn towards quality.”
I chose to study the relatively small area of Syracuse, NY because it is the area to which I had the greatest access, but also because I wanted to see how these national trends are reflected on the local level. Therefore, my goal with this study was to investigate what alternative food networks exist in Syracuse and then to understand what participation in these networks means for the participating individuals. I was specifically interested in what this participation means for how consumers think about their class, their consumption patterns, and their community, within the framework of their personal identity construction.

It is important to understand why people choose to participate in AFNs beyond the moral or health reasons which are most often provided as reasons for participation, because it provides an alternative platform for understanding these networks. It needs to be understood that there are other reasons why people might choose to participate outside of the proposed properties of the network itself. Therefore, in order to understand these networks, it is necessary to look at them within the terms of the people who choose to participate in them, and to take into consideration all of their potential reasons for participation. Consumption patterns are investigated because, at their core, AFNs are about production and consumption. Community is also considered, as one often discussed social benefits of AFNs is their ability to aid in community creation. Using these two methods of understanding participation in AFNs, it becomes possible to understand how people use AFNs to reproduce their own class status, which is beneficial to participants beyond moral or nutritional reasons.
In the first half of this paper I will explain what exactly alternative food networks are, and the ways in which they exist in Syracuse, New York, with a specific focus on community-supported agriculture and farmers markets because these are the components of AFNs that my interviewees participated in. I pay particular attention to the Central New York Regional Market and the unique role that it plays in alternative food networks in Syracuse. I also provide an overview of the academic critiques of alternative food networks and literature written on them. Using semi-structured, in depth interviews, I then use information provided through interviews to explain the ways in which participants in AFNs construct their class identity through their participation. In the second half of the paper I outline the ways in which class identities are constructed through food networks themselves. I have approached this by dividing the second half into three sections; the first section focuses on the ways in which participants conceptualize their consumption within AFNs. The second section explores the ways in which participants think about the communities which they form through their participation. The third section explains the ways in which consumption patterns and community construction contribute to the formation of a specific middle class identity among participants. The last section concludes by explaining the ways in which participation in AFNs can contribute to the reaffirmation of a middle class identity.
**Turn Towards Quality**

One of the first ways in which alternative food networks are understood to have come to prominence is through the increased importance of locality to consumers within a globalized food system. ‘The local’ is often highlighted by participants in AFNs because of its potential to counteract the challenges associated with consumer concerns stemming from the complexities inherent within a globalized food production system. These concerns include issues of “human health and food safety, the environmental consequences of globalized and industrialized agriculture, farm and animal welfare, and fair trade” (Winter 2003a: 24). The concept of quality as a response to these issues is oftentimes seen to be somehow inherent in more “local” and “natural” foods, thinking which results in food systems with shortened supply chains often being regarded as inherently more just in reference to these issues. This is due to the assumed ability of AFNs to re-build trust in farming organizations which is lost during crises such as a food scares (Winter 2003a: 25). These concerns are also understood to be “prime motivating factors in a move away from the homogenized products of the global agro-food industry in the western world” (Winter 2003b:507).

It needs to be understood, however, that this “turn to quality” is not a new trend. While “quality” might have the added benefit, in some situations, of being more environmentally friendly or socially just, the turn to quality is based also “on the continuation and growth of demand for luxury and positional goods and this continuity should not be forgotten” (Winter 2003a:25). Examples of such
goods would include items such as fine French wine, where purchasing such an item would be a sign of wealth and culture.

It is difficult to outline a set of defining characteristics for what is considered to be “quality” however, because this definition “is socially constructed and the way it is measured and signified is constantly subject to change and adaptation as its key constitutive concepts, such as authenticity, health tradition, taste, are themselves renegotiated” (Winter 2003a: 25, Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000). What is considered to be quality can range from considering whether a food meets certain regulations and standards such as those set by the USDA, or general feelings about food which stem from production methods. The marked turn towards quality also focuses on “ethical consumption” and the desire to “make visible” a better way of consuming.
ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS

Over the past 100 years the ways in which food has been produced in industrialized countries has undergone massive changes in relation to the scale on which food production is occurring. The intensification of agriculture enabled by technological advancements and the globalization of food markets in the second half the of the 20th century function as a reflection of the widespread globalization of supply chains. It is this globalization that has generally led to the assumption that locally embedded food networks are all but disappearing (Whatmore et al 2003: 389). Rather than disappearing, however, local food networks have instead come to be increasingly valued within certain markets for their ability to address issues of value, trust, and sustainability between producers and consumers.

A commonly referenced definition of AFNs is offered by Feenstra when she describes alternative food networks as “rooted in particular places, [AFNs] aim to be economically viable for farmers and consumers, use ecologically sound production and distribution practices, and enhance social equity and democracy for all members of the community” (Feenstra 1997: 28). Thus, a defining characteristic of ‘alternative’ is the fact that food networks are grounded in a particular place, in opposition to the placeless-ness associated with globalized agriculture, theoretically freeing these systems from the race to the bottom which
occurs when a farmer suddenly is competing with the entire world to sell a product.

The increase in the number as well as the variety of alternative food networks in recent years is most often understood as an agglomeration of different social movements, which attempt to address increasing global concerns about the sustainability of the current global food system. Alternative food networks, then, attempt to distinguish themselves from the prevailing food regime by building more direct producer-consumer alliances and by creating experimental spaces which can then be used to better meet the needs of those who choose to participate in the system (Roep and Wiskerke 2010:206).

To extend this idea further, it is important to understand that alternative food networks were initially conceptualized, and often continue to be so, as

“the new politics of food provisioning and global fair trade [which] builds upon imaginaries and material practices infused with different values and rationales that challenge instrumental capitalist logics and mainstream worldviews. These alternative projects are seen as templates for the reconfiguration of capitalist society along more ecologically sustainable and socially progressive lines” (Goodman et al 2011:3).

By looking specifically at the shortened food supply chains which are created by farmers markets and CSAs, it is possible to gain a greater understanding of how these networks are conceptualized by those in Syracuse who consider themselves to be involved in the local alternative food networks.
Community Supported Agriculture

The concept of community supported agriculture (CSA) originated in Switzerland and Japan during the 1960s, but did not begin to gain momentum in Europe and the United States until the mid-1980s (DeMuth 1993). Traditionally, a CSA operates when a group of people purchase shares of an expected portion of a harvest in a one-time payment which takes place in the beginning of the growing season, and functions to give the farm money with which to operate for the rest of the season (Hinrichs and Kremer 2002: 71). In this situation, consumers take on added risk due to the unknown future quality or quantity of the harvest. Members then either pick up their food at the farm or from a centralized location such as a farmers market. Typically a CSA in the United States will offer between eight and twelve different types of produce per week throughout the growing season (Martinez et al 2010: 9).
Given the risk taken on by the consumer in the CSA model, the entire system is based upon a compact of mutual understanding of farming practices which takes place between the farmer and local consumers. Community supported agriculture in particular is a celebrated component of alternative food networks because it “puts the farmer’s face on food” in a very direct way, given the amount of contact between producer and consumer that can occur in the CSA model. The amount of direct contact necessary is said to “enhance the dialogue between food producers and consumers” while working under the assumption that consumers are drawn in by their desire for a greater connection to the source of their food and concerns of food quality and accountability (Hinrichs and Kremer 2002:71).

**Population of the United States**

![Population of the United States](image)

*Figure 2 Grabar 2012*

As can be seen in Figure 1, CSAs in America tend to be located near major urban centers in the United States. There is, however, a concentration of CSA farms in the North East and on the West Coast which mirrors the population
of the United States fairly well, as shown in Figure 2, which depicts the population of the United States with a density of one dot per person on the block level. There is a very clear correlation between population and CSA production, but there is also a slight difference between populations in places such as Florida and the Deep South where this correlation appears to be less strong, and the CSAs less dense, given the population of these areas. This is important because it shows that there is spatiality to the distribution of AFNs in the United States, and that these trends do not necessarily reflect simple population density. They therefore imply that there is most likely a cultural element to their distribution as well.

It is the great potential of the CSA model to address consumer concerns which are explained by the “turn to quality” that fuels the focus on this form of direct marketing as the source of great social, economic, and health benefits for both the producers and the consumers involved (Hinrichs and Kremer 2002:71). There are regional variations to the CSA model within the United States, and there more than one way to conduct this business. In the western United States, and California in particular, the CSA is often employed on a much larger scale than its eastern counterpart, meaning that the CSA is essentially a subscription farming option which is devoid of many of the “non-economic” community-based benefits which are associated with more traditional conceptions of community supported agriculture (Hinrichs and Kremer 2002:71).

Beyond issues of scale, CSA membership can also be reflective of preexisting inequalities within US society. Due to the high up-front costs of CSA participation, it is not unheard of that CSA farmers are part of a separate social
class than those participating in the CSA. It is also important to address issues of
time-cost which are present within the CSA model. Those who participate in
CSAs need to be able to spend the time to both pick up the food each week and to
either prepare or preserve unknown quantities and types of CSA goods meaning
that CSA participation is a lifestyle choice, just like any other way that a person
can choose to consume food. Also, despite the rhetoric which often focuses on
“community” as one of the selling points for CSAs, CSA members do not
necessarily have to be involved in contributing to this community, which leaves
community maintenance to the farmer, adding to their already hectic schedule
during CSA season. For the purpose of analysis within this paper, Hinrichs and
Kremer say it best when they state that: “in this respect, issues of class and
community are inextricably intertwined in local food system projects” (Hinrichs
At their most basic, farmers markets are simply a common area where farmers can gather and sell their products, be they fruits, vegetables, etc., directly to consumers. It is the emphasis on direct marketing at farmers markets, given the necessary face-to-face contact between producers and consumers, that can explain some of the increase in popularity in recent years. Farmers markets were originally the main way in which people living in centralized urban systems bought their fresh fruits and produce, and they remain the way that people in much of the world purchase their produce. In post-war America, however, the role of the farmers market declined as cities grew larger. As motorized vehicles grew more widespread and pervasive, so did the large grocery stores which are common today (Futamura 2007: 214).

Farmers markets in America are most often run by individuals who oversee the market, are in charge of organizing the farmers and enforcing rules and
regulations, and promoting the market. Farmers then participate in the market by paying a vendor’s fee to the organization that runs the market. This can either be a flat fee for the entire season, or the fee can be based on available space the day of the market. Sometimes vendors are instead charged a percentage of their sales at the market. Farmers markets in the United States are concentrated largely in the densely populated areas of the Northeast, Midwest, and the West coast, as indicated in Figure 3, a distribution which makes sense given that the original role of farmers markets was to bring fresh food to consumers in urban areas (Martinez et al 2010:6-7).

The resurgence of farmers markets since their decline in the United States, much like the rise of CSAs, is often best understood in terms of a shift in the minds of the population from a focus on production and maximizing yields to a new focus on quality. It is possible to see from Figure 3 that the distribution of farmers markets across America is not limited to one geographic area. Instead, the greatest concentrations of farmers markets is found in the northeast and the west coast, mirroring the distribution of CSAs. The resurgence of farmers markets and CSAs in recent years can be understood to fight back against the placeless-ness and lack of accountability of food in a heavily industrialized system.
Academic Critiques of Alternative Food Networks

Academic analysis of alternative food networks tends to approach AFNs in one of two ways. Scholars engage with AFNs by focusing either on critical analysis of the failings of various activist projects, and trying to identify the processes by which external forces work to mainstream the alternative food networks. Alternatively, scholars focus on pre-identified failings and then try to build upon the promise of improvement that comes with learning from mistakes. The first approach seeks to draw attention to the failings of various networks out of the wish to shed light on the exclusionary processes which can take place in local food networks, such as how such networks can be racist or elitist in nature and make it clear that “alternative” does not necessarily mean “inherently good”. These scholars also look to identify how alternative food networks are still susceptible to the forces of neoliberalism, and the ways in which this rhetoric can have a deep ideological influence (especially in North America) on the ways in which these networks are constructed. Alternatively, scholars who focus on the promise contained within alternative food networks seek to identify the limitations of the networks and to then address and resolve these problems so that they can work to improve the network (Goodman et al 2011: 3).

Angela Tregear goes further than these two scholarly approaches towards alternative food movements, and presents the three most common theoretical perspectives – and, by extension, methodological approaches - within alternative food network literature. The first perspective is that of a political economic approach. This method seeks to take the forces of global capitalism and its
accompanying neoliberal politics, and use them to explain small-scale patterns of human behavior (Allen et al 2003, Goodman 2004). This perspective approaches alternative food networks with the idea that by exposing weaknesses within the system it is possible to address them and make the system better. The political economic perspective is then useful for understanding alternative food networks because it can offer an explanation of the inequalities and injustices which can emerge within such systems while functioning as a counterweight to more idealist outlooks (Tregear 2011:420).

A second, common, theoretical approach to alternative food network studies is rural sociology, or the development perspective. The rural sociology perspective also takes into account the influence that global capitalism has on AFNs, and the fact that AFNs have the potential to address some of the marginalizing and dehumanizing effects of modern global capitalism. But, unlike the political economic perspective, rural sociology focuses on alternative food networks as social constructions and as being emblematic of their social geography. These scholars explain alternative food networks as social constructions in that they are “embodiments of the members of the local communities themselves, as expressions of the beliefs, values, and motivations of those members as they pursue activities that they hope will lead to socioeconomic gains” (Tregear 2011:420).

The rural sociology perspective is important to alternative food network research because it grounds the literature in the human element of these networks, and draws attention to important emotional phenomena that occurs amongst
network participants such as the sense of obligation which can develop among consumers. Unfortunately, the desire of scholars using this perspective to hold on to the initial claims about the positive social aspects of alternative food networks means that they miss opportunities to re-theorize the dynamics of the systems as necessary (Tregear 2011:421).

The third theoretical perspective that is often used to theorize alternative food networks is that of modes of governance and network theory perspectives. Intended as a response to the micro-level analysis conducted on the rural sociology perspective, network theory perspectives aim to understand food systems as a series of networks operating at the scale of the region or the state. This places the power in such systems in the hands of actor groups, and the interactions that take place between different actor groups in order to organize the system. By looking at alternative food systems on the level of multiple, separate organizations, the governance and network theory perspective offers insight into dimensions of institutions and regulatory bodies that are not possible on the individual level. One of the most useful aspects of this research perspective, however, is not the institutional level analysis, but the fact that scholars working from the government and network theory perspectives offer a contrast to the other two perspectives in that they “tend to avoid conflating spatial scale with specific actor values or behaviors” (Tregear 2011:421).

The importance of decoupling spatial scale and actor values is particularly important because it emphasizes the fact that alternative food systems are not systematically inclined to exhibit certain behaviors which they are often lauded
for. For example, alternative food systems are not inherently more just than other kinds of food systems; they simply contain different capacities for justice. Governance and network theory perspective approaches therefore suggest that the job of the researcher is to explain why specific food systems exhibit specific kinds of behavior (Tregear 2011:421).

I use the perspectives and critiques of alternative food networks presented above in order to interpret my own interviews in an attempt to gain greater understanding of AFNs in Syracuse. I do this specifically by using the political economic perspective and rural sociology perspective to gain insight into exactly why people in Syracuse choose to participate in AFNs.
In my approach to alternative food networks, I wish to examine the ways in which people construct their identity through their participation in these networks. While I did not initially set out to understand the ways in which these networks can be perceived as elitist and exclusionary, it became clear, as my research progressed, that the ways in which identity was formed through these networks promoted not the formation but the affirmation of an (upper-) middle class identity through the nature of the cultural capital required to operate within these networks.

To build off of the work of Angela Tregear in her excellent paper “Progressing Knowledge in Alternative and Local Food Networks: Critical Reflections and a Research Agenda,” (2011) I would explain my research within the theoretical perspectives of a political economic approach combined with rural sociology. I specifically examined how participants in alternative food networks internalized issues such as food safety and nutrition, as well as defensive localism, and then used their participation in AFNs to address concerns about food which stemmed from the widespread globalization of food supply chains. I focused particularly on the ways in which interviewees would explain their involvement in terms of both community and personal health resulting from values perceived to be inherent within the food being marketed.
It is overly simplistic to describe my approach solely in terms of abstract concepts of nutrition, and responses to concerns that arise as a byproduct of global capitalism. I also acknowledge that alternative agricultural networks are by their nature grounded in a specific location and therefore cannot be understood in the aggregate. Therefore, I focus my research specifically on the ways in which alternative agricultural networks are being built in Syracuse, New York rather than from a more generalized perspective. I set out to understand the reasons why people choose to participate in Syracuse as well as more generally. My research is firmly rooted in the belief that alternative food networks are, at their core, social constructions and that it would be folly to attempt to understand them without considering the geographic context they exist within.

In order to accomplish my goal of understanding why people come to participate in alternative food networks in Syracuse, as well as to understand how people perceive themselves through this participation, I conducted four, hour-long, semi-structured interviews. The questions asked during these interviews can be found in Appendix A. Of these interviews, two were conducted with farmers who have made the choice to have their farms be CSA farms. I interviewed one man and one woman both of whom are white college graduates in their thirties who run their own business, serve the Syracuse area, and have spouses who work off-farm. I will refer to these farmers throughout the rest of this work as Farmer A and Farmer B. Both Farmer A and Farmer B grow a wide variety of vegetables, herbs, and in the case of Farmer B, flowers for their CSA members. Both farmers pride themselves on being able to produce a wide variety of
vegetables for their members, in hopes that the variety of produce given each week will set them apart from competition. Farmer A produces exclusively for his CSA clientele, but Farmer B also participates in the Regional Market on Saturdays.

I also interviewed two employees of the Central New York Regional Market. Both employees were white college graduates in their early 20s, one male and one female, who worked for the market over the summer of 2012. These two employees ran the Regional Market’s Mobile Market. Both employees became involved in the market with the help of courses which they took while attending Syracuse University and SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. I will refer to the employees of the Regional Market as Market Employee A and Market Employee B for the remainder of this work. At the time of the interview Market Employee A was pursuing a Masters in Environmental Communication at SUNY ESF and Market Employee B had graduated the previous May with a degree in Industrial Design. The market employees were interviewed because of their dual involvement as both consumers and middle-men in AFNs in Syracuse. Both employees shopped at the Regional Market before being employed there, and they both continued to shop at the market after their summer employment ended (although Employee B did eventually move).

I conducted the four interviews by either meeting with the interviewees in person or by conducting an interview over the phone. I recorded the interviews using a handheld voice recorder which recorded the interviews as .mp3 files. I
then opened these files using the freeware sound editing program Audacity and transcribed the interviews in Microsoft Word.

Central New York Regional Market

It would be impossible to understand the changes which are occurring within alternative agricultural systems in Syracuse without first understanding the Central New York Regional Market, and the role it plays in agricultural systems in the greater Syracuse area. The market began in the mid-1920s in downtown Syracuse, and then moved to its current location of 2100 Park Street in 1938. On a typical Saturday in the summer the Regional Market can attract over 400 vendors and is located on a 60 acre site adjacent to Destiny USA and the Regional Transportation Center (Central New York Regional Market Authority, Wooten
Figure 4 depicts the current layout of the Regional Market with the exception of the recently constructed F Shed which should open for the 2013 growing season (Cazentre 2013).

Both farmers interviewed got their start selling their produce at the Regional market as well as at other farmers markets in the Syracuse area, but reduced or cut out entirely selling through the Market when they introduced the CSA option to their farms. The Regional Market functions as a relatively low-cost option for vendors to enter into alternative agricultural networks in Syracuse, and to begin to form connections within the network. For a farmer to purchase a space at the regional market costs 600 dollars for the May-to-November growing season with an additional 300 dollar liability waiver (Cazentre 2011).

The Mobile Market which Market Employees A and B operated is run by the Central New York Regional Market Authority, that is the same group which runs the Regional Market. The purpose of the Mobile Market is to help provide access to fresh produce to underserved populations who might not be able to access the Saturday market. In order to accomplish this, the Mobile Market (a large trailer) will travel during the week and sell food out of the back of the trailer to populations the Market Authority determines to be of need. The Mobile Market visits mainly assisted living facilities, but it also provides service to the SUNY Upstate Medical Center to allow doctors and nurses who might otherwise be unable to attend the Saturday Market.
The act of consuming food is crucial for the formation of identity. Social identification “is the process by which we define ourselves in terms and categories that we share with other people” (Deaux 2001:1). The matter of what a person chooses to consume speaks directly to what that person perceives as their place in the world. Identity construction through the “ethical” consumption of food often focuses on consumption within alternative food networks because it provides a concrete way of qualifying identity construction. By choosing to consume within a network which is considered to be “more ethical” or “more just” or “more healthful”, a participant can portray themselves as the type of person who is concerned about these issues (Surian 2012). The rise in popularity of alternative food networks and, by extension, identity formation, around these networks can be understood in that “people are increasingly perceiving health as a result of individual choices rather than as the result of external variables beyond their control” (Surian 2012, Aiello 2011).

Identity formation, both within alternative food networks and generally, is not a static process. Identity can fluctuate and become more or less important depending on social setting. In attempting to explain why people participate in alternative agricultural networks in Syracuse, it is necessary to understand both how identity is expressed and created through involvement in these networks. By
gaining insight into people’s reasons for participation, it is possible to begin to understand why people chose to participate in these networks, and to understand how this participation changes, but also reaffirms, how people perceive themselves. Therefore, by looking at the social aspects of consumption, I hope to understand how people conceptualize their involvement in terms of how they perceive themselves. Specifically, I aim to gain insight into how people think about their consumption patterns, their community, and their class status within the framework of their participation.

I begin this section by explaining the ways in which people conceptualize their consumption in terms of alternative food networks. I then go on to explain the ways in which the interviewees form communities in terms of the consumption and their participation in these networks. The last section therefore explains the ways in which class identity is reproduced through the participation in AFNs in terms of participant’s approach to consumption and community formation.
At their core, alternative agricultural networks are concerned with issues of consumption and how people choose to consume based on their knowledge of different agricultural production methods. Goods are produced, bought, sold, and eventually consumed. To participate in these networks is to define part of one’s self in terms of a very specific form of consumption born out of an understanding of production methods. The construction of identity through consumption leaves the consumer open to the fact that “the freedom implied by consumer choice [entails] a commensurate degree of personal responsibility” (Warde 1994: 877). That is to say, the way in which a person chooses to consume contributes to the maintenance of their self-identity, where identity becomes a matter of the personal selection of self-image.

Consumption within alternative food networks plays a very important role not only in how a participant forms their own identity, but also in how they perceive the identities of other participants. When asked to describe their typical CSA member, both Farmer A and Farmer B explained that the only connecting factor that they could see between all of their CSA members is the fact that they care enough about where their food comes from to have joined a CSA in the first place. Farmer B describes the way that he sees his clientele and his market as

“There is this sort of thinking that you have to go after a certain clientele and a certain market, and that is not the case. I think we have a really
diverse CSA, white collar, blue collar, sort of everything. I don’t know what it is about certain people, but I think that the only commonality between them all is that they want to support the local farm and they also eat an abundance of seasonal vegetables throughout the year.”

He then goes on to describe that one of the other main commonalities he has observed among his clientele is that they are “people who are trying to eat healthy and creative in the kitchen.” An interesting aspect of the ways in which Farmer B describes his clientele is that while he previously focused on providing a classless description, as indicated by the fact that he specifically describes this consumers as being both white collar and blue collar, Farmer B goes on to say

“But we do have a fair amount of teachers both at the collegiate and the non collegiate level or whatever. We have a fair amount of artists and people who are into the creative community and that sort of thing, and we have a mix of everything else. It is hard to put our CSA membership in a small box because I think they are too diverse.”

The contradictions apparent in these descriptions are fascinating, because while describing the same clientele, Farmer B focuses both on their classlessness, and the ways in which they are acting to reproduce their middle class status.

Farmer A describes her clientele in a similar manner in that she also focuses on the health aspirations and education level of her clientele in describing their consumption choices rather than on their income level:

“I would say that my typical CSA member… I don’t want to make any particular assumptions on income level, but they are all well educated, passionate about good food, not solely local food, but good healthy food. By healthy I mean ‘richly grown’ and ‘sustainably grown’ so that all the nutrients are there and they are not leached out. Yeah I would say that is my biggest comment on them, they are passionate, and they recognize good quality food.”

Farmer A stresses the importance of health to her general CSA member at greater length than Farmer B, but combined they make it clear that they consider the
health benefits of the food that they are producing to be very important to the consumers who are choosing to participate in their CSA.

The consumers who choose to participate in CSAs contrasts greatly with those consumers who are served by the Mobile Market, and the described reasons for their consumption reflect that. When questioned about who chooses to consume at the Mobile Market and what food traits are important to them, it is clear that the consumption of local food has secondary importance to the convenience of the Mobile Market and issues of access and necessity take precedence for the consumers as well as for the Regional Market Authority, which runs the Mobile Market.

This fact is made clear by the controversy which arose over a business park that wished to be added to the Mobile Market rotation. The Regional Market Authority determined that the office complex simply did not have enough need to justify sending the market there and potentially taking away access from people who expressed greater need. Market Employee B said

“Working people have time, well maybe they don’t have time. But when I think about [the] hospital it wasn’t for the patients, it was more for the doctors and nurses who have to work long hours and probably on the weekends as well that wouldn’t be able to get to the market. So we said no to the [office complex] because it wasn’t a place that had the least amount of access”

This contrast shows the subjectivity of determining who gets to participate in these networks. Who determines “need” and why are doctors and nurses somehow more deserving of increased access than those who work at an office complex?

How participants perceive the consumption of others is only one facet of the ways in which participation in alternative food networks contributes to the
formation of an identity in conjunction with participation. Participants also discussed the ways in which they consume their own food, which offered insight into how those who choose to participate in these networks come to terms with the fact that despite their participation in alternatives, they still exist within a world where the norm is a heavily industrialized food system.

Farmers A and B made it clear that it is not possible to live entirely within alternative agricultural networks in the sense that it is still sometimes necessary to buy food from the grocery store or from a Co-Op, especially in the winter. In terms of their own consumption, both Farmers ate as much as they could off of their own land, but they also purchased items such as dairy and meat from other producers, or they would barter with their produce to receive these goods from other producers. There was a definite seasonality to their consumption, with most of the food they ate in the summer being something that they produced themselves, while most of the food in the winter being something from the freezer or which they had preserved. Food also came from more conventional sources such as local grocery stores.

The Employees of the Regional Market behaved similarly, with both employees reporting that they would purchase most of their food from the Regional Market while they were working on Saturdays, while fulfilling their duties at the Demonstration Kitchen at the Saturday Market. The Demonstration Kitchen was a test kitchen where the Regional Market Employees would test recipes using items which were in season at the market and then distribute samples and recipe cards to people visiting the market as an extension of their
duties at the Mobile Market. Neither employee appeared conflicted, as indicated by their tone, about the fact that items unavailable at the Regional Market would be bought at traditional grocery stores such as Tops or Wegmans.

This fact makes it clear that identity formation in terms of participation in alternative food systems is more important because it reflects how people conceptualize their consumption, as opposed to the realities of their consumption. It is for this reason that questions of identity formation through participation in alternative food networks relate specifically to perceived consumption rather than the realities of how a person actually consumes. The participant in the alternative food network, be they a producer or consumer, focuses on their participation as a defining characteristic of themselves, but also as a defining characteristic in terms of how others perceive them. This is because, “the essential function of consumption is the capacity to make sense,” meaning that people consume within alternative food networks not only support their own ideals, but to make sense of their place within the world (Winter 2003a:24).

Using this idea that people are consuming in order to make sense of their place within the world, it is possible to extend people’s consumption and to use it to understand what people perceive their place to be within AFNs and to understand how they interpret the communities which are considered to be a part of alternative food network participation.
Participation in alternative agricultural networks is not only about consuming in a fashion perceived to be more healthful, or more just. These are side effects which are perceived to exist due to the increased focus on community involvement, and accountability between producers and consumers which results from the face-to-face interaction between producers and consumers. This is a thought process exemplified by the USDA-wide effort to “carry out President Obama’s commitment to strengthening local and regional food systems” known as *Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food (KYF2)* which operates under the assumption that people are seeking out local food in the hope of reconnecting with those who grow it (USDA Mission).

This hope to reconnect with those who produce food is explained best in terms of an increased focus on community involvement among those looking to participate in alternative agricultural networks. It needs to be remembered, however, that alternative food networks do not create communities inherently; communities are something which need to be fostered among those who participate in the network on the individual level. The need to foster communities creates a disconnection between the rhetoric that is used to describe alternative agricultural systems, and the realities of participating within these networks in terms of how individuals create and maintain their identities through participation.
The communities which form around AFNs are constructions that take time to develop and they do not inherently produce mutual trust and understanding among participants. Regarding the sense of connectedness among community participants, Farmer A explains that one of her main conflicts with her customers in terms of relating to them is that she views alternative food movements (movements towards buying natural foods, Slow Food, etc) as giving a voice to the idea of local agriculture, but she finds that these movements can have a much different meaning for her customer base. She describes this conflict as being that:

“I don’t feel I relate to the idea they are buying into sometimes. I think when people buy local food they think they are buying more than just the item they are buying. And that is true, they are, they are supporting local food, they are buying into their health and their community’s health. But I also think that there is a little bit of a show that they want too. They really want to feel like they know their farmer. But I don’t look at what I do in terms of those movements. I just really love my job and I love producing good quality food for people who like it, and that is just sort of how I look at it. Keep it simple, like the food.”

Farmer A makes it clear that, for her, there is little idealism involved in her decision to produce local food. She constantly emphasizes health and the nutrition of eating food which is produced on the smaller scale, but she does not appear to feel that she needs to play into her consumers’ idealism.

Instead, she builds her community around other farmers with whom she has professional ties. In addition to her professional community, Farmer A also made it clear that part of her decision to begin farming in Central New York was because of the fact that her husband got a job at Syracuse University which meant that:
'I sort of knew that with the University and with my friends and family I knew that we would be able to jump into a community instead of having to work hard to find and grow one, we would naturally already have networks of people, and that was really important.’

In the case of Farmer A, it is quite clear that despite the emphasis on CSA type production, and its benefits for building local communities, the farmers involved do not necessarily look to their farms to provide the totality of the support structure for their lives. Instead, Farmer A looks laterally to those she has become acquainted with through family ties, and to others involved in her occupation. This is indicated by her response when asked if she thinks she has a community which would support her if something terrible ever happened.

“You know, that I don’t know. That would be a sort of ‘we would have to see in the moment’ type of question. I really don’t know if people would lend time or lend money, I really don’t know. I am trying to think of examples. I do think that that is true though, I have been able to call on a lot of people to help with things. I think that the season is so treacherous for everybody that if something happened in July I can’t think of anybody that would come to my rescue, but you never know.”

“Yeah, when we were constructing our walk in cooler in the shed and we needed a lot of hands to hold things and position things, and I was able to call some of the women who were in the Beginning Woman Farmers class and the ones who were local were able to drive out and help out.”

The support structure of Farmer A closely mirrors that of Farmer B in that they both describe their support structure in terms of their spouses (in the case of Farmer B, his wife helps to produce the farm newsletter and to distribute food during the CSA pick up) and in terms of local farmers.

“I think that we certainly have neighborhood farmers right in our area and we have an old woman up the road who helps us when she can and they always have. She is interested in what we are doing and as long as we are not stepping on each other’s toes, and I think that is collaboration enough
in some regards. The other farms that we tend to lean on, we have a neighboring farm who is a compost producer and we will work for him in exchange for compost, and we have another farm that is a cover cropper who will put hay on some of our land and we will get services out of them. So, we have connections with neighboring farms and we will buy bedding stock and raise some pigs as well, and we work with the neighbors in that regard. And then I think there is more of an extended community with farms regionally that are sort of similar to ours and CSA farms and organic farms and whatever. I think there is a bit of a community there and it can vary a bit, and people are not super connected but a lot of folks try to be cordial know each other and they farm all over.”

The discussion provided by the two farmers make it clear that community is something which takes time to develop and which is not created inherently by participation in alternative food networks.

This finding is reflected on the consumer side as well. When the Market Employees were asked to reflect on the summer they spent working for the Mobile Market, they made it clear that while those who purchased food through the market might feel a sense of community with one another, there was little connection felt between Market Employee A and B and those they were selling food to. The Market Employees discussed how people would come out and buy from them in groups and how these groups would express sadness if they did not come for one week for some reason, but not due to the fact that the market employees were not there, but because of the missed distraction.

The Farmers also continually stressed the importance of remembering that running a farm is the same as running a business. Farmer A states this very succinctly when she says

“I think about it more as a business. I mean, I love to produce richly grown and healthy food, but I also use…it is something that I have to sell. I do run the farm as a business. I think a lot of farmers get into trouble because it is such a personal occupation, it is such a personal thing, we are
Farmer A makes it clear that community must be secondary to the business aspects of the farm or else the farm will not work. But, as Farmer B points out, the community value of the farm can very well be outside of social relations, and instead exists within the confines of the fact that

“I think on the economics of the whole thing, there is an intrinsic emotional community help-value for people connecting with their place and connecting with local restaurants and business and farms etc. I think the opportunity for entrepreneurs that create livelihoods for themselves along with consumers being able to construct meaningful relationships with what they can put in their bodies and what they buy and where they buy it. I think that has a much bigger effect on communities”

It is important to note that Farmer B has been involved in alternative food networks for about five years longer than Farmer A. While they both focus on the importance of being profitable while still being local, the combination of options make it clear that the most important thing to remember in terms of how communities are formed is that they take time. To decide to produce within a community for a community is to decide to allow those connections to form over time and to slowly build what your place within the community is, as well as your consumers place.

Combining the fact that communities are formed between those involved in the same aspect of AFNs, with the way that people interpret their own consumption, along with the reasons that others provide for their consumption, merits the asking of the question of ‘why does this happen?’ Why do people choose to consume the ways that they do, and why do people form communities
with the people they do within the context of AFNs? Based on the interviews conducted it is possible to infer that the missing element of why people choose to interact within these networks in the way that they do because these interactions are a way of reproducing their own class status.
Having outlined the clear divide in how producers and consumers develop their communities in relation to alternative food networks, this leaves the question of *why* do these communities segregate from one another? Why do producers regard other farmers as members of their community, but not those who purchase from them? I argue that at least in part this division occurs due to disparities in cultural capital held by farmers and their consumers and that participation in alternative food networks is a way of expressing one’s (middle) class status.

Cultural capital according to Bourdieu is defined as the “experiences, knowledge, and skills that individuals acquire at the intersection of their economic and social capital” (Cultural Capital 2008). Cultural capital is therefore composed of the non-financial capital that a person possesses, such as their education. The theory of cultural capital “treats attitudes, preferences, and behavior as forms of embodied cultural capital” (Yaish and Katz-Gerro 2010: 169). An individual’s preferences for items such as organically produced or locally grown food are therefore reflected in their cultural capital. Bourdieu then uses this idea of embodied cultural capital to “describe a model of class structure and class reproduction. He argues that class and cultural competencies are hierarchical in mutually reinforcing ways. As such, cultural capital is a signal that is used to maintain class domination” (Yaish and Katz-Gerro 2010:170). Therefore, the
cultural capital that an individual possesses is not all created equal, and it is instead reflected in their class status.

Social class in this situation is referred to as the “social division or system of rank order, evident in the phrase ‘upper, middle, and lower classes’ that is associated with position, privilege, and hereditary advantage (or lack thereof)” (Class 2009). It is important to note that class is more than simply monetary standing however, but also a product of “attire, carriage, speech, diet, habitation and forms of lifestyle consumption – all linked to underlying unequal structures of material resources” (Class 2009). Focusing particularly on the idea of diet and lifestyle consumption as a reflection of social class, it is possible to draw the conclusion that participation in AFNs is a way of reaffirming social capital and solidifying participant’s social class.

I argue that by participating in AFNs and showing preference for the aspects of food which alternative food networks are often celebrated for reproducing, the attitudes and preferences expressed by participants are ways for the participants to reinforce their membership in a class which has the privilege to be concerned about these elements. This is not the only reason for participation, because concerns for the environment and health are still valid and worth defending because AFNs can have real positive effects on health and the environment. But these are not the only effects for participants and the affirmation of cultural capital also needs to be remembered as an element of individual’s participation.
Participants express their cultural capital by showing preferences for the elements of alternative agricultural networks such as the increased healthfulness of the food and increased community support by “buying local”. Consumption and community therefore become metaphors for operating within the middle class, regardless of actual monetary income. This is because (as stated previously)

“The concept of cultural capital [is used] to describe a model of class structure and class reproduction. [Bourdieu] argues that class and cultural competencies are hierarchical in mutually reinforcing ways. As such, cultural capital is a signal that is used to maintain class domination and to shape individuals’ life chances. The dominant classes have distinct cultural tastes, which they use as both an indicator of their cultural capital and as a way to maintain their advantage in social, economic, and cultural arenas” (Yaish and Katz-Gerro 2010: 170).

Therefore, by participating in alternative food networks, both as producers and consumers, the emphasis is not only on developing a local community or on consuming in an ethical manner so much as it is on consuming and producing in a way which reinforces one’s own class status by displaying a class preference towards more ethical consumption.

Given the fact that each member of this study has a college education and describes their socioeconomic status as middle class, it is possible to discern that their participation in alternative food networks is an extension of and reproductive element of a college-educated middle class lifestyle. This can be clearly seen when Farmer A describes her CSA members as people who are

“All well educated, passionate about good food, not solely local food about good health food. By healthy I mean ‘richly grown’ and ‘sustainably grown’ so that all the nutrients are there and not leached out.”
By making this argument that her customers are looking for food which is nutritious in this way, and that they are educated enough to pursue this food, Farmer A is also arguing that she is educated enough to produce food in this manner and to understand the importance of doing so. Farmer B makes a similar claim with reference to the education of his clients when he states

“We have a fair amount of teachers, maybe that is partially because my wife is a teacher, but we do have a fair amount of teachers both at the collegiate and the non-collegiate level or whatever. We have a fair amount of artists and people who are into the creative community and that sort of thing, and we have a mix of everything else.”

In describing his CSA members this way, Farmer B makes it clear that those who participate in his CSA are for the most part well educated, creative people, both of which are descriptors common of the middle class in America.

The two Market Employees interviewed reaffirm their cultural capital through participation alternative food networks slightly differently than the Farmers do because they are in the unique position where they are both consumers in that they are regular shoppers at the Regional Market, both before and after their employment, but they are also middle men who are involved in the distribution of food for the Regional Market. In the case of Market Employee A it is easy to see the way in which his participation in the Regional Market reaffirms his class status through his education when he says

Market Employee A: Oh, my professor in landscape architecture emailed me and said that it was a paid internship and I didn’t have any job lined up for the summer other than Boba Suite and this was a relevant thing that I could put on my resume and get paid for full time, so I did that.

Interviewer: Relevant to what, exactly?
Market Employee A: Like, food studies, um, food systems, since like it is a link in a chain. Since the farmers market has the wholesalers there …

Interviewer: So, what made you originally start shopping at the Regional Market?

Market Employee A: I think I went with some friends when I was an undergrad who were foodies.

If it was not for his college education, Market Employee A would likely never have been afforded the chance to work at the Regional Market and become involved in the production side of a system in which he was already consuming. Through his introduction to the market by friends, which he describes as “foodies,” going to the Regional Market for him was initially and potentially still is an extension of his class status. Foodies were initially defined as “a person who is very very very interested in food…They don’t think they are being trivial – Foodies consider food to be an art, on a level with painting or drama” which, given their elevation of food to a cultural level with art, clearly use food in order to affirm their class status (Barr and Levi 1984:6). Therefore, shopping at the Regional Market in addition to working at the Market reaffirms not only Market Employee A’s education about food issues but also his prior constructions of identity around food.

Market Employee B experiences a similar class status affirmation in her participation and consumption habits when she explains how she feels as if she is a part of national trends:

“I don’t know. I was just coming from my undergraduate background, I don’t know a lot about how the food system works and I tried to educate myself but I don’t know as much as someone who was going to school for it. But I have seen more and more people who were like, early 20s and student age people being interested in where their food comes from and
trying to cook for themselves more. I think it is becoming a thing to start caring about your local economy and the local culture of food. I definitely think that what I was doing was a part of that.”

Market Employee B views her consumption also in terms of her education and as a way of identifying with people her age (and possibly of her class status) and that by identifying with food trends towards local and organic food she is also identifying with people who are like her, thereby reaffirming her class status.

The combination of consumption and community development as forms of interaction within AFNs offer insight into the ways in which those who participate in these systems reaffirm their class status as middle class people. By consuming in a way which is indicative of a middle class lifestyle and education (by showing a preference for food which is described as “more healthful” both for the environment and for community formation), those who participate in AFNs are using their participation to reinforce their identity as a middle class person and as a way of outwardly expressing their cultural capital. This is contrary to assumptions which describe people’s participation in AFNs solely as a way to express concerns for issues in food networks which arise out of increased industrialization and globalization of the food system, and out of a desire to counteract the placelessness of food under such a system.
CONCLUSION

I set out with the goal of understanding how those who participate in alternative food networks conceptualize their role within AFNs and what their reasons for participation were in terms of their consumption patterns, their community involvement, and their class status in terms of their personal identity construction. Studying how identity is constructed within alternative food networks is important because “with the rise of new, more fractured middle class politics in the US, it is important to pay more attention to the ways in which our positive investments in our own racial privilege influences how we define problems and solutions” (DuPuis and Goodman 2005: 362). In terms of AFNs, the problems being responded to are those which stem from globalized, industrial food system, such as concerns that arise concerning food safety and placelessness food.

Those who argue that alternative food networks are responding to concerns of human health and food safety, the environmental consequences associated with producing food on an industrialized and globalized scale, issues of farm and animal welfare, and fair trade, are in fact at their core expressing a turn to quality in food which can only be expressed by those who do not feel pressured by a lack of quantity (Winter 2003b). The main pressure of alternative food systems, by freeing the food system from global competition, is to also free the
system from the negative consequences of a globalized food system in the capitalist market place.

I examined alternative agricultural systems in Syracuse, New York in terms of this turn to quality to understand why people choose to participate in this system as opposed to other networks, and to also understand how their participation in this system contributes to the formation of their personal class identity. I used a combination of the rural sociology and political economic perspectives in order to conduct and analyze four interviews with participants in alternative food networks in the Syracuse area. These participants included two CSA farmers and two employees of the regional market.

I argue that consumers and producers choose to participate in alternative food networks not only because they provide a way to consume more ethically, but also because they allow for both the consumers and producers to reproduce their class status through their consumption. Participating within alternative food networks allows for those who choose to participate within them to conceptualize themselves as an extension of their consumption choices and to build part of their identity around that of being an “informed consumer” or an “informed producer.” Building one’s identity in this way enables both the producers and consumers to display the cultural capital necessary to reaffirm their position as a middle class person. The ways in which AFNs build communities reaffirms this conclusion because communities did not often appear to breach the producer-consumer divide.
The continuation of this divide reinforces the idea that the main result of people participating in alternative food networks was not to build a community between producers and consumers, but to continue building a community laterally among either producers or consumers as a way of both building and reinforcing participant’s cultural capital in relation to one another. The implication of this lateral community building is that the way people approach alternative food networks needs to be reconsidered. To write these networks off simply as a bourgeois movement is to misunderstand the role of these networks in reproducing a middle class identity. It also misunderstands the potential of these networks to actually address the issues which arise from globalized, industrialized food movements by re-localizing consumption to some degree.

Studying alternative food networks as extensions of the affirmation of class status is not the only way of understanding what participation within them means to the participant. It is one dimension of these networks, but it is one which deserves to be discussed because it is not enough to talk only about the environmental and health benefits of these networks, it is also important to discuss what they mean in all dimensions for the people who choose to participate in them. If alternative food networks are going to continue to grow and thrive across the United States they need to be understood from multiple perspectives, as do the individuals who choose to participate in them. This includes the ways in which these networks can help to reproduce class status. There are undeniable environmental and social benefits to alternative food networks, and if these
benefits are going to be maximized and accessibility increased, social class must be taken into consideration.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

The greatest weakness of this study is the small sample size. Four people are simply not enough people in order to gain a good idea of how exactly these networks function. I would suggest that more interviews be conducted with CSA farmers who serve the Syracuse area in order to gain a more complete picture of how they conceptualize their participation within AFNs. I would also recommend that interviews be conducted with people who choose to subscribe to CSAs in order to understand their reasons for subscription, as well as people who choose to shop at the Regional Market but who are not also employed by the Market. I would also suggest interviews be conducted with farmers who do not participate in the CSA model and who choose to market to restaurants or sell directly at farmers markets in order to understand some of their reasons for producing this way. But, most importantly, I would suggest looking further into the idea of class reproduction as a reason for participation and seeing if this conclusion holds up against different production and consumption methods.
WORKS CITED


APPENDIX A

Sample Interview Questions

General
1) Where does the majority of your food come from?

2) What made you want to become involved in food production?
   a) What made you want to become a CSA member?
   b) What made you want to become involved in the marketing of local food?

3) How has the way you think about food changed since being involved in the (production/consumption/marketing) of it?

Producers
1) How long have you lived in Central New York?

2) For how long have you been farming?

3) What made you want to start farming specifically in Central New York?

4) What did you know going in/what are the most important things you have learned
   a) in terms of keeping the farm turning a profit?
   b) Specifically about food/agriculture/people?

5) Is it possible to support yourself solely through the farm?

6) What is your support structure?
   a) Who helps you, how do you get everything done?
   b) Is there community support?
   c) What do you do about farm equipment?
   d) How did you get started (costs)?

7) Who buys your food/product?
   a) Describe them (probe – demographics: race, class, gender, age)

8) How has your farm changed over time?
   a) How is that reflective of what you interpret to be general trends in agricultural production?

9) Have you witnessed any major changes to Central New York agriculture in the past 10 years?
10) What are your feelings about alternative food movements such as Slow Food, Buy Local? What about the current national uptick in awareness of alternative food systems such as Farmers Markets, CSAs, etc?
   a) Did they have any influence on your reasons to become involved in food production?

11) Why did you choose to produce food in (the way that they do organic/non-organic/minimum input)?

Consumers
1) How long have you lived in Central New York?

2) How long have you been a CSA member?

3) What made you initially want to become a CSA member?

4) What are the most important things you have learned by being involved in the CSA?

5) Where else do you get your food? What percentage of your food comes from the CSA?

6) What are the greatest advantages of being involved in the CSA? Disadvantages?

7) What are your feelings about alternative food movements such as Slow Food, Buy Local?

8) What about the current national uptick in awareness of alternative food systems such as Farmers Markets, CSAs, etc?
   a) Did they have any influence on your reasons for becoming involved in the CSA?

Demographics
1) In what year were you born?
2) What is your gender?
3) What is the highest level of education you have completed?
4) How would you describe your ethnicity?
5) How would you describe your family’s socioeconomic class?
CAPSTONE SUMMARY

The preceding document aims to understand the intricacies of why people choose to participate in alternative food networks (AFNs) in Syracuse New York and the ways in which their involvement factors into how participants form their identity around their participation. In order to do this, I conducted four hour-long semi-structured interviews with two CSA farmers and two employees of the Central New York Regional Market Authority (CNY Regional Market) who ran the Mobile Market for the Market Authority.

Alternative food networks are defined by Angela Tregar as “forms of food provisioning with characterizes deemed to be different from, perhaps counteractive to, mainstream modes which dominate in developed countries” which include “localized and short food supply chains, farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSAs) and community gardens and organic schemes” (Tregar 2011:419). This is to say that AFNs are food networks which are alternative to a globalized, industrial food network specifically with regards to production methods, and the ways in which food travels from producer to consumer. Within alternative food networks, shortened supply chains often involves direct marketing from the producers (often farmers) to the consumers, as I examine by looking specifically at the CNY Regional Market and two CSAs which serve the Syracuse area. Both of these forms of food distribution involve direct contact between the farmer and their customers, exemplifying the common
idea that alternative food networks help participants to get to know farmers directly.

The importance of farmers markets in AFNs in Syracuse NY, and the CNY Regional Market in particular cannot be understated. Farmers markets have been experiencing resurgence in popularity in over the course of the past decade which mirrors the increase in popularity of AFNs in general in the United States. The historical role of Farmers Markets was to bring fresh produce to urban populations and they fell out of popularity with progress made with motorized vehicle technology. The Regional Market in Syracuse is unique in that the market has been operating continuously since it moved to its current location at 2100 Park Street since 1938. The Regional Market in Syracuse is important for this study because it served as the jumping off point for both farmers who either sold there or continue to sell there after becoming involved in CSA production. The Regional Market Authority, who runs the Regional Market, was also the employer of the two CNY Mobile Market Employees who were interviewed.

The results of this study found that the ways in which AFN participants used their consumption habits as a way of engaging with their communities had very clear effects on how they formed their (middle) class identities. All participants interviewed identified themselves as middle class without hesitation when asked what socioeconomic class they belonged to, with the exception of one farmer who provided his social class as “no class” but given his wife’s occupation as a teacher and his college education, would most often be classified by others as “middle class.”
Participants in my study often expressed their consumption habits and by extension their participation in alternative food networks in terms of health and making a point to consume in a healthy and ethical manner. Consumption plays a key role in identity formation generally and this remains true for those who choose to consume within alternative food networks. Consumption choices also play into how other’s perceive participant identities. For example, when asked to describe their CSA consumers, the farmers interviewed both described their customers primarily in terms of the fact that they are CSA members. This descriptor speaks to the identity formation of the farmers because by describing their customers in terms of their perception and desire for “good” and “healthy” food they are describing their food this way and thus become the type of person who cares enough about these concepts to produce food this way.

The formation of communities is also an important factor in describing how identities are formed around involvement in alternative food networks because the ways in which communities are formed explains who participants are using their identities to interact with. The most important concept which was taken away from the formation of communities around alternative food networks is the fact that communities are described by participants not in terms of the connections made between producers and consumers, but instead in terms of how producers form communities with one another, and as to consumers. For example, when asked to describe their communities, the farmers interviewed discussed how they relate to other farmers in the region producing in a similar manner to themselves. The employees of the regional market had a similar reaction when
asked to describe their communities. They responded by describing their relationship to one another and to their boss, not to the people who were served by the market each week. The Market Employees also described the communities formed around the Mobile Market as if they were outside actors.

The combination of these two forms of interaction within AFNs combined offer insight into the ways in which those who participate in these systems reproduce their class status as middle class people. It is argued that by consuming in a way which is indicative of a middle class lifestyle and education (by showing a preference for food which is described as “more healthful” both for the environment and for community formation) those who participate in AFNs are using their participation to reinforce their identity as a middle class person. This is contrary to assumptions which describe people’s participation in AFNs solely as a way for people to express concerns for issues in food networks which arise out of increased industrialization and globalization of the food system. Therefore, I conclude that both consumers and producers choose to participate in alternative food networks as a way of reproducing their own conception of themselves as middle class people.