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Article

Food Culture or Cultural Value: Exploring the Different Concepts in Greece and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Food culture(s) can be regionally or nationally situated, often affected by food fashions, fads, investment in brands, and relational engagement with foods that can be sold worldwide. This research explores personal perspectives on the influence of alternative food networks (AFNs) and the businesses within them on the creation of food-associated cultural value and the ability to reconnect consumers with and through food. Semi-structured interviews (n = 19) were conducted between January and March 2022 in two locations, Fthiotida, Greece, and Gloucestershire, UK. These interviews explored, and grounded, the notion of food culture and the articulated meanings of food-related cultural value. Responses were thematically analyzed collectively and at intra-country and inter-country levels. Interviewees identified a strong national food culture in Greece in both daily interaction with food and on seasonal occasions. National food culture in the UK was neither perceived as strong nor readily identifiable beyond specific seasonal occasions. National food culture and perceived food-related cultural value at a personal level were more identifiable and overlapped more in Greece than the UK. Given the health challenges associated with contemporary UK food consumption practices compared with the Mediterranean diet, facilitating perceptions of food-related cultural value, not least through commensality, could improve diets, with AFNs supporting such initiatives.

Keywords: consumer perception; empirical qualitative study; relationships; food; Mediterranean diet; commensality



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1. Introduction

History has seen many changes in the food culture of different countries through colonization, immigration, or globalization [1]. There are specific aspects assigned to certain food cultures. For example, from a geographical standpoint, the Mediterranean diet is different to the Western Diet of the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK) [2]. Distinctions are made on the basis of the Mediterranean diet being more environmentally friendly [3], featuring a more wholesome relationship with food and with others through food, [4–6], and being healthier compared to Western Diets [2,7,8]. In the UK, for example, more than 50% of energy intake in the diet comes from ultra-processed foods compared to around 20% in Greece [9]. The distancing of consumers from food through the rise in unsustainable and trapping food systems [10,11], and the transactional engagement, but lack of trust, in the conventional food system due to price volatility and

food scandals, have led some to question whether the UK does in fact have food security or preparedness in food crises [12,13].

Extractive food systems that consume resources but do not address the externalities of food production systems on consumer mental and physical health, environmental health, and economic and food system resilience have been critiqued in the literature [12,14,15]. Indeed, concerns over the level of consumption of ultra-processed food dominate many narratives [16,17], countered by perceptions of lack of affordability of local or high-nutritional quality foods [18–20]. Therefore, theoretically at least, diets arising from such systems neither fulfill the requirement to be nutritionally appropriate nor credibly affordable. Ultra-processed food consumption also has been associated with low food literacy [9], and with the lack of intergenerational cooking and knowledge exchange within and between families (Narain in [11]), with consumers sitting in front of the television or computer to eat rather than eating together at a table. This suggests a disconnect in societal relationships with food.

There has been increased engagement with alternative food networks (AFNs) (non-supermarket retail) and local food networks (LFNs) as a means to improve food-related connections (see [21]). This engagement in the UK has increased since Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with a resurgence of interest in more natural and local products [14,22]. Indeed, research suggests that after being exposed to specific foods, consumer perceptions and dietary habits can change [23]. This demonstrates how individuals can re-evaluate their relationship with food. Even annual or one-off events such as food festivals give consumers the opportunity to re-evaluate food, for example, engaging with traditional or artisan foods [24]. AFNs have been considered more recently, in terms of the ‘digital context’ [25], the mediating role of proximity to customers [26], conviviality, connections and community building [27,28] and either social, environmental, spatial, ecological or economic embeddedness [29]. As Matacena and Corvo [30] elucidate, food can conjure a ‘deeper meaning’, culturally, socially, and environmentally, especially if AFNs and the businesses within them seek to redress the pull of the dominant conventional food system. Conceptualizations of food-related consumer values, such as the Food Consumption Values and non-financial ‘alter-values’, have been positioned in the literature [31,32]. More specifically, others have critiqued the meaning of food to people, their emotions towards it, and its importance in their lives beyond basic nutrition [33]. Multiple studies have contextualized consumers’ attitudinal and behavioral relationship with food including perceived financial value (e.g., willingness to pay), and different characterizations or claims associated with food products seeking to link food products with normative principles, production or location-based claims or value-based definitions, rather than the intrinsic product quality or emotional-cultural values [8,32]. The emotional, physical and social meaning of food has also been considered in certain health care contexts [34,35]. Ho et al., [34] (p. 1190) in their work with anorexia patients, concluded:

“Food was viewed as an important tool to bond and connect with their loved ones. It [the connection] was perceived to be more important than the food itself and the taste of food was enhanced through social interactions.”

The concept of ‘foodways’ is not new. ‘Foodways’ has been used as a term to describe:

“all the traditional activities, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors associated with the food in your daily life. Foodways include customs of food production, preservation, presentation, gathering, marketing (both buying and selling), uses of food products other than eating and food folklore.” [36] (p. 2).

Thus, foodways, as a term, encompasses the relationships with food, reflects self and group identity, and the sense and meaning related to food which is constructed (or less

formally in some networks assembled) and reconstructed (reassembled) to reflect cultural dynamics [37]. Indeed, complex relationship(s) with food derive an emotional-cultural value linking the visceral nature of eating with cultural roots, and this ultimately affects the perception of the food itself [32].

Jayasinghe et al. [38] differentiate between food culture and cultural foods and the cultural influences such as tradition, rituals and shared beliefs on food-related consumption behaviors and practices. Food culture is often assigned to a location or proximity for a diet or a cuisine such as Italian or Cantonese cuisine [39]. Food culture has been defined as: “what we do, think and feel around food as an individual or group, within the social and environmental constructs at that time” influenced by “our surrounding environments, food socialization and cultural practices (people, place, policy and time) that interact” [40] (p. 2), suggesting food culture can be transient, subject to trends and fads and not necessarily anchored to heritage and traditions [8]. Recent research has compared and contextualized the similarities and differences between food culture and the cultural value of food in terms of degree of adaptiveness, autonomy and identity, influences, knowledge, scale and timescales [8]. Much research into the Mediterranean food system has been conducted in Italy, and comparative analysis has been undertaken to compare the findings with the UK [30,41], looking in particular at the differences in AFNs, and the positioning of trust. There is much less empirical research focused on the perceived cultural value of food in Greece [42], especially outside the main cities, and even less on the comparison with the UK. Since the study explored in this paper was undertaken, there has been more research published on social solidarity enterprises (SSEs) in Greece in the context of AFNs, e.g., a cooperative of olive growers in Lesbos [43], demonstrating the more collectivist culture in Greece compared to the more individualistic culture in the UK [44,45] and a critique of the definitions of food culture and the cultural value of food [8]. The contribution of this work is to address a contemporary knowledge gap on the role of businesses within AFNs in reconnecting consumers with and through food and how this links to the perceived cultural value of food, following the research of [8]. Three research questions emerge:

RQ1: In the context of the study, how do businesses within AFNs potentially reconnect consumers with food, and through food?

RQ2: How does food-related cultural value emerge and what is the role of these businesses within AFNs in providing meaning and context?

RQ3: Can national food culture exist that does not embed food-related cultural value?

In this study, food culture was considered to be stronger in Greece than in the UK. Food culture in Greece was perceived as being based on embeddedness, regularity, inter-generational ties, and knowledge, and was clearly linked with community life (including food producers being embedded within the community). UK food culture was perceived to be weaker, due to western work lifestyles, food price perceptions, and prioritizing other activities, although special annual events were still celebrated with specific foods. Despite not witnessing a strong perception of food-related cultural values in the UK, interviewees described what a strong food culture could be, often citing Mediterranean examples. Of particular note, a differentiation was highlighted between the concepts of ‘food culture’ and the ‘cultural value of food’. Whilst much extant research and policy have concentrated on addressing unhealthy food-related lifestyles, the importance of community and familial commensality and conviviality in promoting healthy relationships with food have been understated and understudied. This research suggests that perceiving its cultural value is part of having a healthy relationship with both the food itself, those who provide it and the community around you. This finding has implications for individuals, industry and policy. The paper is structured as follows: Section 1 is the introduction and Section 2 the methodology. Section 3 highlights the findings from the data collection, specifically what

food culture and the cultural value of food were understood to be in each country. Section 4 discusses the findings and concludes the paper.

2. Materials and Methods

Interviews were conducted between January and March 2022 in two locations: Fthiotida, Greece, and Gloucestershire, UK. The aim was to explore, ground, compare and contrast the concept of food-related cultural value as expressed by the respondents and how this informed an understanding of (re)connecting with and through food. Interviews were informal and inductive, and continued until evidence saturation was reached in each country. Informed consent forms were completed prior to these interviews, confirming the interviewees were happy to take part and for the data to be used in research. The study received ethical approval prior to the interviews from the Royal Agricultural University (number 20212701). The interviews were designed to be exploratory in nature, to then inform future interviews with businesses in AFNs. The exploratory prompted interviews provided rich, detailed evidence from a variety of actors within the food system: academics, politicians and food business owners (Table 1). Respondent codes are used in the text where quotes are presented or narratives described. Interviews ($n = 19$) were conducted in person, online via Zoom or via written responses sent by email. The sampling approach for interviewees was a purposive, but ultimately a convenience-based sample in both locations and was not designed to be representative, per se. Academic and political interviewees were selected and approached on the basis of location and their expertise on/experience of local food systems, research activities or policy initiatives within the studied areas. They spoke in their professional capacity. Business interviewees were chosen to align with the following criteria: Size requirements of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (fewer than 250 employees, under 50 million euro annual turnover, or have an annual balance sheet of under 43 million euro) [46]; different sizes, foci, and within different parts of the chain, and within the search areas of Gloucestershire, UK and Fthiotida in Greece.

Table 1. Description of respondents.

Description	Code
<i>Greek interviewees ($n = 7$)</i>	
Government representative (sent answers via email as could not meet in person due to the start of the Ukraine war).	GP1
Regional government representative	GP2
Extensive mixed farmer—Fthiotida	GB1
Milk cooperative—Fthiotida	GB2
Pork producer—Fthiotida	GB3
Fishing cooperative—Fthiotida	GB4
Vegetable producer—Fthiotida	GB5
<i>UK interviewees ($n = 12$)</i>	
Food and farming organization representative	UKA1
Local government representative	UKA2
Academic-Gloucestershire	UKA3
Academic-Gloucestershire	UKA4

Table 1. *Cont.*

Description	Code
Sustainability organization representative	UKA5
Local government representative	UKA6
Farmer Levy Body representative	UKA7
Goat meat producer—Gloucestershire	UKB1
Large restaurant and food retailer—Gloucestershire	UKB2
Social enterprise community kitchen—Gloucestershire	UKB3
Farmers market representative—Gloucestershire	UKB4
Farm shop retailer—Gloucestershire	UKB5

The lead interview questions were piloted in each country to ensure they were appropriate and capable of providing rich, detailed responses. To ensure anonymity, all interviewees were given a specific code (Table 1). Certain changes were made to adapt questions for Greek interviews (Table 2), and these also involved a native speaking translator. The two lead questions the interviewees were asked were:

1. What do you understand by the term ‘cultural value of food’? How strong [intense] is the [attitude, perception of] cultural value of food in (this country/region)?
2. And if ‘AFNs promote the renegotiation of cultural norms’ [47,48], what part do food SMEs play in this renegotiation?

Table 2. Interview adaptations for Greek interviews.

Issue	Action
The original questions in English did not directly translate into Greek.	The interview questions had to be rewritten.
The follow-up questions/clarification questions were less effective than in the UK.	A translator translated answers ad hoc.
Keeping to the interview questions was difficult	Due to the conversational nature of the participants and the desire for a discussion. The discussion was allowed to flow.
Interviews were more conversational and informal	It was necessary to gain a certain level of trust from Greek participants, contrasting with UK participants, some of whom preferred to make the interview as concise as possible.

The elicitation technique was designed to encourage the interviewees to be more reflexive than a more structured interview would have allowed. Reflexivity in this context means that the researchers and the interviewees have the self-awareness to treat the evidence created within the interviews not as an objective truth, but a subjective construction of messy contexts and multiple realities and worldviews [49]. All direct interviews were recorded on an audio recorder, transcribed partly by Otter.ai and partly manually, and then translated, where appropriate, by a native speaker present during the interviews. Through using Nvivo v.12, content analysis and text coding were followed by cross-comparison at intra-country and inter-country levels. After the codebook was generated, thematic analysis was undertaken in a series of iterative reflection loops.

The Naeem et al. [50] framework has been followed to ensure:

- Perspectivization, which informed the structure of the paper, the articulation of the research questions, interview guidelines and the interviews themselves,

- Recapitulation through preparing, reading through the transcripts, and familiarizing with the contents to inform the inductive development of the codebook,
- Integration by content coding and developing a coding hierarchy,
- Crystallization via reflection and critique to develop thematic coding hierarchies, and
- Edification via synthesis and conceptual articulation through several conceptual iterations to produce the conceptual outputs of the paper.

The research undertaken is exploratory and scoping in nature and as a result has some limitations in terms of wider generalization including the small sample areas in both countries, their lack of representativeness for the whole respective countries, and the purposive and small sample size ($n = 19$). These limitations were considered in the degree of inference drawn in the crystallization and edification stages of the research. The research observations and their analysis are synthesized and critiqued in the next section of the paper.

3. Results and Analysis

During the interviews, discussions around food culture as well as the cultural value of food arose and it was identified by respondents that there was at times overlap, but also ‘food culture’ and ‘cultural value of food’ as concepts had characteristics that were distinct. Thus, despite not asking a question specifically about food culture, it became an important theme that iteratively emerged during the interviews and the development of the codebook. Explanatory quotes that are a phrase or single sentence have been kept in the text; others that are longer have been drawn out to stand alone. One strong theme that iteratively emerged was commensality. Commensality is the practice of people coming together around food, for example, sharing food and eating together [8,51–54]. Eating together improves family meal attitudes and family cohesion [55,56], increases consumption of fruits, vegetables, proteins, micronutrients, whole grains, and calcium-rich food, reduces consumption of fried food and sugary drinks [57], and increases engagement with local communities through social eating [58]. Commensality has also been associated with holding a cultural value for the foods eaten, and through repeated commensality, these foods may become part of an embedded food culture [8].

3.1. Perceptions of UK Food Culture

The general feeling from interviewees was that UK food culture has changed in recent decades, from what some classed as a more traditional, connective relationship with food towards a transactional relationship. Although some felt that the tide was turning back more recently. As one UK respondent stated: “When you take that real immersion out of it by making it much more transactional, that [connection] is somehow lost” (UKA2). It was suggested that the UK food culture is context specific: “It’ll be contextual as well and vary a lot from place to place” (UKA4), e.g., based around specific traditions or occasions such as Christmas, Sunday lunches or afternoon teas: “Even the high tea, where people would sit down and have that, that’s where our culture of food is, and to me it’s very much embraced or encompassed in tradition” (UKA3). However, it was felt that UK citizens are “moving away from” these and being replaced by “television surfers” who do not sit down to eat together (UKA3), thus impacting negatively the commensal aspects of eating. UKA3 suggested that when UK tourists visit places with a geographic context such as France or Italy, their behavior changes due to the food environment that they are in: “you know that the attitude to food there is very big, and you’re prepared to sit down and spend a lot of time eating” (UKA3), demonstrating that food culture is “not something we cannot do in this country... we seem to have lost our way” (UKA1).

Reasons that were given for why the dominant culture around food in the UK is transactional included aspects which suggest individualism and desire for success [45], resulting in the unhappy or 'unfortunate society' [11]:

- *working hours*: "Is it just because we work longer hours, and we don't have time?" (UKA1); "I've got to work really, really hard, make more money, get more stuff... You have to work harder" (UKA7);
- *work location and distance from family*: "We are more mobile and so we just don't live near parents as much as they do in other countries... accessibility to grandchildren just doesn't exist because they live 100 miles away" (UKA1);
- *what consumers feel is a quality way of spending time*: "if people sit down and do that for an hour, they say 'alright okay, shall we go for a walk, shall we do this, what shall we do?'. It's all about doing another activity rather than... eating is not the main activity whereas in France it often is the main activity" (UKA3);
- *price*: "people should give food more time and they should be looking at quality and traceability... I know that I think the supermarkets to some extent pay a bit of lip service to that... they are interested in selling cheap food. But I have a bee in my bonnet about the fact that I don't think any of us pay enough for food" (UKA3); "people think that buying from somewhere that isn't supermarket is just more expensive... their automatic reaction is just 'it's more expensive'" (UKA7);
- *lack of cooking skills*: "If you're less likely to cook, you're less likely to enjoy the social consequences of cooking and eating together" (UKB2);
- *sense of place*: "We've got a food culture in Gloucestershire, and our tourism sector points to it" (UKA2).

Many contemporary forms of food culture were suggested, mainly regarding eating. For instance, customers visiting farm shops and experiencing coffee and cake culture (UKB4), and the alcohol culture in the UK (UKB5) being stronger than a national food culture. Farmers markets are potentially places for commensality, for community development and intergenerational bonding and respect, important for food culture around both eating and buying food. UKB4 described how farmers markets themselves create a small-scale food culture, with a "variety of different food cultures going on," and people of varying demographics coming together around food (commensality); these shifting attitudes mean buying food also becomes a more social activity [10,59]. Youngsters arrive at

"about 11 o'clock when they just got up, ... that's a fantastic thing because they come in and create their own atmosphere which sort of offsets the atmosphere of the older people, do you know what I mean? It makes it more vibrant because you've got people of that age group around; so you've got your mid-30s with kids, shopping, then you've got your under 30s hanging out getting their hot food for lunch, then you've got the older people who come earlier, then you got the regulars also come early for their whole weekly shop... they all come early." (UKB4)

This regularity of exposure for these consumers may be evidence of developing food habits [23]. Comparisons were made by both academics and businesses between the UK and Mediterranean food cultures. UKBs 1 and 5 stated categorically that food does not create commensality in the UK as it does in the Mediterranean: "Nothing like the Med" (UKB5). UKB5 considered why such differences exist and suggested that the weather in the Mediterranean may play a part, with people eating together outside or after work in the square. Additionally, the idea that UK consumers are:

"busy and it takes time to cook good meals. Also, technology today makes people less inclined to meet up as there is so much to watch at home." (UKB5)

France was used as an example: “In France ... cooking and the whole perception of cooking and making lovely food is very much part of their culture. Whereas here we have moved away from that” (UKA3). Additionally, time and inter-generational conviviality was mentioned:

“every Sunday... the French would stop, and they would cook, and probably didn’t sit down until about 2’oclock in the afternoon, but that lunch didn’t finish until 6–7 o’clock in the evening. And the kids were messing around, they would sit down at the table, but they would play around the place, but they sat and they talked and they ate slowly and they ate lots of different things and really enjoyed that conviviality”. (UKA3)

This difference in conviviality and commensality between UK and Mediterranean cultures was questioned by UKA4 who felt that the dichotomy was too stark:

“I’m not sure that the sharing, conviviality aspect of Mediterranean food culture is the main distinguishing factor between food culture in Mediterranean and here... I think it’s a bunch of stuff wrapped up in it, that’s much more than that. You get tons of social isolation [in the UK] and there’s been huge upheaval in lots of aspects in community of life particularly in rural areas... in Italy and across the Mediterranean, and yet there are attitudes around food that persist despite that.”

Overall, the way UK consumers buy, cook and eat food pointed towards an unhealthy or at best unbalanced relationship with food, as highlighted by earlier statistics on the level of consumption of ultra-processed convenience-focused foods. Now Greek food culture is explored.

3.2. Perceptions of Greek Food Culture

Firstly, food culture is a vital part of basic communication where commensality is valued: “There’s an even more distinct example that we say in the Greek culture that we go to eat to talk... to eat in order to catch up” (GB2). GB4 also explained how food is the reason to meet or is central to meeting others. He describes how customers buy and cook different sizes of fish to suit children/adults, etc., and buy fish to enjoy with friends. Additionally, Greek food culture is based on connection within families but also within communities more widely, signifying collective identity [41]:

“... Forms the cultural identity ... most importantly is the vehicle by which the cultural identity and philosophy is transferred by generations, [with] these food meetups. Not only in Greece, but in the Med, southern habit- this get-togetherness.” (GB3)

This ‘deeper meaning’ ascribed to food demonstrates why connective, local food systems continue to be dominant in Greece when faced with ‘conventional’ supermarkets [30]. Food is the medium by which people connect in person. However, these must be both regular events and in-person. For instance, GB4 cited daily lunches at home as important for families. Also, traditional Sunday multi-generational get-togethers continue to provide the connection between families:

“In Greece it’s still part of the tradition to be getting together with families every Sunday and when a special seasonal celebration... I think generally culturally it’s very important because otherwise the bonds between families and generations would deteriorate and people would only catch up together by phone which is a big no-no...” (GB2)

Not only is inter-generational connection important per se, but inter-generational knowledge transfer also forms part of the food culture:

“It is important because with this kind of contact the younger ages can learn the secrets and traditions of a well-cooked food, the secrets of the older generations in choosing

the best quality ingredients but also the fact that people can come how close to each other.” (GB5)

This link with quality of ingredients was mentioned by other interviewees, for instance:

“I think that enhances the transfer between generation to generation of the appreciation of food quality and its importance because the youngest are picking up food traditions from grandparents... there is an inherited level of understanding of how important food is” (GB2)

Whilst the importance of tradition and family still continues, new work regimes have meant Greek food culture has been changing in recent years, mainly in cities. GB4 described how the “latest generation start to live a bit more like the trends of other countries... working long hours and with routine patterns which has made a lunch at home impossible.” This was felt to be very undesirable as: “We don’t want life to go and be like America but new generations need to work and some modern types of work means that you need to move or discontinue this lifestyle.” (GB4). This echoed concerns with the UK interviewees who felt that work locations and distance from family influenced food-related choices. Whilst in Greece establishments exist where fresh, quality lunches are prepared for consumers to pre-order in the morning, they are not available everywhere, leading city workers to “eat out fast, mechanically and often, too much.” (GP1). However, more broadly GP2 felt a “global shift from mass to quality” was occurring, following “the revelations of global food scandals... redefinition of trust between producer-consumer and awareness-raising between producer-consumer”. And thus, they suggest resistance to the conventional western food culture continues. Traditional, local AFNs are ‘part of a solidarity economy’ as discussed in Anthopoulou and Partalidou [48], and important in redefining healthy eating, making citizens aware of them and satisfying those “who seek quality... for safer and healthier food”. These, and the traditional local growers in every village, instill a sense of place entwined with trust in local food systems and demonstrates the collectivist culture here [45,47].

In summary, in the UK, the respondents felt that the food culture is dominated by its transactional nature, and characterized by price, lack of cooking skills and minimal focus on commensality. Specific events were suggested that provide context for food culture, but no ongoing daily food culture was described as demonstrated by the Greek interviewees. Farmers markets were also cited as important centers of food culture. There was a fairly equal balance between those who talked of the lack of food culture and food sharing in the UK and those who believed a contemporary form is growing. Greek food culture was characterized by its commensality and conviviality with regular in-person get-togethers, inter-generational food-related knowledge transfer, and a focus on the quality of food that was eaten. Thus, food is the medium by which people connect with family and the wider community. Although work lifestyles in some areas of Greece are changing, this remains the dominant food culture. Now the cultural value of food is considered.

3.3. Cultural Value of Food and Values Associated with Food in the UK

The UK interviewees did not demonstrate a strong understanding of the term cultural value of food. As highlighted in Section 3.1, the lack of an underpinning, strongly recognizable food culture was suggested as a reason for food not being valued highly enough (UKB1 and UKB2), i.e., “the majority [do not] embrace food in this way” (UKB5). UKA1 also felt that due to the multi-cultural nature of the UK:

“I can only speak for people with my background, and I think for us its generally weaker but I wouldn’t want to generalize that across other ethnicities which perhaps have more cultural value and sense of tradition [associated with food].” (UKA1)

Where cultural value does exist, it was described as “weaker” than that in other parts of continental Europe (UKA3 and UKB2). UKA1 conflated cultural value with specific traditional events such as Christmas, place and community; another with coffee and cake:

“Cultural value of food in the UK is about taking a bit of time to go and leisurely take in some nice stalls or nice farm shop, have a coffee and a cake and maybe buy some sausages!” (UKB4)

A sense of possessiveness and ‘strong attitude’ towards the food is invoked: “I think people can get quite possessive over the food in the UK” (UKA7) and this creates a link to the identity of an area and regional culture, perhaps due to the symbolism of the food reflecting the sense of place (UKBs 2, 3, and 4). AFNs and micro and small businesses within them were felt influential to creating a sense of place for foods, and through this, identity [8]. Farmers markets were hailed as food environments where knowledge could be readily transferred which could instill cultural value.

“Some stallholders were very good at sales ...encouraging people to appreciate... ‘why is this beef more expensive?’—‘Well, it’s from a heritage breed that grows more slowly, it’s out on that field over there, it eats grass all year round and that makes our beef of a higher quality’,—‘oh right, now I understand that’”. (UKA1)

Thus, through knowledge exchange, these food businesses can have a role in changing consumer perceptions towards the food they buy. Knowledge of and appreciation for food and its producers may well lead to the development of the cultural value of food. Themed events at markets, such as a fish or wild game weekend, could raise individuals’ perceptions of the cultural values of food through knowledge building, education and increasing food literacy, creating “a longer-term relationship around food” (UKA2), connecting consumers to food as well as to the producers:

“People that come to the market will feel that connection to a local baker or a local cheese man, and they will feel that sort of... supporting things that are happening around you in your area and that link between land and your food.” (UKB4)

These farmers markets have regularity, occurring once a month, so if perceptions of food are slow to change (UKB5), increased regularity underpins a stronger cultural value through embeddedness and exposure to food and food production (UKA7). UK businesses cited how the cultural value of food within their businesses was also being created by their suppliers or their actions either by community creation or a ‘re-vamping of British food culture’ by more producers producing in traditional and quality ways: people that really ‘take care’ of their product (UKBs1, 3 and 4). UKB3 felt there is an “awakening to the cultural value of food”, possibly evidence of the ‘deeper meaning’ described by [30]. Indeed, they stated consumers were demanding more from food suppliers and were asking at a restaurant or food shops about provenance and the associated animal welfare/ environmental concerns surrounding food production, suggesting a shift in attitudes and behaviors [60], embedding production-related and supply-related food values [33] developed through business–consumer interactions and insights.

UKA6 suggested that the cultural value of food arises through commensality when people “come together to eat but also to do other things at the same time”, giving “coming together to talk about things, or to listen to music or watch performances” as examples. “Being able to congregate around a food-related activity” (UKA2) and buy, eat and share together facilitates a longer-term connection with food with a “sense of importance for it” (UKA2), creating connections. Indeed, food was described as “social glue” (UKA4), eating together being a social activity, although these examples do not put food center stage as with the Greek examples. This social glue arises within a wider community. Providing “good

food and someone to eat it with” is something The Long Table attempts to provide around Stroud, understanding the value of commensality where people feel isolated or unhappy and are “desperate for community” (UKB3). But it also arises at a familial level. “To cook and sit down and eat together” bonds people, breaks down barriers, by chatting and having fun (UKA3) and creating cultural value in the foods eaten and the food experiences created. Thus, this reconnection with food and reconnection of producers and community through food is almost entirely facilitated by the food business itself, demonstrating their important role in changing cultural food-related norms and in providing a deeper meaningful context in which food is purchased. Interviewees also believed that holding a stronger cultural value for food would be helpful in solving food system and other issues like climate change, human health and animal welfare concerns (UKB1 and 2).

3.4. Cultural Value of Food and Values Associated with Food in Greece

Both businesses and academics believed that the cultural value of food was strong in Greece: “Cultural food value is the eating habits of a place which have been created through the traditions of the inhabitants and the crops that thrive in it.” (GP1) Cultural value here was rooted in place and local traditions, developed through contact between generations, and required an understanding of how food was produced and who produces it through exposure and community involvement. All Greek interviewees felt the cultural value of food in Greece was “very strong” because it was “entwined” with family and religion (GP2), and the production of local products was a common feature in communities. This aspect of provenance aligning with cultural, indigenous heritage has been found in other studies including connectedness, belonging, embeddedness [60,61]. It was clear that provenance was a strong attribute of cultural value: GB3 also considered Christian religious events (such as Easter, Christmas, Lent), where food means “something more” due to “linking the mind with other aspects of life” (see [62] for a wider exposition). For example, he described

“where the lamb will come from for Easter, where the pig will come from for Christmas. Even there is a religious connection which puts food in a separate importance, because throughout the year, either for religious specific dates or events or for traditions, you follow specific food patterns and choices.” (GB3)

Clearly then, lamb has symbolic value relating strongly to its religious connection. The strong consumer connection with, and preference for, local products and traditions provided “emotional satisfaction” (GP2), and daily local markets were described as “festivals of local products” (GB1). GB1 also described the preferences of local people for local products, signaling the socio-cultural value of the Mediterranean diet [4], i.e.,

“cultural awareness about the perception of consumers about our products is quite strong, mainly as they consider that they are connected with a local product, produced by local producers, observing local traditions”. (GB2)

Within this discussion the term provenance emerged, i.e., the idea that people culturally valued food more when it “consists in the distinctive features of each diet in a region,” combined with “traditional eating habits”. (GP2). GP1 seconded this, explaining the familial connections that arose and how

“There is a strong element of food searches from the particular homeland. In this way, an emotional satisfaction is achieved first, but also the personal relationship of trust, friendship and family ties are maintained.”

Thus, holding a cultural value for regional foods was expressed differently in each country, the UK interviewees citing possessiveness for certain associated foods, and Greek interviewees citing the importance of the personal relationship. Quality was much entwined

with trust, for the food producer and the supplier. GB3 explained how supermarkets “concentrate on profitability and the tend to import meats with low trust levels of where they come from.” Buying food straight from the fishermen, farmers or producers built trust in the reliability of quality and provenance of the food, antithetical to the buying/selling anonymity described by [10]. One respondent stated:

“We talk so much about what is Greek and what is imported, and you might be wondering what is so different and why it is so important. It’s not just because it is frozen. Bringing cheap fish from the Atlantic is completely different fish in terms of taste and nutrients, even if it’s the same fish, because it’s proven such open oceans in terms of water, they have inferior quality of food for the fish in comparison to the Med, that’s why the Med fish taste differently.” (GB4)

Cultural value can include mindful eating, food having symbolic meaning, holistic wellbeing and socialization [62]. GB5 links the cultural value of food with the familial food culture:

“Cultural value of food I consider to have to do with the family’s eating habits, the family gathering at the lunch table but also the living conditions of the family and people in general. . . there is still the gathering of the Sunday family table, the gathering of family and close relatives and friends in joyful events. The meeting of friends.”

Similarly to the cultural value of food being linked with everyday practices in Italy [41], Greek interviewees cited how it was rooted in its exposure in daily life. For instance, GP2 described how, in Central Greece, local products and their production are a feature of local communities: “The production is directly related to consumption due to the fact that in the wider area the population is engaged in agriculture.” Thus, consumers have a greater respect and value for those foods as they understand what went into producing them, and the farmers and fishers are a visible part of communities. Therefore, knowledge via this direct exposure is potentially a requirement for holding a cultural value for food. In Greece, the respondents felt that people are regularly exposed to food production on the land, in the community, in the garden and in the kitchen. Therefore, they are grounded in regularity and repetition and a sense of food being of daily cultural importance, with production being “directly related to consumption”, due to a wide engagement with agriculture (GP1) and with face-to-face contact with producers (GB4). For informal occasions, it was normal to “just call” friends to invite them to share the fish that weekend/evening because it was fresh. What was also clear was the vital importance of the role of food businesses not only in embedding the cultural value of food but also in developing and grounding food culture together with consumers. Businesses are part of the community with consumers, each understanding the other. Thus, the businesses play a role in providing context, connection and communicating meaning. The themes that emerged from the UK and Greek interviews have been compared and contrasted in Tables 3 and 4. As shown in Table 3, similarities and differences exist between what respondents define as and witness as food culture and the cultural value of food in the UK and Greece.

Food culture is context specific, with a clear cultural framing which can promote or otherwise exclude any meaning or significance being associated with food. Food culture becomes embedded through habits and practices (regularity and repetition) and is a concept that explains the practices, rituals, values, and social norms within the food environment (availability, pricing, food composition, etc.) in a particular culture [38]. However, regularity and repetition can embed unhealthy food choices and interactions with food as equally as positive food culture.

Table 3. Comparison of the themes that emerged from UK and Greek interviews on food culture, habits and practices.

	UK Reflections on Food Culture	Greek Reflections on Food Culture
Communication	This was inferred rather than explicitly described.	Food is a reason to meet and central to meeting
Context	Culture based on traditions or occasions or a specific time.	Daily but also based on traditions or occasions or a specific time.
Cultural framing	Lack of cooking skills. Price focused. Work influences—technology reduces personal interaction, working hours, work location and distance from family.	Creating community.

Table 4. Comparison of the themes that emerged from UK and Greek interviews on cultural value of food, and its meaning and significance.

	UK Reflections on Food-Related Cultural Value	Greek Reflections on Food-Related Cultural Value
Appreciation of food	Farmers markets were suggested as one place where appreciation of food could be increased through gaining more knowledge.	Individuals and communities have an emotional satisfaction connected with food and through food to people who they eat with.
Commensality	People coming together around food (coffee shops, farmers markets), leading to intergenerational bonding.	People coming together around food, leading to intergenerational bonding.
Connection	Lack of connection with and through food. Transactional rather than relational connection with food	Connection with family, friends and community. Transactional connection growing with some individuals.
Conviviality	People connecting together through food.	People connecting together through food.
Cultural identity	Specific foods and occasions were named.	Food is the vehicle by which cultural identity and philosophy is transferred from generation to generation. Sense of place.
Embedding of cultural value	As people are exposed to foods more, they perceive a cultural value in it. This may mean they have to regularly interact with the food (exposure) to perceive a cultural value.	Cultural value was rooted in place, community and local traditions and contact between generations
Knowledge	Knowledge of food production, differences in quality, and the relationship which gives rise to the knowledge exchange can increase a consumer's cultural value	Cultural value is embedded via intergenerational knowledge exchange and practices. Also, daily exposure to food producers within the community. Passing knowledge about food and food traditions from one generation to another.
Sense of place	Food can be linked to place, and a sense of connection and self-identity related to place or the community in that place. Regional pride or possession of specific foods	Provenance, product quality and trust were attributes of cultural value associated with Greek food. Regional relationships between producers and consumers

In contrast, the cultural value of food is mediated through aspects such as appreciation of food, commensality, conviviality, cultural identity, knowledge and sense of place. These aspects can be reflected in food myths [37], or a taste of place [63]; in short, cultural value is a non-monetary visceral expression of the value of food [64]. This research has been focused on three research questions:

RQ1: In the context of the study, how do businesses within AFNs potentially reconnect consumers with food, and through food?

RQ2: How does food-related cultural value emerge and what is the role of these businesses within AFNs in providing meaning and context?

RQ3: Can a national food culture exist that does not embed food-related cultural value?

Considering the first and second research questions, interviewees cited multiple examples of how businesses within AFNs reconnect consumers with and through food, as well as how they provide meaning and context. From the UK perspective, businesses within AFNs provided new opportunities for consumers to learn about food, food producers and how food is produced, thus changing consumer practices and habits and the contexts in which they purchase food. This knowledge exchange, coupled with a regular interaction at AFNs such as farmers markets, can result in relationships developing between consumers, between consumers and producers, and generally in the wider community. However, meaning and understanding need to be developed before cultural value is created.

From the Greek perspective, the role of food businesses is not focused on reconnecting consumers with food, as this deep connection with food, producers and community already exists. The role of businesses is more centered around continuing and deepening the meaning and context which consumers have been accustomed to, through maintaining the quality of the food and the meaningful, regular interaction with consumers and community. This inter-country difference clearly highlights the variance between the UK and Greece, both in the type and the strength of food culture, and the perceived cultural value of food. In a country dominated by large supply-aggregated food retailers [65] such as the UK, it is possible to have a food culture that does not embed food-related cultural value (RQ3). UK food culture was perceived to be weaker, due to western work lifestyles, social pressures, food price perceptions, and prioritizing other activities. Obstacles to building the cultural value associated with food included disconnection between producers and consumers, a lack of opportunities for commensality and cooking often being perceived as another household chore. In some areas in Greece, most notably the large cities, there is evidence that a more Western food culture based on processed food and 'eating on the go' is developing, but this was context specific. Food-related cultural value was found to be strong in Greece, linked to commensality, which was of daily importance, connected to and embedded in family, religion and communities; it was argued by Greek respondents that to culturally value food, individuals needed to have a basic understanding of food production and the final product, something which was not perceived commonplace in the UK. Section 4 concludes the paper.

4. Conclusions

The contribution of this research is to firstly differentiate between the concepts of food culture and the cultural value of food and identify that whilst the characteristics of the concepts can often overlap, they are distinct. Whilst supporting the findings of extant literature, this finding has implications for future research in this area when framing research around cultural engagement with food. The second contribution relates to the need for explicit policy in the UK focused on increasing the perceived cultural value of food. Whilst much research and policy have concentrated on the need to address unhealthy food-

related lifestyles, the importance of community and familial commensality and conviviality in promoting a healthy relationship with food have been understated and understudied.

Aspects of food culture such as communication, context and cultural framing have received attention in terms of continued mapping, problematization and recapitulation, but there has been less academic and policy focus on edification around building or strengthening food systems that create and recrystallize appreciation of food, relationships with and through food (connection, commensality and conviviality), knowledge building and sharing and relational rather than transactional interaction with food. This research suggests that perceiving the cultural value of food is part of a healthy relationship with food, with self and others and this has implications for individuals, industry and policy. The third contribution relates to industry structures and the support of food businesses within AFNs, especially in light of the dichotomy between the supermarket-dominated UK food system and the AFN-dominated system in Greece. Despite the small sample of interviewees in the study, their insights explore and inform a critique on the situation for small businesses. To enable an ‘awakening’ of the cultural value of food to occur, greater consumer knowledge of food and inclusion of producers within food communities are vital. Future research could explore how food businesses within AFNs are changing consumer relationships with food, with others and with themselves.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

AFN	alternative food network
LFN	local food network
SSE	social solidarity enterprise
UK	United Kingdom

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