Reimagining Food Heritage: Exploring and Defining Foodways and Sustainable Food Practices in St. Louis

Our Research

The purpose of this co-authored, mixed methods descriptive research study was to examine how the intersection of foodways and sustainable food practices helps define the food heritage of St. Louis area residents. While prior research examines these concepts separately, and even shows connections with other factors such as health and discrimination, none look at all of these concepts together—a gap this research fills. To that end, this dissertation describes the intersection of cultural foodways and connection to sustainability in seeking a definition of food heritage and a path towards sustainable food heritage for St. Louis residents.

- 621 Food Heritage and Sustainability Surveys completed
- 14 Stakeholder Interviews
- Examine perspectives around sustainable food practices, foodways and food heritage

Methods:

Quant: 134 question Food Heritage & Sustainability Survey in English, Arabic, French and Spanish

Qual: Purposive Sampling: 25 stakeholders were asked, 14 interviews were conducted (56% response rate), seven female & seven male, eight identified as Black & six identified as White

Discussion:

Connection to Food Heritage:

Q: I eat what I eat because heritage and culture are of no concerns to my food choices. (Reverse coded)

- Whether life has afforded them the privilege of acting sustainably and being aware of their foodways or not, it seems that food heritage is an important concept to STL residents. Food heritage is a motivating factor for St. Louisans’ food practices, preferences, and choices.
- Time and time again, we saw our stakeholders identify their food choice with their food heritage. In fact, our stakeholders highlight how food stereotypes were more often the best identifier of one’s cultural food system and food culture. Although initially negative, these stereotypes can open the door to experiences with new foods and conversations around the dinner table which, in turn, lead to more cultural awareness and understanding.
- Our results define the current realities of St. Louisans and set the stage for current professionals working in this arena and for future research. Working together we can achieve a St. Louis where every resident can feel the way an immigrant program manager feels: “I feel lucky that I can eat the way I want to.”

Sustainable Food Practices:

Q: If I had more resources (money, time, energy, etc.), sustainability and sustainable practices would mean more to me.

Here we see clearly that engaging in sustainable food practices is a privilege that not all St. Louisans can afford - they often take a back seat to more important issues such as putting food on the table. In looking towards the future (sustainable food heritage) sustainable food practices can be used as the disruptive agent. Sustainable food education is the key to reclaiming sustainable food practices leading to a reimagining of food heritage.

Foodways:

Q: I eat what I eat because I eat it regularly.

- Our survey data says that a connection to foodways hinders a connection to food Heritage. While our stakeholders express that food heritage is defined through foodways.
- Analysis: Regardless of the contradiction presented here, foodways (and an awareness of one’s foodways) is an important part of defining food heritage. Perhaps people do not eat more sustainably because they are too connected to their foodways, whether or not they are aware of that connection. It is possible that this connection to foodways is as simple as the way a business owner puts it: “people like what they like, and they like eating what they like.”
- The time and effort to examine your life and understand your foodways is a privilege. Unfortunately, it is only through an awareness of foodways that food injustices can be righted.

From the onset of this study, the research team hoped that this research would accomplish three goals: contribute to the growing body of research centered on food heritage, provide a baseline definition of food heritage for St. Louis residents, and serve as a springboard for further actions in St. Louis to promote Sustainable food heritage.